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Pentecostalism and Forms of Individualism

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The discussion around Christianity and individualism is a bit unusual in anthropology for having the character of an actual debate – those contributing to it have been uncommonly responsive to one another's arguments in ways that give the literature a certain momentum and coherence. In Chapter 4, 'Borders and Abjections', the authors, with one slight exception I will take up below, leave much of this literature aside, choosing instead just to lightly refer to the two main opening statements (Robbins 2004; Mosko 2010) as a background to introducing their own highly original and stimulating arguments. One thing I might usefully do with my contribution, then, is situate their discussion in the context of the wider debate.

At this point, it is perhaps fair to say that there are four main positions in play in the debate about Christianity and individualism. 1) Christianity in some of its forms can foster a strong commitment to individualism, most fully elaborated in the idea that what Christians must strive for, alone and together, is a kind of salvation that God will deliver only on an individual basis. This would be a good representation of my original position (Robbins 2004). 2) Christianity in all its forms has nothing to do with individualism; it is in itself a 'premodern' cultural form that, like perhaps all of these, is based on dividualism and notions of partibility, whereby people conceive of relations as ontologically primary in this world and conceive of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit as beings with whom one relates by means of traditional kinds of transfers of detachable aspects of the self. This is Mosko's (2010)

position. 3) Christianity supports not just individualism but also the cultivation of relations of various kinds, and it supports both of these things equally, so there is no sense in which it can be meaningfully called individualist. This is Werbner's (2011) position. 4) Christianity supports both individualism and relationalism, but in different contexts or at different moments in people's lives, so its individualist impulses are truly a part of its general make-up, but they are not always its dominant ones – rather, Christians 'oscillate' between individualist and relational understandings of the self. I read Daswani (2011) as holding something like this position. My own final position is something akin to a version of the fourth position, but one that notes that considerations of value need to be taken into account in arguments about oscillation, such that if people consider those contexts or moments in which they pursue Christianity in individualist ways as more important than those in which they draw on its relational aspects, then we should be prepared to let that tell us something crucial about the nature of their Christianity – something that might count as its leaning overall in an individualist direction (Robbins 2015).

Something like a mix of third and fourth positions has become, I think, the dominant one – the idea that Christianity is both relationalist and individualist. Some scholars adopt this position as a way to have things both ways, as it were, not really having to make any strong claims about whether Christianity favours individuals or relations. Others, or at least I myself, would like to retain the option of making such strong claims in ethnographic situations that seem to warrant them. But no one wants to argue any more (and indeed no one ever really has, but demonstrating that would get us into more detail than we have space for here) that Christians do not have any relations. Most people, perhaps with the exception of Mosko, want to treat Christian lives, if not Christianity itself, as having individualist and relational aspects.

So where does 'Borders and Abjections' fit into this scheme? As written, it has to be read mostly as changing the subject (pun intended). Or at least, it works to redefine individualism as not a matter of caring about the individual and its salvation but rather as one of caring about the making and maintaining of borders that in various respects protect one's inner world from a chaotic outside one. If we were to translate this into the terms of the standing debate on Christianity and individualism, we might see bordering efforts as akin to moves toward individualism, while crossing borders could stand for a relational impulse. Read in these terms, this chapter would stand as a refreshing turn to taking a kind of individualism – abject individualism – as central in Pentecost – forgoing a stress on relations (without making the silly claim, which again no one

has ever made affirmatively, that Christians do not have relations). But the authors mean the shift to a focus on borders as a wholly new conception of individualism and a fundamental reorientation of the debate, so it is best to honour this intention and ask what kind of space this move opens up beyond that occupied by the prior discussion.

My use of a spatial metaphor in concluding the previous paragraph was not random. Focusing on what is new in 'Borders and Abjections', we might say that at a deep metaphoric level the authors' argument is about the person in space, while much of the other literature on Christian individualism is, at an equally deep metaphoric level, about the person in time. Thus, the previous debate dwells on the temporally grounded notion of oscillation and sometimes also attends to believers' concern with breaking with their past and with their *eventual* salvation. Focusing more on issues of space, and drawing in Kristeva, the authors argue that the New Testament and Christian individualism more generally focus on matters of the inner person and the borders that create it.

