

Pentecostalism

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► **To cite this version:**

Yannick Fer. Pentecostalism. The Sage Encyclopedia of the Sociology of Religion, 2020, pp.569-570.
halshs-02553785

HAL Id: halshs-02553785

<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-02553785>

Submitted on 24 Apr 2020

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In: Adam Possamai & Anthony J. Blasi (eds.), 2020. *The SAGE Encyclopedia of the Sociology of Religion*, Thousand Oaks, Sage: 569-570.

Pentecostalism is a Protestant movement that emerged in the early 20th century in the North American context. It focuses on personal experience of the “gifts of the Holy Spirit” (*charisma*) as a means of deeper individual sanctification, and as a “power” for fuelling new missionary impulse. Its international expansion, the great diversity in its local expressions, and the rise of new charismatic movements over the last four decades have given shape to an ample Pentecostal/charismatic space in which religious practices, organizational patterns, and sociocultural backgrounds can vary considerably. However, four key elements may assist analysis of the main sociological characteristics of this space: (1) the emphasis on conversion and the way Pentecostalism strives to confirm the reality of this “new birth”; (2) the emotional dimension of the charismatic experience; (3) the complex relationships between Pentecostalism and local cultures; and finally (4), the political impact of Pentecostal movements today.

Pentecostalism is a conversionist religion that aims to deeply transform the existence of believers. This religious project of resocialization meets the desire for moral respectability, particularly salient amongst underprivileged social classes, who contributed to the historical development of Pentecostalism (before progressive extension of the circle of converts to the middle classes, at the end of the 20th century). The rise of Pentecostalism is also closely linked to contemporary mobility – rural exodus toward cities and international migrations – which contributes to making these churches a place for community reshaping. Beyond the discourse of conversion, which emphasizes a before/after opposition and focuses on the subjective experience of “a personal encounter with God”, the durable transformation of believers’ personal disposition results from significant institutional work of socialization, training, and control. Observation of Pentecostal congregations also underlines the crucial role that churches and missionary youth networks play in the transmission of this “chosen” identity to the children of converts, through mediation apparatus that move these children toward personally experiencing the “action of the Holy Spirit”.

This charismatic dimension of the Pentecostal experience implies necessary religious emotions within the frame of a subjective experience focused on “immediate” (without visible mediation) communication with God. During church services, strong emotions and enthusiasm are inspired by a set of expressions that prove (in the eyes of believers) the presence of God, inspiring intense and transparent self-expression to thank God for all He has done. Distinctive Pentecostal identity is specifically built on “baptism in the Holy Spirit” – “speaking in tongues” (or *glossolalia*), interpreted as a visitation of the Holy Spirit, in reference to the Day of Pentecost as described in the New Testament (Acts 2). In classical Pentecostal churches, learning to speak in tongues – which notably implies the ability to “let go” and “listen” to God – marks a major step in religious socialisation and plays an important role in accession to church responsibilities. In more recent charismatic churches, the emphasis tends to be placed on various forms of exorcism and bodily experiences of possession, such as trance. These variations of emotional experience make Pentecostalism a privileged field in which to observe contemporary evolutions of emotional regimes and norms of self-control.

International Pentecostal expansion began to accelerate in the 1950s with the development of new means of transportation and economic globalisation. Pentecostalism is today present on all continents, especially in South America and Africa, where it has contributed to the creation of numerous indigenous churches. Classical Pentecostalism has often proven hostile to local non-Christian cultures, in the name of a personal salvation that implies distancing oneself from cultural “bad spirits”. However, the recognition that Pentecostals grant to such supernatural entities (in their efforts to fight them) has much more ambivalent effects. Eager to take seriously the worldviews of non-western societies, in terms of the influence of spirits on the lives of local peoples, charismatic missiologists have gone so far as to elaborate a theology of “spiritual warfare”, focused on the confrontation between territorial spirits and the Christian God.

The body is at the core of these processes of acculturation and opposition, as Pentecostalism tends to consider individual bodies as the most evident manifestation of changes brought about by “new birth” (through both physical and moral healing); at the same time, the body remains the natural repository of paganism. This particular conception of body and culture also influences the Pentecostal representation of gender. Studies on gender relations in Pentecostalism describe the coexistence of a heteronormative conception of patriarchal authority with concrete women’s empowerment, partly linked with the conviction that female bodies are more permeable to the action of spirits: while women are often seen to have “spiritual

gifts”, this gendered sensitivity to spirits also legitimizes the control over women’s “zeal” by male hierarchical authority.

Sociologists first analyzed Pentecostalism as a force of depoliticization, a religion preaching a withdrawal from the “world” rather than social engagement, and more focused on individual salvation than on collective destiny. But the growth of Pentecostal churches in many African and American countries, followed by the entry into politics of certain converts, and the emergence of Pentecostal political parties, stemming mainly from recent charismatic streams, have contributed since 1990 to transforming Pentecostalism itself into a political actor. The main demands of Pentecostals in politics initially dealt with the moralization and transparency of public life, and the defence of Christian “moral values”. Two factors reinforce this progressive politicization of Pentecostalism: on one hand, the influence of evangelicalism, as a social movement promoting Christian activism against the secularisation of Western societies; and on the other hand, conservative charismatic networks inspired by the theology of “spiritual warfare”, such as the New Apostolic Reform. These networks, closely connected with the new North American Christian Right and political movements such as the Tea Party, claim that the Bible should be the cornerstone of political order; they have also developed a strong Christian Zionism, with prophetic accents. Meanwhile, in a more discrete way, many Pentecostal churches and networks are today involved in the implementation of social, health, and humanitarian programs, as neoliberal policies of State disengagement have opened new opportunities within these domains for such actors in civil society.

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Cross-references

Evangelicalism; Zionism; politics; emotion; conversion

Further reading

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