

A religion without institutions?

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Pentecostalism, a rapidly growing movement, is a paradoxical religion: it denies its status as a church, leaving individuals in a one-to-one relationship with God, yet in a way that allows dominated groups to acquire a degree of social legitimacy.

Reviewed: Yannick Fer, *Sociologie du pentecôtisme* (Sociology of Pentecostalism), Paris, Karthala, coll. « 4 Vents », 2022, 223 p., 19 €.

Pentecostalism is a religious current that emerged out of evangelical Protestantism. It is based on a literal reading of the Bible. Its believers stand out for their suspicion of church institutions, emphasizing instead the personal experience of faith. They insist notably on the importance of “awakening” and “baptism by the Holy Spirit,” which takes the form of speaking in tongues or glossolalia.

Amidst an already abundant literature in the human and social sciences on Pentecostalism across the world, Yannick Fer’s book makes a useful contribution. This sociological study, drawn from the author’s habilitation thesis, synthesizes twenty years of scholarship on the topic. It appears at a moment when new generations of students are increasingly drawn to the sociology of religion. The book provides a comprehensive perspective that considers the characteristics of a multifaceted phenomenon by relying on over a hundred studies, the most important of which were conducted in the United States, Latin America, and the Pacific. The book also draws on Fer’s own research.¹ It is unfortunate, however, that Fer does not mention studies

¹: Yannick Fer first became interested in Pentecostalism in French Polynesia. He has also done research in New Zealand, Haiti, and France.

on Pentecostalism in Muslim lands,² even though they illustrate the movement's vitality.

From the outset, the author explains that his approach consists in analyzing religion with the tools of general sociology, rejecting the view that "religious phenomena" possess an "irreducible specificity" (p. 7). He notes that religious studies, which began to emerge in the late nineteenth century, have undergone an incomplete process of deconfessionalization. Consequently, he emphasizes the importance, for sociologists, of making one's own tools, as well as the need for scholars to analyze their own place in the academic field, which, due to its own unique concerns, plays a role in determining their position.

Fer has chosen to organize his book into thematic sections. This allows him to define Pentecostalism's main characteristics, without limiting him to an overly restrictive definition—a challenge when describing so protean a phenomenon. For this reason, he adopts an historical approach, defining as "Pentecostal" the various movements that appeared at the movement's beginning.

Back to the origins

Fer begins by revisiting this movement's origins. Several false conceptions have wound up in sociological literature, such as the belief that Pentecostalism is revolutionary or rooted in Black culture. For Fer, these are illusions dispelled by "more rigorous examination of the sociohistorical circumstances [of its beginnings]" (p. 19).

This confusion is no doubt due to a fantastical conception of Pentecostalism bequeathed by "Pentecostal studies." According to these authors, the African American preacher William Joseph Seymour founded the movement when he opened one of the first Pentecostal churches in Los Angeles in 1906. Characterized by Black, white, and Hispanic believers living together, this church seemed to symbolize a movement that transcended racial distinctions.

² Katia Boissevain, "Des conversions au christianisme à Tunis. Vers quel protestantisme?," *Histoire, monde et cultures religieuses*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2013, p. 47-62. Karima Direche-Slimani, "Dolorisme religieux et reconstructions identitaires. Les conversions néo-évangéliques dans l'Algérie contemporaine," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, vol. 64, no. 5, 2009, pp. 1137-1162.

Fer, however, proposes a more subtle analysis of the various actors involved in the movement's beginnings. He recalls the role played by Charles Fox Parham, an advocate of segregation, who founded his own itinerant "evangelizing ministry" and taught William Joseph Seymour.

Fer also discusses the place of women in this story. They acquired a degree of social recognition that was proportional to the religious roles they were given. This was the case of a believer named Agnes Ozman, who was the first to show evidence of "speaking in tongues" — a practice that gave the movement its name. Consequently, Fer concludes that "the religious dynamic of 'awakening' can confer ... a specifically 'spiritual' legitimacy on actors who are otherwise subject racial and sexual domination" (p. 32).

Reexamining the appropriate definition of Pentecostalism, he notes that specialists of Protestantism have often struggled with how to describe it. This is due to two reasons.

First, the movement has evolved since the early twentieth century and the surge of charismatic Pentecostalist groups in the 1960s, which were characterized by an "emphasis on individual autonomy and the multiplication of forms of experimentation with 'the action of the Holy Spirit' [and] modes of organization favoring network dynamics rather than the church or denominational rationalities" (p. 51). Second, Pentecostalism adopted religious traditions of the societies where it established itself, leading some scholars, such as Jean-Pierre Bastian, to conclude that while Pentecostalism may be a form of Christianity, it is not Protestant.