Sticking with spatial metaphors – the approach of 'Borders and Abjections' looks at borders from the inside towards the outside, focusing on how to defend them and how to purify the inside when it is demonically breached. Here I think things get interesting in comparative terms, for there is some variation in this historically and today across the Christian tradition, and even in 'Pentecost'. Leanne Williams and I (2017), looking comparatively at some of the literature on Pentecostalism in Africa and at my own work on the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea, and also at some work on the history of the Christian notions of sin, note that this kind of material indicates that there are at least two models of sinfulness in the Christian tradition and that one can find both in Pentecostalism. One model stresses human fallenness and finds that the way humans are by nature is sufficient to explain the existence of sin and evil inside of persons and in the world. Evil does not come into people from the outside but is in people from the start. Another model sees evil as caused by demons and the devil and as afflicting people from the outside in. One can look at the historical development of these two models, noting, for example, that the one that concentrates on innate human evil has been central to the Calvinist tradition. One can also look at the history of Pentecostalism in these terms. The well-known move in some but not all places from 'ascetic' classical Pentecostalism to the neo-Pentecostalism of spiritual warfare, healing as deliverance and, in some places, the prosperity gospel is in some respects a shift from a focus on innate human sinfulness to one on demonic causes of evil. One question these observations raise is whether 'Pentecost' as a heuristic needs to be retooled so as to take in this variation or whether it mostly

means to apply only to the three cases at hand in this book, perhaps all clearly marked by neo-Pentecostal emphases, and also to whatever other cases might look just like them, but is happy to leave out Pentecostals who do not fit. This might be justified in various ways but then perhaps one might want to rethink the name 'Pentecost' for this heuristic because of such internal variation.

Part of the reason I wanted to bring up the historical complexity of Christian thought about whether sin is more a product people's insides or of external factors that contaminate those insides is to raise some questions for the very interesting thoughts in 'Borders and Abjections' about the shift from disciplinary society to control society and the bearing of this shift on 'Pentecost'. There is a suggestion, though the authors ultimately deny it, that the new kind of Pentecostal individual they identify is a reaction to a new kind of society in which, following Deleuze, external replaces internal control and power and capital move without borders, attempting to do away with all set apart 'insides'. The new Pentecostal individual could be, as the authors put it, a critique of the control society or, as another idiom has it, a form of resistance to it. But others might imagine, using yet another idiom for thinking about places like Melanesia and Africa, that this Pentecostal formation is just a hold-over from disciplinary kinds of self-management – obsessed as they are with borders and at least one binary, neither of which are after all really important in control societies – in places where the control society has not yet been fully installed. Can this possibility be ruled out? In general, I think the analysis presented in 'Borders and Abjections' has promise, but the other interpretation I have mentioned seems plausible because, as it appears here, the analysis floats a bit high above the data. The way around this would be to locate the shift from discipline to control societies in the places studied (giving it real content there) and then put the details of this analysis of social change into conversation with religious details. This effort would also have to include a careful consideration of the fairly well documented history of the neo-Pentecostal view of the world as an arena of threatening principalities and powers and its allied healing techniques. This was put together in Southern California at a specific time – indeed, exactly the moment Deleuze published his control society essay – and it spread out from there to other parts of Pentecost; indeed, one reason there is a 'Pentecost' figurable as a global place is that this neo-Pentecostal style was not invented locally in each place as a response to local experiences of a shift to a control society but rather diffused around the globe in ways that, as is so common with Pentecostalism, allowed the demons to be local without generating much localization of the framework for understanding or dealing with

them (Robbins 2012). This kind of historical discussion and attention to globalizing dynamics might well support the argument made in 'Borders and Abjections', but without this kind of attention to ethnographic and historical detail I worry that this argument might just remain too abstract to be more than suggestive.

And finally, having troubled the notion of 'Pentecost' by zooming in close enough to find variation within it, I guess I should also zoom out and raise the question of whether 'Pentecost', the place that is not a place, cuts the world at its outer borders as well. At the very least, I think it makes a cut in the broader evangelical tradition at a place where it does not make sense to do so. In a somewhat cognate comparative exercise to the authors', Bambi Schieffelin, Aparecida Vilaça and I looked at conversion in three different settings and to two different kinds of Evangelical Christianity – fundamentalism and Pentecostalism (Robbins et al. 2014). As is well known, these two traditions are siblings that do not like each other much. Arising around the same time and both out of the broader evangelical stream, Fundamentalists, who do not believe that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are available to believers today, anathematize Pentecostals for their belief that they are. We wanted to know what conversion to one or other version of the faith meant for converts' views of the person. I cannot summarize the whole argument here or our use of Marcel Detienne's (2008) work on comparison as one important guide to method, but a key finding was that in all cases, converts developed a new understanding of and a heightened concern with the inner self. So Fundamentalists resemble Pentecostals when it comes to commitment to border work, even as they differ in other ways. Indeed, if one reads Nancy Ammerman's (1987) classic ethnographic account of Fundamentalism – the book *Bible Believers* – it is hard not to think that Fundamentalists may even have perfected this model before the Pentecostals got to it, for Fundamentalists have long made border work of all kinds central not only to healing but to all of religious life. From the point of view of 'Borders and Abjections', then, perhaps they would also belong in 'Pentecost', though they would surely want to change the name! One question this discussion of fundamentalism raises, just as do some of my other points in this comment, is about the kind of work that could profitably be done to situate Pentecost within or at least in relation to the massive continent of Christianity more generally.

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