

A Pentecostal Latin America?

Rowan Ireland

THE PENTECOSTAL EXPLOSION

The awakening of scholars

WHEN I WROTE MY FIRST PAPER on the theme of religion and social change in Latin America, some twenty-eight years ago, the sects were nowhere in sight. More ruefully and truthfully, I should say they were peripheral in *my* vision of things, and in the general view of most social scientists interested in the field of study. Catholicism and the Catholic Church were at the centre of things. The Church appeared newly alive after its address to issues of justice and peace at Medellín in 1968. In Brazil, which from 1964 had the first of the new military dictatorships that were to become so dominant throughout Latin America in the 1970s, nuns and priests engaged in new forms of pastoral work with the poor, and appeared to be not only at the forefront of challenge to the military government, but the ferment of a new age. In their vision of Latin America in the making, the poor, i.e. the Catholic faithful, would become 'subjects of their own history' rather than objects in history made by the military, local élites and the great international powers. The Catholic Church and the poor, overwhelmingly Catholic, were indeed the focus of scholars concerned to trace the religious factor in deep and dramatic social transformations taking place in Latin America. And that focus appeared to be right and proper.

How different it has been in more recent years. I am still writing about religion and social transformation, mainly in Brazil where I do my fieldwork on popular religions and urban social movements. But it is about the sects, specifically the Pentecostals, that I write, and am asked to write.¹ Ever more attention is given by scholars, journalists and politicians to the Pentecostals and ever less to the 'progressive' Catholic Church and its experiments. And the attention is not only on the Pentecostal explosion itself, the growth in absolute numbers and proportions of national populations, but on the social transformation the explosion signifies and effects. Where once scholars debated the subversive potential of the Catholic Church's base communities (the CEBs) on the dictatorships of the 1970s, now they debate claims that the central historical dynamic in Latin

America is with the Pentecostals. More specifically, scholars have shifted attention to examination of claims as shocking as David Martin's that within their templates, and in the practice of their Protestant values and disciplines in everyday life, it is the Pentecostals who are laying the foundations for deep liberal-democratic transformations of still élitist, statist and authoritarian societies.²

What underpins this change of focus and debate among observers of the religious strand in Latin American societies? First and most obvious is the Pentecostal explosion itself. This is more than a very rapid increase in the number of Pentecostals. Neither Latin America nor Pentecostalism are very coherent categories, such is the immense variation between the societies and the churches respectively comprising them; so statistics for the whole of Latin America, even when available, cannot be used on their own to justify alarmist or triumphalist imagery. But to call the growth and development of Pentecostalism in most Latin American societies an explosion is not to indulge in hyperbole. Like all images, 'explosion' has its limitations: it reinforces the incorrect stereotypes that Pentecostalism is very new in Latin America and that it comes like a bomb from elsewhere, i.e. from well-financed US missionaries, rather than being a mainly indigenous development. Two factors, however, make the image apt: first is the increasing rate of growth and diversification in the last thirty years; and second, the attainment by the Pentecostals in that time of a sort of critical mass – a following, an institutional presence and a momentum of growth which enables them to be 'subjects' or active voices in the making of Latin American history.

Brazil: The pentecostals arrive, socially and politically

Take the case of Brazil. There are 20 million Protestants in Brazil's population of 150 million, and of these at least 13 million are Pentecostals. Those numbers, read alone, would indicate something less than an overwhelming presence, even allowing for extraordinary growth rates in some of the newer churches. But then we recall the commitment of the 13 million, such that now the vast majority of churchgoers in Brazil in a given week are Pentecostals. And they have places to go. In any of the less affluent suburbs and shantytowns of Brazil's great cities it may be difficult to locate the local Catholic church, but there will be a dozen or more Pentecostal temples of the Assemblies of God, Brazil for Christ, the Four Square Gospel Church (among others), and now, the fastest growing of

them all, the Church of the Universal Kingdom of God. Presence is established in other ways too. That last church, founded by a former Brazilian bank clerk, Edir Macedo, mushroomed during the 1980s and now has its message diffused through fourteen radio stations, a press, and a television station in São Paulo – all paid for by donations from the 600,000 members it had acquired by 1990.³

