

Canadian Pentecostalism: Transition and Transformation

Michael Wilkinson, ed., *Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009. 308 pp. \$32.95*
reviewed by Brian Gobbett, *Briercrest College & Seminary*

The twentieth-century ascent of the charismatic and Pentecostal movements may well prove to be one of the seminal movements within the history of Christianity, perhaps, as some have suggested, equal in weight to transformative events such as the great divorce of the Orthodox and Catholic traditions in the eleventh century or the ruptures of the Reformation era in the sixteenth century.

The statistics (as well as the stories) are compelling and often cited. Whether from a small handful at a camp meeting in Cherokee county (1896), or a Bible school in Topeka (1901), or the widely noted Azusa Street revival that began in an African-American neighborhood of Los Angeles (1906) – origin stories, as always, are contested – the charismatic movement has transcended these inconspicuous locales and, in scarcely a century, emerged as a worldwide phenomenon that by now might well have surpassed 500 million adherents.

The demographic impact in Canada is significant. By 1991 over 400,000 Canadians self-identified as Pentecostals and, as Michael Wilkinson suggests in his introduction to this volume, the number of Canadians who have had Pentecostal or charismatic experiences might number as high as 4.4 million individuals or some 15 per cent of the population (4–5).

In response to the paucity of scholarship on Canadian Pentecostalism,¹ Wilkinson, associate professor of sociology at Trinity Western University and director of the Religion in Canada Institute, has assembled a wide-ranging group of outstanding scholars dedicated to the task of correcting our understanding of why Pentecostalism has gone “largely unnoticed by outside observers in Canada and why Pentecostalism, along with other religious movements, is currently important for thinking about the role of religion in society” (11). The result is an impressive, although slightly idiosyncratic, exploration of Canadian Pentecostalism organized around the broad categories of “Origins and Development”, “Aspects of the Canadian Pentecostal Experience,” and “Institutionalization and Globalization.”

Canadian Pentecostalism has its origins in a widely attended symposium held at Trinity Western University in 2006. In the work of thirteen scholars from disciplines including biblical and theological studies, cultural and global studies, history, and sociology, Wilkinson has discerned patterns of “transition” and “transformation” around which this collection is framed. These interrelated concepts speak to the notion of change, either as a process (“transition”) or as an end result (“transformation”). In the latter case, the transformation may be particular (located in the individual) or of vast consequence (the globalized nature of religion). We see these concepts explored in a wide variety of contexts in this volume.

Most prominently, the transition of Pentecostalism from an early twentieth-century renewal movement to an institutional body (most often in this volume to the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada [PAOC]) comes under

¹For example, Pentecostalism receives scant attention in Terrence Murphy and Roberto Perin, eds., *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 1996). Although ranging beyond Christianity, Robert Choquette is more generous in devoting several pages to Pentecostalism in *Canada's Religions* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2004).



frequent interrogation. This process was complex, and the analyses provided are episodic. For example, Bruce Guenther (ch. 5) explores the institutionalization of Pentecostal education and curricula via Western Bible College (and its variants) and its continuing influences. Martin Mittelstadt (ch. 6) argues that in understanding the nature of both early (renewal) and contemporary (bureaucratic) streams of Pentecostalism, scholars must take careful note of the movement's particular hermeneutical approach to Luke-Acts.

Pamela Holmes's analysis of "ministering women" (ch. 8) notes the transition from egalitarian practice to a patriarchal and hierarchical structure as early as 1925 (178). Significantly, when the PAOC finally allowed for the ordination of women in 1984, Holmes argues that this step found concord on the conference floor only once the office of ordination was stripped of its institutional authority (187). As an internal report at the 1984 conference suggested, "ordination confers nothing! It is simply a recognition of the call of God and the consecration of the person to that call to certain types of ministry" (187).

Drawing upon recent scholarship that has emphasized aboriginal agency and the formation of an indigenous Christianity, Bob Burkinshaw (ch. 7) argues that the charismatic revivals among coastal First Nations groups in British Columbia in the 1950s were spontaneous and initially outside the purview of the PAOC. Although organized Pentecostalism was not always unwelcome by native groups, the institutionalization of indigenous Pentecostalism by the PAOC quickly followed. Not surprisingly for students of revivalism, there has been declension in the numbers of adherents and religious vitality in native communities in recent years, although Pentecostalism still remains a significant cultural force among many indigenous populations in Canada and Alaska.

