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An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity

By Allan Anderson

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[1] Pentecostal churches constitute the fastest growing group of churches in Christianity today, representing already a quarter of all Christians worldwide (1). Depending on the definition, the global number of Pentecostal adherents may range from about 250 million to over 500 million (11–12). Defining Pentecostalism, however, is not an easy task. Theologian and historian Allan Anderson (13) opts for a very broad definition: ‘I think that the term “Pentecostal” is appropriate for describing globally all churches and movements that emphasize the workings of the Spirit, both on phenomenological and on theological grounds.’ Anderson (103–104) follows acknowledged experts on Pentecostalism, like the Swiss Walter Hollenweger and American Pentecostal Harvey Cox, who included African Initiated Churches (AICs) in the Pentecostal family. Including these ‘Independent’ churches in Africa, Latin America, and Asia increases the supposed worldwide number of Pentecostal adherents to over 500 million. But I do wonder whether the classical Pentecostal churches, like the Assemblies of God, would feel comfortable being in the same category as the AICs (and vice versa!).

[2] The aim of the book is described on page xii as follows: ‘This study concentrates on the history and theology of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity and its origins, development and significance throughout the world.[...] The book discusses Pentecostalism in the different continents from its earliest origins and development to the present day, and the relationship between Pentecostals and Charismatics and their religious, political and social contexts.’ On the same page (xii), Anderson writes: ‘I write as a sympathetic yet critical insider, having had my own ‘baptism in the Spirit’ in 1968, and having spoken in tongues since that time.’ The back cover describes the author as ‘a former Pentecostal minister.’

[3] Importantly, the book shows that Pentecostal phenomena like speaking in tongues and prophesying were part and parcel of the early Christian Church (19ff). But already in the 2nd century AD, the practice of spiritual gifts began to decline as the church institutionalized and gained political power. ‘The charismatic gifts came to be localized in the office of the bishop and in popular legends surrounding individual saints, martyrs and ascetics’ (19). This is a standard style textbook account along the lines of Max Weber: the routinization of charisma in church offices.

[4] Anderson (27–33) does an excellent job in describing many 19th century precursors of Pentecostalism: Wesley’s Methodism, the Keswick Convention in the UK, John Nelson Darby’s ‘dispensationalism’, the divine healing movement, and John Alexander Dowie’s utopian Zion City near Chicago. But the Holiness (or ‘Sanctification’) movement in the USA is considered by most historians to be the most direct influence on Pentecostalism: ‘The Holiness movement was a reaction to liberalism and formalism in established Protestant churches and stood for Biblical literalism, the need for a personal and individual experience of conversion and the moral perfection (holiness) of the Christian individual’ (27).

[5] Many historians let the Pentecostal movement begin with the preacher Charles F. Parham’s Bethel Gospel School in Topeka (Kansas), where his student Agnes Ozman first speaks in tongues on January 1, 1900 at 11 pm. Parham was an ex-Methodist, an independent preacher, and a healer in Kansas. An idiosyncratic man with racist ideas, he was not a good organizer nor, perhaps, a worthy founder of a new current in Christianity. An important innovation is that Anderson (35–38) devotes much attention, and rightly so, to various other revivals (mostly unconnected) involving speaking in tongues and other charismatic phenomena. This already happened in South India after 1860 and later in Wales (1904–05); Azusa Street, Los Angeles (1906); Korea (1907–08); and Chile (1909). They clearly show that the Pentecostal spirit was present all over the world, wherever the context was favorable.

[6] For various reasons, however, it was the 1906 revival in Azusa Street, Los Angeles, that came to be considered as the birthplace of Pentecostalism. It was led by the black preacher William Joseph Seymour, who had been a student of Parham and accepted his views on the baptism in the Spirit. Seymour’s preaching of Parham’s views on the acting of the Spirit, combined with a strong tendency to include both black and white members in the congregation, caused him to be evicted from the small black Holiness church where he was preaching. He subsequently started the Apostolic Faith Mission on 312 Azusa Street in 1906. Anderson (40–42) writes: ‘For the next three years the revival in Azusa Street was the most prominent center of Pentecostalism, [. . .] Seymour’s periodical *The Apostolic Faith* reached an international circulation of 50,000 at its peak in 1908.[. . .] at least twenty-six different denominations trace their Pentecostal origins to Azusa Street, including the two largest: the Church of God in Christ and the Assemblies of God.[. . .] Pentecostal missionaries were sent out all over the world from Azusa Street, reaching over twenty-five nations in two years.’

