



BOOK REVIEW

ANNELIN ERIKSEN, RUY LLERA BLANES AND MICHELLE MACCARTHY, *GOING TO PENTECOST, AN EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH TO STUDIES IN PENTECOSTALISM*, NEW YORK, BERGHAN BOOKS, 2019, 228 PAGES

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Going to Pentecost, An Experimental Approach to Studies in Pentecostalism is a holistic and practical study of contemporary religious forms with a focus on Pentecostalism. The book, which is a continuum of a previous work of Annelin Eriksen (2017), proposes a new methodological approach in the study of Pentecostalism. By relying on a comparative study carried out in three different areas (Luanda in Angola, Port Villa in Vanuatu and Kiriwina in Trobriand Islands), the authors -who are all anthropologists specialized in religious studies- develop a “non-territorial methodology” (p.4) by painting a “portrait of what Pentecostalism is *also* about” (pp.22). They postulate that the study of Pentecostalism should be de-territorialized given the fact that its forms and practices have evolved to detach from cultural or territorial confines. In this regard, they develop the concept of “Pentecost” in order to designate that de-territorialized and un-sited venue infused by Pentecostal ideology and practices. This methodology presented by the authors as an alternative approach to the study of Pentecostalism consists in a differentiation between the local and the territorial: “although practices are local, Pentecostalism is non-territorial” (p.5). The result of this approach is the turning of the object under study (Pentecostalism) into a place (“Pentecost”).

Literally, ‘Pentecost’ refers to an event and is thus “more of a dimension of time than space” (p.4). In the Christian tradition, it is the time when the Apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit. By turning “Pentecost” into a place, the authors add a geographical meaning to this religious/spiritual one. They go beyond the biblical significance of Pentecost and put an emphasis on the religious forms and practices stemming from it as well as the communities involved in those practices. That is the reason why “Pentecost” is localized through different communities. Thus, in four

parts, the book conceptualizes that space known as “Pentecost”¹. The last part is peculiar in that it consists of comments made by some specialists in the study of Pentecostalism about the issues raised in the previous parts.

The first part entitled “Introductions” beacons the study by providing the background of the argumentation. Here the authors outline conceptualize their view by insisting on the non-territorial aspect of Pentecostalism and its holistic character which requires that it should be re-sited through an artificial context coined as “Pentecost” which is an analytical construction. This artificial context encompasses different locations whose comparison helps in “making a connection between them” (p.14). These localities are geographically situated in the South making “Pentecost” a “‘global south’ phenomenon” (p.23). The “introductions” ends with a reading guide where the authors indicate that the book can be read either in a linear perspective or other alternatives orders focusing on sections that can be read separately.

Part two titled “Presentations from ‘Pentecost’” has three chapters illustrating the religious setting of ‘Pentecost’. By relying on empirical data gotten from the three localities, it presents the different trends that characterize ‘Pentecost’ such as healing, urban sociality, moral domestic economy, and relation to death and funerals, and also the preeminence of Anti-relativism and Absolutism. Healing whose *raison d’être* is related to evil and witchcraft is based on the production of ‘borders’ which consists of “creating separation between pure ‘insides’ and threatening ‘outsides’ at different levels and in different contexts” (p.65). These borders are seen as a strategy of being “protected against evil invisible agencies” (p.104). As indicated by MacCarthy (2021), the Trobriand islanders elevate borders only by becoming born again, engaging the Holy Spirit and constructing a closer relationship and study of the word God. This fight against the evil is a means to bring order: “witchcraft and sorcery are also considered as the ultimate disorder that social life in ‘Pentecost’ is geared towards (re)ordering” (p.109). However, the Pentecostal social life is also a source of disorder notably through noise which “had become part of [the] quotidian acoustics” in ‘Pentecost’” (p.95). Healing sessions are usually noisy through screams of healers and their clients. In order to benefit from the spiritual insurance provided by the healers through the creation of borders, recipients of healings must become members of the church in a context characterized by a plurality of possibilities and a competition between churches. This plurality contradicts with the absolutist value of an anti-relativist interpretation that churches offer to their members by presenting themselves as the only and “single path in the road to salvation”.

A move away from cultural to religious oriented practices also characterizes ‘Pentecost’. As written by Birgit Meyer (2004), Charismatic Pentecostal churches are featured by shifts from local cultural village traditions. This is seen in the moral domestic economy and the relation to death and funeral. In the domain of moral domestic economy, ‘Pentecostal’ life style focuses on the nuclear family and the church congregation rather than kingship ties. Traditional and “communal event of redistribution and sharing are replaced, in a way, with feasts for church events....”

¹The concept « Pentecost » is always written into quotations marks in order to make a difference with the Biblical Pentecost described in the Bible.

(p.76). Elaborate death ceremonies and funerals have become ‘wasteful’ and burdensome (p.91). Death is looked upon as an end. It is more important to focus attention on immediate families and communities “rather than looking to ancestors [...] and those who have died” (p.83). There is “no time to cry” as seen in Port Vila. Funeral ceremonies dedicated to deaths are replaced by funeral liturgies oriented to the living as noticed in Palanca. In “Pentecost”, death is no longer cosmologically important and has become an absolute end (p.88). Having seen what characterizes ‘Pentecost’, the book proceeds by presenting theories generated from there.

