

11

‘Pentecost’ in the World

Birgit Meyer

Space is just an activity of the soul, just the human manner of connecting inherently unconnected sense affections into unified ideas.

—Georg Simmel, *Soziologie*

Going to Pentecost is an ambitious thought-experiment. In the anthropology of religion, the study of Pentecostalism has been profiled as a field for conceptual innovation. This volume is placed in this tradition. At a time in which anthropologists, also due to new funding schemes, are increasingly involved in collaborative research projects, the question of the methodological and conceptual gains of such more or less explicit comparative endeavours is pertinent. There are still many researchers who study Pentecostalism *in* various locations – myself included – but few attempt to study it *across*. This is the explicit aim of this volume. In order to do so, as the authors argue, the anthropological inclination of contextualizing Pentecostal forms and practices in a particular regional environment is to be put on hold. In order to overcome the limits of a methodology that takes for granted geo-cultural territory as the prime explanatory frame, they plead for a deterritorialization of approaches to Pentecostalism. This, however, does not mean the rejection of space as a category. As a next step, Pentecostalism is reterritorialized as a trans-regional ‘place’ consisting of various sites: Port Vila on Vanuatu, Kiriwina and the Palanca neighbourhood in Angola’s capital Luanda. Through this move, the authors argue, it is possible to undertake a ‘direct’ comparison of the way in which ‘the recognition and immediate experience

of the Holy Spirit' occurs in these sites. In this volume this direct, lateral comparison is undertaken along a horizontal axis (Part I), which subsequently forms the base for a frontal comparison along a vertical axis that aims at conceptual innovation in anthropology (Part II). With much pleasure I have accepted the invitation to reflect on the question of what is gained by undertaking this thought-experiment, paying special attention to Chapters 3 and 6 in which the Palanca, a neighbourhood in Angola's capital Luanda, is the point of departure.

Going Horizontal: Discerning 'Pentecost's' Absolutist Logic

The authors constitute 'Pentecost' as a place for the sake of their experiment. I have no problem with this move as such. Spaces and places are not given but shaped through the imagination. They emerge – and are made real – through human actions and thoughts: 'an activity of the soul' (Simmel 2016 [1992]: 688, translation BM). Usually the main interest of anthropologists and scholars of religious studies is to grasp the actions and thoughts through which their interlocutors develop a sense of place and how it is informed by and feeds into a particular social configuration. Christianity, and Pentecostalism in particular, offers a broad sense of place and space that envelops local sites into a wide – or even global – cosmological scheme. Studying this upscaling of place and space from the level of the local to the global on the level of the interlocutors is not the prime interest of the authors of this volume. Connecting geographically distant sites into a unified transregional whole, their concern is to project 'Pentecost' as an imagined, laboratory place for an innovative scholarly analysis. Still, if we take 'Pentecost' as such a place, the question arises how it relates to the regional environments that the authors reject as their prime explanatory frame. Chapter 3 shows that 'Pentecost' is neither independent from nor congruent with the Palanca, Kiriwina or Port Vila. If anything, it is a place within other places to which it stands in an oppositional relation. The dialectical engagement with the world out there, which is discarded and encroached upon, is at the core of Pentecostal activities. Construing 'Pentecost' as a separate place independent from the region in which it is situated would stand in the way of grasping this dialectic. De facto, the authors acknowledge this in their analysis, thereby relativizing the initial deterritorializing move. This is most explicit in Chapter 6's emphasis on the continuing impact of traditional Bakongo notions on everyday life and the directions taken by Pentecostal churches in the Palanca, but it also shows clearly in the

point that sin is understood as rooted in Trobriand notions of witchcraft and sorcery.