Add institutional presence to numbers, buildings and media, and the picture of expanding establishment is complete. Pentecostals themselves are aware that, in the last thirty years, they have become accepted and even sought after in the world of work. Elsewhere, I have described Assemblies of God regional festival services where the past in which *crentes* (believers) were denied employment and property rights is excoriated and God praised for the battles won in the recent past. Now, *alleluia*, Assembly affiliation certificates can be used as a basis for getting jobs, and no politician can be persuaded by the Catholics to block the building of a temple.⁴

Similarly in political life. Before the 1980s, there was little attempt to mobilize Pentecostals for political ends, and Pentecostals tell of their exclusion, as *crentes*, from both the wheeling and dealing of local Catholic patronage politics and the community projects of the Catholic liberationists. In any case, pastors and their congregations appear to have been assiduously apolitical – ‘on strike from society’, as David Martin has put it – engaged in their carefully constructed world apart in the defining practices of Pentecostalism: celebration and cultivation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, mutual support in living a strict Christian morality in defiance of the mores of popular culture, proselytizing, and the provision of services within the congregation. However, from 1985, when leading pastors of the Assemblies organized the election of their members to the Federal legislature, there have been various attempts to mobilize *crentes* for political purposes. These attempts at mobilization have not always been successful, and they have generally been in the name of rather narrowly defined Pentecostal church interests or moral concerns. But they do indicate a sort of arrival at the highest levels of formal politics.⁵ Of even greater significance are the reports that, coincidental with generally conservative institutional involvement, there has been local involvement of individual Pentecostals. Self-consciously motivated by their faith, they support the new radical Workers’ Party (the PT) and espouse positions for social justice and equity not so different from those championed by Catholic liberationists in the CEBs.⁶ Here is something explosively

new indeed: Pentecostalism operating for conservative ends at the commanding heights of formal politics, and engaged at the grass-roots in radical critical politics. That appears to be exactly how the Catholic Church was maintaining its hold on the making of Latin American history in the late twentieth century; but now it faces a rival, vigorous at all levels of society.

Guatemala and Chile: Pentecostalism as a social movement

Brazil has the largest absolute number of Pentecostals in Latin America. But in some other countries they are a higher proportion in the total population or have an even greater claim to have displaced Catholicism as the exclusive source of a religious dynamic in social, political and cultural transformation. Among Guatemala's six million population, 20 per cent are Protestant and at least two-thirds of those are Pentecostal or, more accurately, 'popular Pentecostal' (especially among the poorer classes and the Mayan Indians) and neo-Pentecostal (especially among the urban middle sectors). In the 1980s due attention was given by journalists and academics to the political impact of the latter US-linked type.⁷ General José Efraim Ríos Montt, a member of the neo-Pentecostal Church of the Word, became president, and in various ways wove a Pentecostal evangelical campaign into his particularly bloody and repressive chapter in the long war of the Guatemalan army against the Guatemalan people. From the perspective of the later 1990s, however, we can see that other forms of Pentecostalism, with deep indigenous roots, were flourishing, and apparently providing a sort of protected cultural space in which the poor could re-invent social bonds broken in years of exploitation and violence.

Chile, with Brazil and Central America, is the other of the three major sites of the Pentecostal explosion. In 1992 13 per cent of the Chilean population identified as Protestant (up from 6 per cent in 1970) and about 90 per cent of these are Pentecostals.⁸ For most of the last thirty years, Chilean Pentecostalism has been interpreted as socially restorative or, during and after the Pinochet dictatorship, collaborationist, aiding and abetting the projects of the military authoritarians. As elsewhere, these interpretations rather miss the full force and significance of Pentecostalism in Chilean social transformation. Scholars of Chilean Pentecostalism now recognize that for over thirty years, far from sealing themselves off from the rest of society in refuges for the poor, Pentecostals have been going out

from their temples and engaging in a variety of movements for social change, some quite radical in nature. And we now recognize that shortly after the generals, angered by the Catholic radicals, wooed and won a select group of Pentecostal leaders to swing the second religious force in the country behind the regime, that force proved far from cohesive. During the 1980s, voices from the congregations became louder, not only in criticism of collaborationist leaders deemed to be unrepresentative, but denouncing the military regime itself. Once again some rather paradoxical conclusions have to be drawn. First, Chilean Pentecostalism explodes as a force in social transformation, not as a sort of unified pressure group but more like a social movement whose internal debates and tensions increasingly articulate and shape the central issues of the society at large. Second, Pentecostalism has achieved this force not because Pentecostals are primarily political actors but, on the contrary, because they are a minority hugely moved and motivated by a deep and urgent spirituality.