Part three is more theoretical. It uses empirical experiences presented in part two to discuss theories related to ‘Pentecost’ namely: Theory on borders, theories of neo liberalism and prosperity and theories of rupture. The theory on borders is set in comparative relation with that of individualism. The theory on borders and the theory of individualism emphasize reasons for and repercussions of separation and autonomy. It portrays the technology through which borders are created and how they are also transformative. As seen in part two, the healers never penetrate the body of patients but they rather heal the inside from the outside. This is informed by their “ability to see what others cannot” (p 9). Very often, “healing technologies echo medical technologies (for instance X-ray sight) but why are surgical procedures not used?” (p.122). Borders are always created from the outside and they are related to the theory of ‘rupture’ which implies “a separation or exclusion from something in order to create something new” (p.159). Instead of always depending on borders that might later default, causing recurrent healing, why can the healers not destroy the demons at ones just like it is done through medical surgery. When a surgeon operates a patient, he extracts and destroys the unwanted from the body. So as a spiritual surgery, healing should also be able to destroy demons spiritually. Knowing that an evil spirit can return into the body alongside more demons as indicated in the Bible (Mathew 13:43-45), why are the healers not destroying the demons instead of just commanding them to leave the possessed bodies? Where do they leave the body to? Considering the importance of healing in “Pentecost”, one can deduce that the non-destruction of demons is a strategy for healers to remain indispensable. This then raises the issue of coexistence wherein the Holy Spirit and the evil spirit coexist to make the former active through the latter. On the repercussion of borders, it destroys kinships and group networks as well as rupturing flows of domestic economies and traditional modes of redistribution (Mayrargue, 2008).

This is in line with the neoliberal economy strategies that characterize Pentecostalism which promotes “gospel of prosperity”. Tithing and seed money insure manifold returns of wealth and health. ‘Pentecost’ gives a new significance to life in the present and a move away from the death, which is what the authors call the ‘life gospel’: “It is a theory about why it is necessary to focus on the living and why a move away from a focus on ancestors....” (p.138). Contrary to the ‘life gospel’ obtained from ‘Pentecost’, the competitive activities of Pentecostal leaders portray a means to accumulate wealth (Simojoki, 2002) from their followers.

In five chapters, part four deals with comments and critics from other scholars about the discussions raised in the previous parts. They are hereby presented not on a linear but on an alternative order according to their content. Matei Candea on

“Comparison Re-placed” (pp.179-185) evaluates the new approach the authors use as disrupting classic anthropological device of place-concept binary by using a single concept (‘Pentecost’) in three different localities. However, the place-concept reappears in the form of three traits of Pentecostalism portrayed in part two namely inside/outside borders, anti-relativism and a move away from wealth to waste. However, in her contribution on “‘Pentecost’ in the World” (pp. 209-215), Birgit Meyer criticizes the conceptualization of ‘Pentecost’ by focusing on the fact that it neglects the environments where it is found. As a matter of fact, ‘Pentecost’ “is a place within other places to which it stands in oppositional relation” (p.210). In concurrence to this reality, MacCarthy (2021) informs that the invitation of a stronger form of Christianity (Pentecostalism) in the Trobriand Islands was provoked by the inability of protestant mainline churches and the Catholic parishes to halt the prevalence of magic, witchcraft and sorcery. It is thus due to such environments that “religious borders” erected by ‘Pentecost’ are progressively crossed by non-Pentecostal churches in their efforts to survive (Fogue & Nayah, 2020). On his part, Joel Robbins in “Pentecostalism and forms of Individualism” (pp.186-192) asserts that Christianity supports “both individualism and relationalism, in different contexts and at different moments in people’s lives” (p.188). This is contrary to the strict borders created in “Pentecost” that promotes individualism. Talking about “Life and End of time, A note on comparison, ‘Pentecost’ and the Trobriands” (pp.193-200), Bjorn Enge Bertelsen opines that the “life gospel” in “Pentecost” is not justified on Christian bases but rather it is seen to be another form of colonialism which request that people to abandon an integral part of their culture as seen in part two. Thus “what cosmological and/or religious edifice empowers ‘Pentecost’ and what domains are integral to it”? (p.198). Apart from the “life gospel”, “Pentecost” is also looked upon as a neoliberalist context with different movements partaking in different ways (p.207) as explained by Knut Rio in his contribution on “Wealth Versus Money in ‘Pentecost’ :Why is money good (201-208)?” The Trobrianders joined ‘Pentecost’ also to heighten their wealth through a sense of productivity, modernity and progress.

Beyond the innovative methodological approach that it proposes in the study of religions and despite the limitations surrounding the conceptualization of “Pentecost”, this book has the merit to put the South in the “forefront of social development” (p.23). Through the new practices and social realities that it generates and which are diffused in other parts of the world, ‘Pentecost’ is shifting locations of the global South from the periphery to the center in the understanding of new religious practices and social condition.

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