

## **Discourse and Empowerment in Mediated Religion**

A Reflection on the “Evangelical Te Deum” in Perú

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For the third consecutive year as part of Peru's Independence Day celebrations, President Alan García, the First Lady, his Ministers, the Chief of the Military Political Command, members of Congress, mayors and civic leaders allied with the government met on July 30 to celebrate a “Service of Thanksgiving for Perú” characterized by some local media as an “Evangelical Te Deum.” This liturgical event was organized by a so-called “Thanksgiving Ministry” composed of leaders of diverse evangelical denominations.

In political terms, this event is significant in that it is a religious meeting that breaks with the Independence Day tradition that had political leaders attending only a Roman Catholic liturgy. For the President to participate in an evangelical liturgy could be interpreted as a gesture that recognizes the religious plurality of Peruvian society. In fact, behind this event one discovers many vested interests that must be analyzed to discover their political, cultural and religious implications. In this brief article I will offer my interpretation.

First, this event confirms that contemporary religious practice, ritualized publicly and collectively, is highly mediatized; that is, it demonstrates how a religious rite has appropriated elements of media culture. This liturgy included elements that are hardly characteristic of traditional evangelical worship services: it began with an interdenominational choir singing Handel's “Messiah” then moved on to brief speeches of welcome, all in a theatrical setting. In addition, at the emotional high points of the sermon, the audience responded not with a hearty “Amen” but with a burst of applause. The event was broadcast live throughout the country on the state TV network. However, this religious rite turned media spectacle was not a mechanical reproduction of a standardized media format, but rather the acting out of a symbolic strategy of recognition by actors who understood that they were being observed, that they were living out a public experience of observing and being observed; this rite illustrates one of the characteristics of contemporary religiosity: the collective religious experience as theatre.

Secondly, this religious event demonstrated how an emerging sector of evangelical leaders who are already present in the media had chosen not to move in the traditional terrain staked out by official religion, since they are acquiring power in the public sphere and building more fluid relationships with political power. We see here how religious and political sectors use one another. On the one hand, the presence of the President and other political leaders at a non-Catholic liturgical event created the image of a supposed democratic opening to other religious sectors by the current administration. On the other hand, the evangelical sectors that convened the liturgy reap the symbolic benefits of increased public legitimacy, media presence, and access to political power without relying on the mediation of official religion.

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It is interesting to note the absence of the historical leadership of both the National Evangelical Council of Perú (CONEP) and of the National Union of Evangelical Christian Churches of Perú (UNICEP) – although UNICEP is closer to the evangelical leaders that planned the liturgy. The event planners acted as individuals, rather than as representatives of their respective denominations. This is interesting because the public religious empowerment experienced by these leaders demonstrates that contemporary mediatized religion transcends traditional institutional legitimacy. Unlike the past, the contemporary religious leaders do not necessarily derive their legitimacy from the coverage provided by official religion, but from other factors, including their capacity to engage in mediated discourse, their relationship with and closeness to political power, the construction of a secularized image, their insertion into the larger religious marketplace, as well as their elaboration of a moral discourse that promotes personal ethics and that does not presuppose confrontation with political power.

These characteristics of the leaders that convened the “Evangelical Te Deum” tend to confirm a contemporary global phenomenon: new types of leadership, new representations and relationships are emerging beyond the spaces and boundaries established by traditional religious institutions. They further indicate that traditional religious institutions have begun to lose their capacity to regulate the beliefs and practices of their members. The media-based religious leader finds his or her legitimacy not in the authority derived from an institution, but rather in the ways that he or she appropriates media spaces and networks in the public sphere. It is important to emphasize that the emergence of these newly empowered, mediatized religious leaders has generated energetic processes of resistance and negotiation, with clear ethical implications as well as powerful implications for the internal power structures within churches.

Thirdly, this liturgical event recognizes that the new leaders have articulated a religious discourse that increasingly incorporates elements of social reality that were previously discounted, stigmatized or ignored by many of the churches that participate in the emerging movement. However, it is interesting to observe a tacit symbolic negotiation, at the level of discourse, with the political actors in whose honor the liturgical event was held. It is possible to observe, for example, that the sermon, while stating the need for a political leadership built upon the bases of Christian morality, does not single out any concrete acts that might bring into question the ethical responsibility of the political actors for situations that do not coincide with evangelical values. The absence in the sermon of a review of the current political situation that might bring to light cases of inequality and exclusion that persist in society, not to mention the specific responsibility of the President and the current political leadership for these anomalies, means that the politicians end up receiving a “spiritual blessing” on all their political actions with no “prophetic call” to assume the ethical implications of public office. Such mutually beneficial diplomatic gestures mean that this type of religious and political gathering leads to none of the discomfort that political actors often go to great lengths to avoid. These events become a source of mutual legitimization, where underlying motivations and interests are left unexpressed.

We are witnessing, then, a cultural mutation of religion in which the mediation of the media plays an important role by providing a space for public legitimation and empowerment. In the case described here, a sector of Peru's evangelical community has been empowered by its insertion into the public and political spheres after building increased legitimacy through its presence in the mediatized public sphere, leading to a decentering of institutional religious power. This phenomenon also illustrates how the field of religion has become a highly mobile cultural space, incorporating resistance and the negotiation of power, constituted in new forms of administering and cultivating religious belief, as well as new ways of seeking legitimacy and recognition. As argued by Danièle Hervieu-Léger, each actor in this scenario engages in religious oratory as a function of his or her expectations, interests, aspirations and social and cultural resources. Here, religious identities are inherited less every day; beliefs are disseminated and new religious practices are created, as are new religious and political imaginaries.