Chapter 11
Great Risk for the Kingdom: Pentecostal–Charismatic Growth Churches, Pastorpreneurs, and Neoliberalism

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ABSTRACT

Pentecostal–Charismatic Christianity (“PCC”) has successfully navigated the challenges modernity poses to religion, growing rapidly in the twentieth century. Toward the end of the twentieth century, however, neoliberalism began its ascent to its current hegemonic status. Neoliberalism reconfigures social institutions as marketized practices with a measurable ‘payoff’. PCC adapted to this challenge in the form of a “growth churches,” adopting many of the characteristics of neoliberalism. In adopting a homogenous model and method of ‘best practice’ in order to facilitate growth; offering a ‘prosperity’ theology that fits well with the development of human capital; and endorsing the universalization of risk through modelling “pastorpreneur” leadership, it is argued in this chapter that growth churches are a paradigmatic example of a late modern religious phenomenon accommodating neoliberalism in a largely uncritical manner. The chapter concludes with some observations that critique this association between neoliberalism and growth churches.

INTRODUCTION

Early twentieth century social thinkers such as Émile Durkheim and Max Weber proposed what has come to be known as the “Secularization Thesis,” predicting that rationalism and science would bring about what Weber called a “disenchanted” world – one with no place for religion (Weber, 1946). Pentecostal–Charismatic Christianity (hereafter “PCC”) is a religious form that has ‘bucked the trend’ predicted by the Secularization theory, numbering an estimated half a billion followers worldwide at the close of the twentieth century (Hollenweger, 1997). PCC is perhaps Christianity’s chief riposte to the secularization theorists – far from disappearing, here is a religion being born and growing to an enormous size, all in the modern, ‘post-religious’ age (Jennings, 2015).

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While much of PCC’s growth has occurred in the still-developing contexts of the poorer nations of the world – referred to by Elijah Kim (2012) as the “Majority World,” PCC has also demonstrated an ability to adapt and grow in late modern societies, such as the United States, Australia, Canada and Western Europe. Toward the end of the twentieth century, and in the early twenty-first, religion and other social institutions have been confronted with the new challenge of neoliberalism – “a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms” (Brown, 2015, p. 17). In this chapter, I briefly survey PCC’s beginnings and early adaptability to the forces of modernity. Next, I will outline some of the key components of neoliberalism, namely “human capital” and “entrepreneurship,” which work to reconfigure all aspects of the social world in measurable, monetizable form. I conclude by examining a paradigmatic example of PCC’s adaptation to neoliberalism – the “growth church” – and discuss why I think this accommodation is highly problematic.

Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity in Twentieth Century Modernity

PCC was and is a religious sect with a focus from its inception on phenomena that could best be described as ‘ecstatic’, such as glossolalia and divine healing. PCC – to a higher degree than any other form of Christianity – has maintained an emphasis on catalysing tangible religious experience, or what Durkheim might have called “effervescence” (1976). Not only does PCC offer this, but it links to a tradition and a set of rituals and symbols that allow the repeatable catalysation of effervescence (Jennings, 2008).

PCC, which emerged in North America, Wales, and India early in the twentieth century, has from its beginnings prioritized evangelism, and in many ways the newly plural societies of modernity were very amenable to the spread of this new blessing. The message and ethos of the nascent Pentecostal movement was spread not only through face-to-face mission work, but the distribution of printed flyers, and eventually through the proliferation of mass-produced books, cassettes, printed music, and other technologies. Thus, the movement adopted not only the Protestant Christian tradition, but also demonstrated an easy capacity to adapt to the modernity in which it emerged.

The early Pentecostals understood the primary characteristic of their movement to be the enigmatic experience they called the “baptism of the Holy Spirit.” How did one know that one was in fact baptised in the Spirit? One can almost imagine Max Weber’s anxious Protestant asking a similar question – how can one know one is truly saved (Weber, 1976)? Unlike Weber’s uneasy Reformed believer, the early Pentecostals had a direct answer: the evidence that one has experienced the baptism in the Holy Spirit was the gift of glossolalia – usually referred to as “speaking in tongues.” Thus, PCC arguably offered a form of assurance and certainty in a rapidly changing world.

More recently, Joel Robbins has also pointed out that PCC possesses the cultural features which allow it to be both simultaneously adaptable to local contexts, as well as maintaining its homogenizing global form (Robbins, 2004). In regards to the latter, PCC lacks a central church or governing body, yet has managed through mass communication to propagate homogenous ecclesial and liturgical forms internationally. To take one example: Hillsong Church in Sydney has promulgated a style that has been copied by many other churches all over the world. This homogenizing effect is further facilitated by the internet and the ease with which large churches like Hillsong not only produce music, but also provide instructional videos on playing the instruments and producing their ‘unique’ sound.

However, the resistance to the process of routinization of charisma observed by Michael Wilkinson is significant in the capacity of PCC churches to embrace the other force latent in globalization – the impetus to indigenization (Wilkinson, 2015). The requirement for each congregation to engage in char-