[7] Anderson (43) closely follows the Swiss-born theologian Walter Hollenweger, the dean of Pentecostal studies, who traced elements of the black American spirituality as the main influence on Azusa Street Pentecostalism: ‘an oral liturgy, a narrative theology and witness, the maximum participation of the whole community in worship and service, the inclusion of visions and dreams into public worship, and an understanding of the relationship between body and mind manifested by healing through prayer.’ This leads Anderson to conclude rather optimistically: ‘early North American Pentecostalism typified by Azusa Street was a revolutionary movement where the marginalized and dispossessed could find

equality regardless of race, gender or class.[. . .] Racial, doctrinal and personal issues simultaneously caused the divisions that erupted in early Pentecostalism.’ Citing Cecil Robeck, Anderson later (250) remarks dryly: ‘The Pentecostal movement split in less than a century into “nearly as many different divisions as it took the rest of the church a millennium to produce”, and as a result has not lived up to its ecumenical potential.’

[8] An interesting question is why Pentecostalism has been so successful in attracting converts, but such a failure in maintaining church unity and sponsoring ecumenicalism? Answering it requires a sociological perspective, which is somewhat unsatisfactory in this book. When sociological factors are analyzed, for instance in Chapter 3 on Latin America, the results are not always convincing. There is a huge sociological and anthropological literature on Pentecostalism in Latin America, but Anderson uses only a very small part. The sociological analysis of the socio-economic and political context facilitating (or constraining) Pentecostal growth on pages 238–239 remains somewhat superficial. The author often uses literature which tends to be less critical of Pentecostal churches, which may reflect his own positive bias towards the subject. Hence I find his conclusion (81) on Latin American Pentecostalism rather optimistic: ‘these new communities sometimes filled the gaps created by socio-economic and religious disintegration and offered full participation and supportive structures for marginalized and displaced people. Thus they have become catalysts of social change and may eventually become instruments of political clout. Whether Pentecostals proactively oppose reactionary structures or bolster the forces of conservatism remains to be seen.’

[9] Later in the book, Anderson first repeats this optimistic view (262), but then nuances it strongly when he writes (264): ‘Pentecostalism has in so many cases [. . .] become a supporter of reactionary politics, not only in the USA, but in countries like Guatemala, Chile and South Africa. As Robert Anderson [*Vision of the Disinherited*, 1979] observes, although Pentecostalism was ‘an oblique expression of social protest’ and ‘born of radical social discontent’, as it became institutionalized it gradually withdrew from the social struggle.’ Most Pentecostal believers keep a safe distance from politics. A few progressive Pentecostal groups in Chili and Guatemala seem to represent the exception to the rule. Some Pentecostal leaders do get involved in politics to morally reform their country, but the results are often disappointing (see the book *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa and Latin America* by Paul Freston). Neo-Pentecostal leader Jorge Serrano, for instance, became bogged down in corruption and was ridiculed in Guatemala after his presidential coup d’etat failed and he had to flee the country (see Henri Gooren, *Rich Among The Poor*, Amsterdam 1999: 34).

[10] The strengths of Pentecostalism are well-illustrated in the book. Chilean Pentecostal theologian Juan Sepúlveda sees Chilean Pentecostalism, ‘one of the earliest expressions of the movement in the world to arise independently of North American Pentecostalism’ (239), as an expression of ‘indigenous Christianity.’ Anderson (240) promptly follows up: ‘Sepúlveda’s view reinforces our contention that Pentecostalism’s ability to adapt to any cultural and religious context is one of its main strengths.[. . .] Both popular *forms* and *meanings* are preserved in

Pentecostalism, and in this way it has become an “incarnation” of the gospel in the culture of the *mestizo* (mixed Amerindian and European) lower classes.’

[11] Pentecostal flexibility and adaptability are the keys to its success, but also the keys to its fragmentation and division. Where the Spirit flows freely, schisms happen frequently as dissident leaders break off to start their own churches. These dynamic religious entrepreneurs make Pentecostalism flexible and successful—and highly fragmented. In the words of David Martin in *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish* (2002: 114): ‘It is the availability of the Spirit which drives forward and vitalizes the evangelical movement but inevitably it leads to a clash of rival charismata. The result is schism and contention and in the subsequent abrasions quite a number retire hurt and disillusioned.’ This issue is not addressed by Anderson and it partly explains the high drop-out rates in Pentecostal churches, especially in developing countries.

[12] My main points of criticism are the book’s unsatisfactory treatment of the sociological factors and the fact that the author’s positive bias towards the subjects sometimes seems to get in the way of the analysis. He tends to focus on the positive developments, which makes his argument vulnerable to the criticism that with the same evidence a less rosy picture may have been painted.

[13] In the beginning of the book, Anderson (15) writes: ‘The main aim of this book is to bring a perspective on Pentecostalism that challenges existing presuppositions and paradigms.’ From a theological and – especially – historical point of view, he has done an excellent job. This innovative book shows that Pentecostalism from its beginnings was a truly global phenomenon, which nowadays is especially strong in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The book is also eminently readable and very nicely structured. I would recommend it to anyone studying Pentecostalism. However, I would also recommend that they read it in combination with David Martin’s *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish*. Together, the two books present a very complete picture of Pentecostalism. One could hardly ask for more.