THE FAITH AND PRACTICE OF PENTECOSTALS

Difference and similarity

As social scientists like myself get to know a range of Pentecostals and their congregations, it is ever more difficult to generalize about faith and practice. In Brazil I am constantly aware of differences between members of the three waves of Pentecostal churches (early twentieth-century like the Assemblies of God; the post-World War II Brazilian-founded churches like Brazil for Christ; and the late-century neo-Pentecostals like the Church of the Universal Kingdom of God). Some of my friends in the Assemblies do not recognize this last church as truly evangelical or Pentecostal, though they are remarkably ecumenical in their relations with other *crentes*. To them, and to some observers, like Paul Freston, the Church of the Universal Kingdom is beyond the pale because its emphasis on exorcism involves recognition of the spirits of the Afro-Brazilian religions, because it appears to place too much emphasis on individual material success, and because it appears to be comparatively relaxed about moral standards.⁹

Then, within congregations of particular churches, I have had to distinguish between spiritualities that move and motivate some members to discern a public dimension in the private troubles they confront in everyday life, and spiritualities which dispose others to

deal with their troubles by withdrawing from all social and political engagements beyond the bounds of the church.¹⁰ More recently, I have been wondering about different types of conversion among Pentecostals and the consequences these types of conversion have in the lives of Pentecostals as citizens. Some Brazilian Pentecostals live a sort of continuing conversion that turns them towards social engagements well beyond the bounds of their church and appears to dispose them to renegotiate gender roles or challenge racism first in church, then in society at large. Others, of the neo-Pentecostal variety, speak of once-and-complete conversion that includes them in upwardly mobile Brazil. Another path from once-and-complete conversion in the older churches appears to lead back into the church: at conversion there is acquired a blueprint for salvation within the haven of the church.¹¹

It is possible, however, to draw a profile of Pentecostal belief, practice and social orientation, despite all the variation – doubts about including neo-Pentecostals aside.

Seven characteristics of Latin American Pentecostalism

My list of seven defining characteristics – a social scientist's, not a theologian's – includes the following.

Whatever the type of conversion, *Pentecostals are conversionists*. In their testimonies, whether public or private and casual, conversion is the central theme. It is a conversion that is more than a decision for Jesus, but one that is sealed in the experience of baptism in the Holy Spirit (as distinct from baptism by water which is important but ancillary). That experience signifies and achieves what has been ardently sought by the convert: a complete turning away from a previous life, the life of sin and consequent suffering, and a complete rejection of the elements of popular culture which sustained that rejected life.

The supreme virtue for Pentecostals is the control over self and daily life that is achieved through the utter break with the past and with popular culture. *The religion of Pentecostals is a religion of personal responsibility.*

The characteristic tension in Pentecostalism appears (to this outsider) to lie in the combination of a preoccupation with intense immediate experience of the power of the Spirit of God and an equal preoccupation with achieving practical control over everyday life. This tension is not experienced as such by Pentecostals. Rather,

the spontaneity of religious experience achieves and validates the control over everyday life.

Though first and foremost an experientially based faith, *Pentecostalism is a religion of the Book* as well. The Bible is at once emblem and inexhaustible source for the morality tales which show how control over life might be achieved, how virtue is rewarded and transgression is punished, in and after this life. The Bible is also mined for stories and images which define the dignity of those who, with the strength given them by the Spirit, live the moral life, whatever their status in the material world. These latter stories and images seem to inform Pentecostal critique of social mores and corrupt politics.