Fer, for his part, maintains that, in the social sciences, a denominational perspective is necessary. But he notes that one cannot "reify general analytical categories (Pentecostalism, charismatic religiosity, Protestantism, and so on) as essences or closed spaces" (p. 49).

Institution and conversion

Fer next considers the institution's role in conversion. Paradoxically, Pentecostalism denies its status as an institution, emphasizing the importance of a one-to-one relationship with God. This belief, which may be regarded as a religious fiction, nonetheless has real utility for believers. It makes possible a "new birth," which goes

hand in hand with biographical invention, allowing believers to acquire new dispositions. Furthermore, by incorporating this belief in one's close relationship with God, allows individuals, at least theoretically, to untangle themselves from previous forms of sociability. As an institution, Pentecostalism is a space for forging new and specifically religious forms of sociability, enabling the reconfiguration of individual dispositions.

Fer next considers Pentecostalism's emotional, corporeal, and cultural aspects. He believes that scholars have too often viewed the term "emotional religiosities" (p. 97) as a step backward, towards an evolutionary perspective. Building on the work of Cas Wouters, he maintains, to the contrary, that we are witnessing the emergence of a *new form*: after a first phase that allowed the free expression of emotions and a second that required strictly controlling them, a new phase, which appeared in the twentieth century, is characterized by the controlled expression of emotions.

In this sense, Fer does not consider the dominant role of emotions as evidence of a return to a primitive state of religiosity, for he considers their role "religiously necessary" (p. 100), as they strengthen the believer's attachment to Christian dogma. For instance, "speaking in tongues" is seen by Christians as pure communication with God, shorn of linguistic imperfections. For Fer, this practice is a socially inculcated emotion, expressing itself as a desired and control enunciation. Belief is thus the prerequisite that allows believers to authorize themselves to express certain emotions, which remain nevertheless subject to the religious community's control. Similarly, the body is a privileged vector of adherence to the Pentecostalist dogma through its emphasis on the personal experience of healing, which confirms the existence of a God acting directly on the faithful.

This freer expression of feelings and incorporation of beliefs drawn from local cultures is also made possible by an evolution in Pentecostalism's missionary doctrine, by way of its charismatic current, which now focuses on evangelizing cultures rather than isolated individuals. According to the rhetoric of evangelical missionaries, there is ancient proof of a Christian presence among "unreached peoples" (p. 143) which must be restored. This belief authorizes, moreover, the reinterpretation of endogenous cultural practices and their inclusion in Pentecostalist doctrine (such as the incorporation of dance by Hawaiian Pentecostals). The spiritual combat dynamic also leads to a strengthening of the connection between a people and its territory, which requires a symbolic narrative consisting of a confrontation between the territory acquired by the Christian community and lands that have yet to be evangelized.

Religion and politics

Finally, Fer considers the connection between Pentecostalism and politics. Because it insists on the importance of the individual believer's personal commitment, one might assume that this religious movement is apolitical or even a depoliticized. Yet this overlooks two key factors that, according to Fer, remind us that the personal is indeed political. In fact, Pentecostalism's political impact is indeterminate. As a movement, it leans towards conservatism, encouraging the religious community to protect itself against the outside world. Yet in some contexts, Pentecostal actors will make their faith a political matter.

It is true that one might assume that Pentecostalism's political impact is limited since, in practice, it confines itself to moral and spiritual discourse, blending esoterism and bitterness about moral decline and loss of authority in a rapidly de-Christianizing society. In the same way, while the trend emphasizing spiritual combat has a theocratic agenda, it would seem to lack the concrete tools to advance this agenda.

Yet the movement's political impact can, at times, be considerable. Building on their network dynamic, Pentecostals can take over public spaces to engage in lobbying. This is encouraged in many parts of the world where the state delegates social policy to associations and religious organizations. The media also plays a major role in spreading the Christian Pentecostal vision.³

In conclusion, Fer's book provides of an overview of the vast field that is Pentecostalism. Its themes are well chosen, and they provide answers to the various questions raised at the book's outset. The only shortcoming is the book's excessively theoretical approach, which probably makes it less accessible to newcomers (given Pentecostalism's complex genealogy).

The book sheds light on the religious reconfigurations occurring at a global level. Indeed, if the Pentecostal movement is currently experiencing explosive growth, it is probably because it has adapted itself to globalization. It owes its force to a twofold movement, whereby it supports individuals in their efforts at individuation even as it

³ In my work on Pentecostal conversions in Kabylia, I have personally observed how communal, religious, and political dynamics intersect to form counter-discourses, drawing henceforth on Christian evangelical doctrine.

relies on the strengthening church authority, which prevails over other forms of institutional authority.

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