CHAPTER 4

The Spirit of Brazil: Charismatic Christianity among the World’s Largest Catholic and Pentecostal Populations

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Introduction

For most its five centuries of history, Brazil, like all of Latin America, has been Catholic. Like their Spanish cousins, the Portuguese at beginning of the sixteenth century claimed the newly discovered land on behalf of their king and Catholic faith. Papal bulls granted the New World to the Iberian crowns and charged them with evangelizing the indigenous peoples of the Americas. The evangelization of Brazil’s indigenous population and African slaves was generally carried out in a more laissez-faire manner than in much of Spanish America. The great sugar plantations of the northeast were the center of Brazilian colonial life, and if there happened to be a resident priest on the plantation his pastoral activities were primarily focused on the owner and his family and not the African slaves. On the Amazonian frontier the Jesuits made went to great lengths to evangelize the native Amazonians and protect them from slave raiders, but their new faith afforded them little protection from the ravages of smallpox and other lethal diseases brought to the New Word by the Europeans. On the eve of independence from Portugal in 1822 Brazil was thoroughly Catholic, but the predominant type of faith practiced there was a folk Catholicism that syncretized elements of African religions, medieval Portuguese Christianity and indigenous beliefs.

Catholicism remained the official state religion during the new nation’s first six decades. Following the lead of Mexico, which had separated church and state three decades earlier, Emperor Dom Pedro II disestablished the Catholic Church in 1888 and thus laid the legal foundation for the growth of Protestantism. Mainline Protestant denominations from the US were the first to take advantage of the new religious liberty and sent missionaries to proselytize Brazilian Catholics at the end of the nineteenth century. Brazilian Catholics showed little interest in the gospel preached by North American Presbyterians and Methodists. The Pentecostal message of healing and spiritual rebirth, however, was received with such great enthusiasm from the moment it arrived on Brazilian shores in 1910 and 1911 that in just a century it has become the
predominant form of Christianity practiced in Latin America's most populous nation.

After six decades of explosive growth, charismatic Christianity has attained hegemonic status in Brazil's religious economy. The great majority of church-affiliated Christians in the country, both Catholic and Protestant, worship at services in which the Holy Spirit takes center stage. Among Protestants, Pentecostalism has enjoyed such success that at least 75% of all evangélicos (the preferred term for Protestants in Brazil and throughout Latin America) belong to Pentecostal denominations such as the Assemblies of God, the largest in the world, or Pentecostal-style, charismatic mainline churches.1 Across the Christian divide, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) has proliferated to the point that in just three decades since its arrival in Brazil, home to the largest Catholic population on earth, it can claim at least half of all practicing Catholics among its ranks.2 Such is the hegemony of charismatic Christianity that those Catholic and Protestant groups that do not offer some form of pneumatic worship face stagnation and even decline.

The main objective of this chapter is to explore the reasons for charismatic Christianity's extraordinary success in the Brazil's free-market economy of faith. The theoretical model of religious economy in which churches and denominations compete for 'religious consumers' in an unregulated market of faith will help the reader better understand the success of charismatic Christianity in Brazil. In present-day Brazil 80% of Protestants practice a Spirit-centered form of the faith, mostly in Pentecostal and Pentecostalized mainline churches. Similarly, more than 60% of Catholics in this the nation with the largest Catholic population on earth are charismatics.3 Through examination of the elements that determine the success or failure of any religious organization competing in an unregulated religious economy, charismatic Christianity's recipes for success will become clear. Analyses of products, marketing and consumers will illuminate the determining factors in ecstatic Christianity's

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1 Pentecostalism emerged from the Holiness movement of the nineteenth century. Literal interpretation of the Bible, ecstatic worship, and asceticism characterized the believers. Baptism in the Spirit is the central tenet and experience of Pentecostal religion.
3 See footnote 2 for source of data. 'Charismatic' is an umbrella term denoting those Christians who have adopted Pentecostal forms of beliefs and practices. Thus Pentecostals themselves and both Protestants and Catholics who prefer a more spirit-centered practice are considered charismatics.