As we have seen, the forms of Pentecostal religious organization are various – from large national churches with an increasingly professionalized clergy (e.g. the Assemblies) to small congregations, often newly separated from larger churches, with no established hierarchy or professional clergy. However, it is possible to distinguish Pentecostal organization by contrast with Catholic. Even in the larger national churches, *local congregations are autonomous* to a remarkable degree, and relate to other congregations through local networks rather than central organization. Then, within congregations, even an established pastor exercising strong authority is open to challenge from the charismatic authority constantly developing in the spontaneous exercise of the gifts of the Spirit.

Pentecostal congregations are not only assemblies for the celebration of the Spirit and guarantors of new moral community. *They are mutual aid communities* too, providing visitation and assistance for the sick, and help to women suffering problems of domestic violence. In a variety of ways congregations address very directly what a recent writer on Brazilian Pentecostals has called 'the pathogens of poverty'.¹² Some writers have contrasted this direct address by Pentecostals to the Catholic liberationist address found in the CEBs which calls the poor to a long collective struggle for a new political and social order.

Finally, in several special senses *Pentecostalism is a religion of women*. I have some difficulty making this point with the full subtlety required. There is the simple sense, that a majority of converts and of congregations are women; but that point could as well be made of the various sorts of Catholic communities. The more subtle point is that Pentecostalism appears to address those 'pathogens of poverty' as they affect women particularly, and to empower women

to deal with them in their everyday lives, even as it disposes them to accept a range of traditional gendered values. Hannah W. Stewart-Gambino and Everett Wilson have summed up the conclusions of several researchers in this way:

The difference for Pentecostal women is not that they reject traditional values regarding family, sexual codes, or gender roles; rather they see themselves as individuals responsible for their own liberation from the oppression of evil, defined as natural passions and instincts. It is the process of individuation, coupled with the assertion of a primary responsibility to God rather than one's spouse or family, that transforms women into active, responsible agents in their families' lives. These researchers assert, then, that Pentecostal conversion not only 'domesticates' male roles but also results in greater individuation and autonomy (if still traditional in social values) for women.¹³

CATHOLIC REACTIONS, ECUMENISM AND TRENDS

A serious misdiagnosis?

In my view, all seven elements of the Pentecostal profile must enter into good explanations of the continuing Pentecostal explosion. In other words, Pentecostalism appeals, gathers ever more converts, prospers and becomes historically more and more important because it is conversionist; because it demands and assists self-control from converts; because of the mutual validation of spontaneous experience of the power of the Spirit and personal control over everyday life; because of the use of the Bible as an authoritative source of practical morality; because of its congregational structures and the scope allowed for the exercise of charismatic authority of ordinary members; and because it is geared to women's definitions of the problems of everyday life and empowers them to address those problems.

Catholic responses appear predicated on rather simpler explanations of the explosion. At the Latin American Bishops' Conference in Santo Domingo in 1992, the Pope warned against 'the invasion of the sects', spoke of 'ravenous wolves', and launched a 'new evangelisation' drive which was to reassert the Catholic Church's position at the heart of Latin American culture. The explanation for the advance of the wolves was that 'significant amounts of money are offered to subsidise proselytising campaigns that try to shatter ...

Catholic unity'.¹⁴ The analysis is counterfactual at least to the extent it suggests that the funds for proselytizing come from external Protestant sources. Overwhelmingly, the financing of Pentecostalism is internal and comes from congregational collections and tithes. Curiously, Catholic projects in recent years, both of the Catholic liberationists and the conservatives, have been far more dependent on international support than the Pentecostal churches ever were. But the papal analysis is more seriously awry, first in its assumption of an extant unitary and unifying Catholic culture, and second in its failure to grasp the internal dynamics and the deep indigenous roots of Pentecostalism. The testimonies of Pentecostal converts show that Pentecostalism attracts because it locates individual, everyday life experience in a plausible universal story of salvation, because that story is preached in neighbourhoods by neighbours, and because the story is validated at once in direct spiritual experience and in the practical control over adversity demonstrably attributable to conversion. The Pentecostal explosion is not to be understood as an exotic imposition on the passive, manipulable masses.