There is much more in this volume, of course, but we might note that the study of Pentecostalism in Canada is itself in transition – as displayed in this volume – as it moves from "participant-observers" to a "new Pentecostal historiography" and even to the secular academy.² If it is the case, as Randall Holm tells us, that Pentecostalism is "a walk that is coloured by the landscape and culture where [Pentecostals] find themselves" (91), this volume suggests that there is still much work yet to do in understanding the nature of charismatic Christianity within a uniquely Canadian landscape and culture. That said, it is unfair to expect a diverse collection (both in scholarly discipline and topic) to produce a contextual study akin to a monograph such as Grant Wacker's *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (2001).³

There are indeed occasional glimpses into the interconnection between charismatic practice and a uniquely Canadian social context. In a methodologically sophisticated study of apocalyptic belief among Canadian Pentecostals, Peter Althouse (ch. 3) argues that the strength and nature of apocalyptic belief made a particular contribution to the moral reform movement that had such vital life in late Victorian and early twentieth-century English Canada. A prominent eschatological impulse among early Pentecostals led them (in a manner similar, but not identical, to the Social Gospel movement) to criticize the current social situation, all the while offering a countercultural

²I am drawing this terminology from Augustus Cerillo, "The Beginnings of American Pentecostalism: A Historiographical Overview," in *Pentecostal Currents in American Protestantism*, ed. Edith L. Blumhofer, Russell P. Spittler, and Grant A. Wacker (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 229–59. Cerillo notes that the first students of charismatic phenomenon were "participant-observers" who saw little need to place their own movement within the historical process or within socioeconomic, political and religious transformations; instead, they largely saw the arrival of Pentecostalism as "a providentially generated, end-time religious revival fundamentally discontinuous with 1,900 years of Christian history" (229).

³Wacker's placement of the early Pentecostal experience within broader American culture is particularly evident in the last chapters of the book, where he explores issues of social location, nationalism and civic attachment, and attitudes toward the First World War.

Church & Faith Trends



February 2010 / Volume 3 / Issue 1
ISSN 1920 - 0439

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
// An Initiative of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

vision of society based upon their understanding of biblical Christianity. Althouse's contribution to the literature of the moral reform movement is a significant contribution to a topic that has received considerable attention from historians and sociologists since the publication of Richard Allen's *The Social Passion* (1971).

Canadian Pentecostalism also makes stimulating connections between Canadian Pentecostalism and global communities and processes. David Reed and Donald Swenson provide studies of charismatic Anglicans and Roman Catholics respectively, while Steven Hunt sees the Toronto Blessing as an ideal site upon which theories of globalization – and, in particular, the debate over whether globalized religious movements are best interpreted as hegemonic or imperialistic processes or as localized cultural events – may be tested. Hunt concludes that the multi-dimensional and global nature of the Toronto Blessing is best understood through a theoretical lens that pays heed to both hegemonic models and local interpretation.

Likewise, in recent years there has been much study of periphery-centre relationships. Michael Wilkinson explores some of these in his analysis of Pentecostal immigrants and the nature of global networks and social communities that characterize ethnic congregations in the PAOC.

It is fitting, however, that Peter Beyer concludes the volume with a provocative essay on the relationship between waves of Pentecostal growth and global contextual factors. The periods of charismatic growth – the years before the First World War, the era after the Second World War and especially the 1960s, and the post-Cold War era – were also periods of enormous and multi-faceted global tensions. Pentecostalism's modern birth coincided, for example, with an unprecedented trend in transnational mobility (including mission work) and the advent of important developments in communications, both of which profoundly shaped the face of the twentieth-century charismatic movement. While there is, of course, no attempt to establish direct causal relationships between charismatic revival and larger global trends, Beyer's exploration of the necessary interplay between the local and the global is compelling and worthy of debate, particularly when some current grand theories of global events tend to downplay the former.

In his historiographic survey on Canadian Evangelicalism written in 1995, John Stackhouse noted that Pentecostal groups (amongst others) “all have Canadian stories largely untold by scholars.”⁴ The diversity of both scholars and research institutions represented in this volume signals that Stackhouse's observation is on the verge of significant change. To draw upon Holm's metaphor once more, *Canadian Pentecostalism* is a very significant step forward in beginning to tell that story and as such deserves a wide audience. 🌱

⁴John G. Stackhouse, Jr., “The Historiography of Canadian Evangelicalism: A Time to Reflect,” *Church History* 64, no. 4 (1995), 632. Stackhouse rightly makes note of Thomas William Miller's *Canadian Pentecostals: A History of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada* (Mississauga, ON: Full Gospel Publishing House, 1994).