So if analytically 'Pentecost' can be taken as a place, it needs to be stressed that it is located in the midst of tensions, conflicts and antagonisms in relation to non-Pentecostal worlds as well as with regard to the relation between different kinds of Pentecostal churches. What emerges as the defining characteristic is the uncompromising, absolutistic manner through which it relates to its pluralistic environment. We learn that those in search of experiencing the Holy Spirit as an immediate presence live in the midst of a world that they find disconcerting and even potentially polluting. This is most obvious in the Palanca, an urban neighbourhood with countless churches, bars, shops and markets and filled with sounds and images from all these locations. The Palanca witnesses the outcome of a process of urbanization through which an older moral order was dissolved – at least this is how it looks in retrospect – and where inhabitants find themselves in need of security and guidance. The extent to which this is a world in turmoil comes to the fore in the shift of meaning attributed to *ndoki* (witchcraft). While in the traditional past *ndoki* served to establish order, now it is taken as a symptom of disorder that calls Pentecostals into action. A sense of insecurity associated with disorder also emerges from the two Melanesian sites. So here 'Pentecost' is not a nice future destination like heaven (as a perspective that emphasizes the Pentecostal eschatology might suggest) but a place in or from where to wage war. In other words, construing 'Pentecost' as a place puts its antagonistic and aggressive stance to the world at the centre of the analysis. It opens up scholarly inquiry for a systematic study of Pentecostal ideas and valuations about as well as engagements with co-present others.

In this context it needs to be noted that the Pentecostal discourse in the three sites itself makes profuse use of spatial and temporal metaphors but does not construe 'Pentecost' as a place (if anything, it might be the event of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit). Being Pentecostal means being in motion. Pentecostal churches in the Palanca offer 'a diagnosis that establishes the road to salvation'. Through 'metaphorical mapping' and 'temporal sequencing' they produce 'an ordering effect in people's lives'. In Port Vila the Bible is taken as a door to the 'right road' to be followed, while on Kiriwina Pentecostalism involves a 'journey from darkness to light'. This use of spatial metaphors resonates with the longstanding Christian trope of life as a journey along either the broad path through mundane pleasure that ends up in hell or the narrow path to heavenly Jerusalem. Traditionally (as in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* or the lithograph of the *Broad and Narrow Path*), the

narrow path would require a sober, world-renouncing attitude that Max Weber (1920) circumscribed as innerworldly asceticism. The path taken by Pentecostals in the three sites leads through a battlefield in which evil spirits – especially witchcraft – are fought in the name of the one and only truth, the world here being perceived as posing a serious threat; the right attitude is not one of mere dissociation from the world but of an active fight against and with it. Promising a way out of the mess and to restore order, the Holy Spirit vests believers with belligerent mindsets, prone to insist on and install an absolute truth.

What I find particularly intriguing is that the chapter spotlights a strong Pentecostal resentment with regard to the present in which born again Christians cohabit with all sorts of others who are perceived as enemies. The messy, plural world, with all its distractions, seductions and dangers, fuels, at least in some people, a desire for a Christian order that is to be reached through an absolutist, anti-pluralist route. As the authors spotlight, the rejection of plural possibilities in favour of a singular truth comes with its own contradictions. The plurality despised by Pentecostal churches is at the same time the reason for their existence. They thrive thanks to the very sense of insecurity that they seek to alleviate and yet need in order to be in demand, just as they need to affirm the danger of witchcraft and the devil against which they claim to protect their followers. And while they each claim the ultimate path to an absolute Christian truth, they are in strong competition with each other, entailing fission and differentiation, and finding themselves placed in what Blanes' interlocutor Nunes sees as a capitalist spiritual supermarket.

In sum, by exploring 'Pentecost' as a place opposed to and yet entangled with a non-Pentecostal world, it becomes very clear that the appeal of Pentecostalism in the three sites – and I would say, in many others – is due to its rejection of relativism and plural possibilities. It appears to be a simplifying and uncompromising force that seeks to resolve the challenges posed by pluralism or, as I would put it, co-existence with others across various differences by closure and insistence on one single truth. However, I wonder whether the Pentecostal logic of absolutism is as absolute in practice as it is claimed to be by the authors. How far can this stance at all be maintained in everyday practice in the more or less plural configurations of Port Vila, Kiriwina and above all the highly diverse Palanca? More comparative research on 'Pentecost' in the world – in the three sites and elsewhere – would be needed to sort out the effects of a stance that absolutely opposes an inescapable plurality. As I will argue below, doing so would require looking beyond 'Pentecost' into the broader dynamics of coexistence in the midst of everyday encounters.