The 'new evangelisation' drive is under way and deserves an evaluation far more profound than I am able to give it. As readers would expect by now, I consider it bound to fail for the following reasons. It attempts to restore a distant, re-centralized church teaching authority at precisely the moment when the Latin American poor, as they take up the so-called sectarian option, are demonstrating their desire and aptitude for local and personal articulation of a living, helpful religious culture. It gives primacy to the abstractions of dogma in a cultural milieu in which teaching must first be validated in personal spiritual experience and then in its demonstrable utility, particularly for women. Its pedagogy appears to assume a passive if error-prone flock in a situation where the pedagogy that appears to work is interactive and assumes responsibility and creativity on the part of those who are to be taught.

The end of the Catholic base communities (CEBs)?

It might be thought that if the Vatican way to some sort of Catholic restoration fails, then the Catholic liberationists, through the CEBs, might succeed. And, indeed, some studies of CEBs in particular places suggest that this might be the case. Some CEBs did attempt an evangelization that was interactive, engaged with issues brought by ordinary members from their everyday lives; and they developed

locally meaningful liturgical expressions. In the 1970s and into the 1980s, they appeared to be generating not only a new Catholicism and an expanding, active Catholic laity, but a new popular base for a variety of movements of social transformation. But the CEB's experiment has faltered badly under pressure from the Vatican restorationists. In many areas it remained too firmly and exclusively under the direction of clerical agents of 'the progressive Church', and the avowed interactive pedagogy was never successfully practised. Political conditions have changed, and the strong focus of many CEBs on political mobilization to confront the authoritarian custodians of unjust orders is no longer relevant or effective.¹⁵ For these and other reasons it is unlikely that the CEBs will continue to pose an alternative to the Pentecostals, and I say this even though I believe the impact of the CEBs' experiment has been greatly underestimated and that the spirit of Catholic liberationism lives on.¹⁶

Pentecostal hegemony?

Are we to conclude, then, that a Pentecostal Latin America is in the offing? That envisages a future in which the Pentecostals have not only the numbers but a dominant role in defining the terms of the debates and the imagery by which Latin American societies live. That future cannot be assumed for a number of reasons. There are signs, documented in the Chilean case, that the Pentecostal churches, under changing socio-economic conditions, do not retain their numbers well and do not attract the better-educated young or the x-generation global consumers.¹⁷ Then, as Pentecostal churches age, some show signs of just that routinization and clericalization that bedevils the Catholic Church. It is possible that as Pentecostalism falters for these sorts of reasons, the African religions will continue to surge in Brazil and Cuba. When we add to the scene the groups so far not alluded to in this article – the Japanese-inspired groups like Mahikari, the Mormons, and the whole range of non-Pentecostal Christian churches – then we can begin to see a future in which Pentecostals are only one set of voices in increasingly de-centred societies. In this sort of Latin American society there would be no focal debates about national identity and probably no religious negotiation of a hegemonic imagery. In the most pessimistic scenario, Latin American societies would become fragmented into tribes, some of which were formed around religious identities.

An ecumenical future?

However, there is also a possible ecumenical future in which different religious groups neither merge nor relate to one another as hostile or indifferent tribes. This would be a future of dialogue, of civilized conflict, of exchange of inspiration and insight, of borrowing, of living and faithful syncretism. It would be a future in which ecumenical dialogue nurtures the imagery of whole societies. Of course it is not going to be quite like that: there will be groups, including some Pentecostal and Catholic groups, which will have nothing to do with such ecumenical dreaming. But there are some images to keep the dream alive.

- In Chile, on the Sunday before the Pinochet coup in 1973, prominent Pentecostal leaders stand outside the presidential palace with the Catholic Cardinal, the Lutheran bishop, representatives of other churches, and the Jewish community to pray for peace.
- In 1985, the Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn) convenes a Pentecostal Consultation of Liberation Theology in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico.
- In 1997, in the northern suburbs of São Paulo, Catholic and Pentecostal women gather for regular meetings to discuss problems of domestic violence and the drug traffic and to determine what they can do locally to address these problems.

