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Yannick Fer

“Pentecostalism”

in: Bryan S. Turner; Chang Kyung-Sup; Cynthia F. Epstein; Peter Kivisto; William Outhwaite; J. Michael Ryan. *The Encyclopedia of Social Theory*, Londres, Wiley Blackwell, pp.1725-1727, 2018.

Pentecostalism emerged in the early 20th century from a “revival” within the context of North American Protestantism. These Protestants, concerned about the new ways of thinking that accompanied urbanisation and the development of the railways, opposed the theory of evolution, the historico-critical biblical exegesis and the Social Gospel then in vogue among the urban churches of the Northeast. They sought a “new blessing” capable of bringing both deeper individual sanctification and a new missionary impulse to meet the challenges of their time. Like Fundamentalism, Pentecostalism was at its outset a conservative moral reaction, but it differs by its emphasis on charismatic experience. Its distinctive identity has indeed been built on the “baptism in the Holy Spirit”, a “speaking in tongues” (or glossolalia) interpreted as a visitation of the Holy Spirit, in reference to the day of Pentecost described in the New Testament (Acts 2). More generally, Pentecostalism claims that the “gifts of the Holy Spirit” (*charisma*) are available today: glossolalia, but also divine healing, prophecy, and the discernment of spirits.

This charismatic dimension implies a set of necessary emotions, within the frame of a subjective experience focused on the “immediate” (without visible mediation) communication with God: emotions felt by the believer express his/her involvement in this “personal relationship” with a god who intervenes here and now, through religious apparatuses of socialisation and regulation (Fer, 2010). The combination of charisma (in a theological sense) and emotion has led many sociologists to describe Pentecostalism as mainly a system of charismatic authority, dominated by the figure of the pastor-prophet, in contrast with more institutional and rational forms of religion. However, the charismatic theology of Pentecostal churches embraces more diverse types of leadership and institution than the simple Weberian ideal-type. Thus, classical Pentecostalism still values the institutional control of individual practices. At the contrary, since the 1980s, the rise of new charismatic currents fostering more radical experiences (trance, exorcism, or delivrance) has produced an ambivalent process of desinstitutionalisation: through the spread of a less hierarchized and more flexible sociability,

but also through the development of international “spiritual warfare” networks based on the restoration of the apostle’s authoritarian figure (Gonzalez, 2014).

Pentecostalism is in its essence a missionary movement. From 1914, the establishment of the American Assemblies of God – the first national Pentecostal fellowship (Blumhofer, 1993: 113-140) – has contributed to coordinate missionary efforts abroad. Pentecostal international expansion began to accelerate in the 1950s with the development of transportation means, economic globalisation, and migrations. The Assemblies of God alone today claims 67.5 millions members worldwide (2013 statistics), and Pentecostalism is present on all continents, especially in South America and Africa.

Social scientists have examined these relationships between Pentecostalism and globalisation, first by analyzing the ideological affinities between Pentecostal values and capitalism, notably in reference to Weber’s [1726] analysis of Protestant asceticism (Martin, 1995; Meyer, 2007). Among the poorest social classes, where Pentecostal churches found their first converts, the adhesion to Pentecostalism produces a lasting reshaping of personal dispositions which can indirectly contribute – not without tension – to better insertion in the global economy. The Pentecostal emphasis on individual destiny encourages the separation from the traditional social ties and entry into the neo-liberal economy, while the integration of conservative moral values reinforces obedience to the dominant social order. However, these affinities between Pentecostal morality and social norms are complex, as demonstrated, for example, by studies on gender relations in Pentecostalism. These describe the coexistence of an heteronormative representation of patriarchal authority with concrete women’s empowerment and the “domestication of men” due to the priority given to the nuclear family (Martin, 2003: 54).

Rural exodus toward cities and international migrations represent a second intersection between economic globalisation and Pentecostalism that David Martin describes as a “religious ‘movement’ accompanying and facilitating the movement of people” (Martin, 2002: 23). The Pentecostal promotion of change considered as a progress and its focus on personal itineraries brings a religious sense to geographical and social mobility. At the same time, the encompassing sociability of Pentecostal churches provides a new community place for migrants in urban settings, within the “new family” of converts but also owing to transnational church connections with their countries of origin. Pentecostalism has indeed generated many transnational churches, whose development has accompanied South-North migrations and nurtured South-South exchanges, notably between South America and Africa

(Argyriadis, Capone et al., 2012). These transnational circulations have made Pentecostalism (or more widely charismatic Christianity) a “global culture” (Poewe, 1994; Coleman, 2000) that transcends local cultures while maintaining with them ambivalent relationships: “a religion that localizes easily yet claims to brook no compromise with traditional life and that at the same time seems to have at its heart a set of globalized practices that often look very local in their makeup” (Robbins, 2003 : 224).

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