Going Vertical: The Conceptual Gains

Chapter 6 discusses the findings of the 'journey through Pentecost' in the light of existing scholarly concepts and theories developed with regard to Pentecostalism in the framework of the anthropology of Christianity, and beyond. The proverbial motto of making 'a complete break with the past' (Meyer 1998) relied on a temporalizing strategy used by Pentecostals to construe contemporary others as not sharing the same time and place, thereby denying their coevalness (Fabian 1983). The qualification of significant others as backward and hence as belonging to an imagined past is a prominent strategy of dissociation (currently also often recurred to in populist ideologies mobilized in Europe that regard Islam as backward). While I think that this strategy is still operative in Pentecostal discourse (at least in Ghana), I agree with the authors that the logic of moral absolutism found to prevail across 'Pentecost' amounts to more than the trope of rupture in the sense of a break or discontinuity that for so long has occupied scholars of Pentecostalism. Emphasizing the dialectical relation between 'Pentecost' and the non-Pentecostal world, they argue that the resentment towards others 'enacts a form of separation within a "present" that is inherently immanent'. Instead of temporalizing enemies as backward, they are spatialized as dangerously co-present. This wish to distinguish and separate themselves from others with whom they share time and place in one space has strong implications for how people live together with and across their differences. They point out that Pentecostals perceive their world as a space of multiplicity. Enemies are confronted as illicit, immoral cohabitants with whom one is doomed to, and yet does not want to, coexist. This focus on the dangers in and of the present opens up possibilities to reimagine the past in a nostalgic longing for wholeness, rather than as a backward stage to be left behind for the sake of progress. The past is opened up as an imaginary space from where to expect a future. Such an apparently hitherto little explored use of the categories of time and space in 'Pentecost' is intriguing and certainly deserves more attention in research to come.

And yet, what I find much more telling with regard to the thought-experiment offered by Chapter 6 of this volume is Pentecostals' strong idea that absolutism is the only adequate response to the vicissitudes of coexistence with morally, religiously and socially different others. For me, it brings across a strong sense of a fear of the other and danger of pollution. Having illuminated the operation of the absolutist logic in the dialectical encounter between 'Pentecost' and the world in great

detail, the authors state – in their last sentence – that the ‘absolutist road towards salvation ... ultimately appears as a form of transcendence of the anti-relativist and anti-pluralist resentment that the Pentecostal worldview sets into motion’. I find it difficult to see evidence for this statement. Is it a wishful attempt to eschew the final conclusion of Pentecostalism as owing its appeal to offering a highly simplifying order? As noted above, I wonder how far this logic is at all maintainable and maintained in the practice of everyday life. In Southern Ghana I often noted a gap between Pentecostal believers’ strong emphasis on personal piety and their preparedness to arrange themselves with others – whether they belong to other religious traditions or are found to lead an immoral life. Notwithstanding strong personal convictions, many people are prepared to work out a way, albeit superficial, of dealing with each other or to ignore each other (see also Larkin 2014, who argues that in a setting of coexistence of Muslims and Christians in Northern Nigeria, people develop ‘techniques of inattention’ so as to ignore each other). So it is not the case that the characteristic absolutist logic, which I also recognize with regard to my research, is implemented in all situations. In my view, it is high time to conduct more detailed research on the modalities of coexistence as they are practised in plural settings in general, and the role of Pentecostals therein in particular. An absolutist logic is not all there is and, if pursued to the end, may raise more problems than it sets out to resolve. A lesson to be learned from the thought-experiment is that a sole focus on ‘Pentecost’ is too limited to understand the problems of living together for which Pentecostals search a solution. I think that it is time for scholars studying religion to move beyond a narrow focus on Pentecostals and Christians and to pay more attention to interactions and entanglements with significant others. There is a need to transcend the distinct anthropologies of Christianity and Islam so as to explore how and how far people manage to live together with and despite staunch exclusive religious convictions and absolutist logics in everyday settings (Janson and Meyer 2016). If ‘space is just an activity of the soul’, as scholars we are to find out how multiple souls construe a joint common habitat of which ‘Pentecost’ forms one part without entirely imposing its absolutist logic in theory and practice.

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