Small things, and no great achievements are involved (indeed quite to the contrary in the case of the first image). But in so far as these images record symptomatic and not unique events, they may be read as signs of a possible future worth working towards. That is the possible future in which deep ecumenical dialogue and exchange nourishes national dialogue and inflects civility throughout Latin America.

Rowan Ireland is Reader in Sociology at La Trobe University in Australia, and a member of that University's Institute of Latin American Studies. He has spent several years in Brazil engaged in fieldwork on religion and politics, and more recently on the 'popular movements' in Brazilian cities. His main work on religion in Brazil is *Kingdoms come: religion and politics in Brazil* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991).

NOTES

1 The word 'sects' is used in the official discourse of the Catholic Church in Latin America to refer to the whole array of new religious movements, Afro religions (e.g. Santería in Cuba and Candomblé in Brazil), and evangelical Protestant churches including the Pentecostal churches. I do not think it appropriate to bunch these very different groups under a label which is in most cases inaccurate. Since I could not say much about the whole array in 4,000 words, I decided to concentrate on the Pentecostals. In Latin America as a whole, the single most important and striking religious phenomenon in the second half of the twentieth century has been the growth and impact of the Pentecostal churches, particularly among the so-called 'popular classes'. I do not think that, collectively, the Pentecostals are properly or accurately described as 'sects', but when that word is used it refers to an array in which Pentecostals are the largest contingent by far.

2 David Martin, *Tongues of fire: the explosion of Pentecostalism in Latin America* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990). More recently, David Lehmann has demonstrated the deep cultural impact of Pentecostalism, in Brazil in particular, in his *Struggle for the Spirit: religious transformation and popular culture in Brazil and Latin America* (London: Polity Press, 1996).

3 For an account of the several waves of Pentecostal development and of increasing political impact, see Paul Freston, 'Brother votes for brother: the new politics of Protestantism in Brazil' in Virginia Garrard-Burnett and David Stoll, *Rethinking Protestantism in Latin America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), ch 3.

4 Rowan Ireland, *Kingdoms come: religion and politics in Brazil* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), pp 81–93.

5 See Paul Freston, *op. cit.*, for details.

6 For example, John Burdick, 'Struggling against the devil: Pentecostalism and social movements in urban Brazil' in Garrard-Burnett and Stoll, *op. cit.*, ch 1.

7 For the Guatemalan case see Everett Wilson, 'Guatemalan Pentecostals: something of their own' in Edward L. Cleary and Hannah W. Stewart-Gambino (eds), *Power, politics and Pentecostals in Latin America* (Boulder CO and Oxford: Westview Press, 1997), ch 8.

8 For the Chilean case see Edward L. Cleary and Juan Sepúlveda, 'Chilean Pentecostalism: coming of age' in Cleary and Stewart-Gambino, *op. cit.*, ch 6.

9 Paul Freston, *op. cit.*, pp 69–71.

10 Rowan Ireland, *Kingdoms come*, ch 4.

11 Rowan Ireland, in Cleary and Stewart-Gambino, *op. cit.*, pp 129–138.

12 Andrew R. Chesnut, *Born again in Brazil: the Pentecostal boom and the pathogens of poverty* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

13 Hannah W. Stewart-Gambino and Everett Wilson in Cleary and Stewart-Gambino, *op. cit.*, p 238.

14 John Paul II, 'Opening address' in Alfred T. Hennelly (ed), *Santo Domingo and beyond* (Maryknoll NJ: Orbis Books, 1993), p 48.

15 Examples of critical assessments of the CEBs include W. E. Hewitt, 'Myths and realities of liberation theology: the case of basic Christian communities in Brazil' in Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth (eds), *The politics of Latin American liberation theology* (Washington DC: Washington Institute Press, 1988); and more recently, Manuel A. Vásquez, 'Structural obstacles to grassroots pastoral practice: the case of a base community in urban Brazil', *Sociology of Religion* 58 (Spring 1997), pp 53–68.

16 An eloquent argument on the deep, long-term impact of the Catholic liberationist experiments is presented in Daniel Levine, 'On premature reports of the death of liberation theology', *The Review of Politics* 57 (Winter 1995), pp 105–131.

17 Cleary and Sepúlveda, *op. cit.*, pp 110–112.