Leaving Pentecostalism

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1 Introduction

Pentecostalism is often described as an expanding and dynamic form of Christianity (Martin 1990; Vasquez 2009; Anderson 2014: 1–2), rife with disruptions and divisions (Coleman 1998, 2013). In the beginning of the twentieth century, when large numbers of Pentecostal groups and congregations were being founded, many of them strictly defined their identity and moral boundaries by opposing both mainstream Christianity and the contemporary society and culture. For example, the Finnish Pentecostal Movement (henceforth FPM) identified itself in terms of a community of believers, in contrast of the Finnish Lutheran Church. In the FPM, many of the first-generation members came from the Lutheran Church and Laestadian groups with a historical background in Pietism, a revival movement which favoured individual vocation and holiness teachings of Christian morality. (Mantsinen 2014: 17–19; 2015a: 45–48.)

In the first sixty years of its history, the FPM and its congregations saw constant mobility and membership turnover, with people joining, leaving, and being expelled. Due to these disruptions, new congregations and deviated groups were formed. Especially the 1960s has been labelled by many in the FPM as an era of “legalistic spirit,” when different criteria for a “true believer” were invented. In many cases, breaking social norms – for example, smoking or dating an outsider – demanded a ritual of public apology if one wished to remain in the group. The harsh treatment of members in the past still represents collective trauma in the FPM, as well as for many who left or were forced to leave. The turnover rate has since decreased significantly; in the 2010s, a member rarely gets expelled. Local disruptions and conflicts do exist, but the majority of experiences of leavers are specific to individuals, not necessarily collectively shared. (Mantsinen 2015b.)

In addition to group control and maintaining the sacred borders of a religion, some aspects of Pentecostal religion can be emotionally and mentally burdening: namely, highlighting the end times and the coming of Christ, a vivid and intense worldview of personal good and evil, and ecstatic-charismatic practices, such as glossolalia and prophecies. The high intensity of living up to expectations of a committed personal practice of religion and its moral

teachings, social pressures around the experience of emotionally laden charismatic phenomena and a personal connection to God, and living in expectation of the end times can be very heavy, both emotionally and cognitively, if also fulfilling and exciting for many.

The FPM and its congregations have been open for people to leave without sanctions or official actions towards apostates after their departure. The grasp of a Pentecostal congregation usually ends at its doorstep. However, every exit from a social community has its cost for an individual, especially in forms of weakening social support and a changing worldview and understanding of reality. Pentecostals have traditionally taught that for a believer the congregation is the safeguard against the evil world and the Devil. Therefore, many who have considered leaving have first had to face the mental pressure of assuring that their souls are safe after the exit. Usually leavers have not experienced intimidation by Pentecostals, tending to remain in contact with Pentecostals only through their own family and closest friends.

2 Previous Research and Empirical Material

Research on Pentecostalism has been growing rapidly since David Martin's *Tongues of Fire* (1990), with major concentration on the African and Latin American scene, the expansion of Pentecostalism, and Prosperity Gospel (Coleman 2000; Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001; Robbins 2008; 2011). Perhaps due to the expansion of Pentecostalism around the world, there has been relatively little attention paid to the generational transmission and failure of transmission of Pentecostalism, as well as the act of leaving Pentecostalism. These issues have been touched upon only briefly when scholars have written about social and organisational changes in Pentecostal denominations (Poloma 1989; Miller and Yamamori 2007; Poloma and Green 2010). This lack of transgenerational and apostasy research produces challenges for understanding processes of transmission, change, and personal consequences of Pentecostalism. In my research, I have worked to fill this gap.

To date, research on leaving religion in Finland has been scarce. It is approached usually from the perspective of the majority religion, the Lutheran Church of Finland. The first work done in this field was a study of who left the Church – and how – by Jouko Siipi (1965). Later, Juha Seppo (1983) studied the historical case of the first leavers, when the law of religious freedom became effective in the 1920s, making it legal to not belong to any religious institution in Finland. These first leavers included many who joined Pentecostal congregations, but also many non-religious people. Other cases have studied leaving

the Lutheran Church (Niemelä 2007; Spännäri 2014), leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses (Ronimus 2011), and identity formation in exit stories from various religious groups (Timonen 2014). Additionally, recent public discussion on power and violence in religions has generated a few studies and publications (Hurtig 2013; Ruoho 2013; Villa 2013; Linjakumpu 2015).

I have limited my research on leaving religion to those ex-Pentecostals who grew up in Pentecostal families. In this way, I have narrowed the scope of enquiry and excluded converts, who often can be more fluid in their mobility between social groups and religious identities. In my study, the informants had the opportunity to be socialised into the religion of their parents, but somewhere this transgenerational transmission failed. My collected research material consists of individual in-depth thematic interviews (11 people), written personal stories and questionnaire (12 people), publicly available stories in magazines and books and on the internet (5 separate stories), a survey conducted among FPM congregations (84 respondents), and interviews with two Pentecostal pastors. Additionally, I have used my previous ethnographical fieldwork, interviews, and other collected research material in order to ground my findings in the larger context of Finnish Pentecostalism.

Searching for ex-members of a minority religion can pose challenges. The total number of leavers is still relatively small within the general population, and therefore a public call for informants can be futile. First and foremost, I found my informants through social media and previous contacts: via a project website, Facebook, and e-mails, which people forwarded and shared among their contacts. Later, I also sought informants through an e-mail list offered by *Uskontojen uhrien tuki ry.* (Support for Victims of Religions Association). Finally, to add variation to the scope of the study, I personally contacted one informant who is now a Lutheran priest. With these methods, I managed to reach an acceptable saturation point of data for a successful analysis of the issue.

Although academic research on leaving Pentecostalism has been scarce and no previous academically collected material exists, there is a growing and already available body of source material. On the internet, there is a wide variety of personal blog posts and support groups for people who have left Pentecostalism (as well as other religions, such as Islam; see Enstedt and Larsson 2013). Most of these are in English, but they can be found in other languages as well. Furthermore, newspaper and magazine articles, as well as entire books, have been written by people who have left Pentecostalism. These personal stories offer valuable sources for many new research initiatives to study narratives of exits and the construction of new identities. However, since they are not systematically organised and samples cannot be standardised, there is little sense in forming any generalisations based on them. Although this is somewhat the

case with all exit stories – they cannot be generalised to include all personal experiences in every situation – by carefully studying every selected case and their backgrounds we can detect some similarities and common causes in exit processes and trajectories. Yet, individual complexities still remain. For this, a systematically collected – and perhaps proportionally selected sample – might tell us more.

3 New Findings Focusing on “leaving religion”

The FPM reached roughly its current size (46,000 members, 224 congregations) already in the 1980s in a country of five million people. Apart from an aging population and natural loss in membership, one reason for the stall in its growth rate has been that a large number (my estimation is in the thousands) of children of Pentecostals have left the FPM or have never become baptised members. When I conducted a survey among Pentecostal congregations, I asked how many people had left their congregation in the past ten years and how many had been expelled. According to the data, larger congregations (more than 800 members) are careful not to expel anybody. The small congregations (less than 100 members) have been relatively more prone to use their power when it comes to a perceived deviant individual than the larger congregations, although the number of people expelled is still small. One significant and crucial explanation for the difference can be found in the large number of lay persons working in congregations. According to my findings, although education and professionalism (for example, the use of trained psychologists) has increased in the FPM, this trend varies greatly between congregations. In larger congregations, professionals are easier to find; in small congregations, there are not enough trained, experienced people. From this it also follows that power can end up in the hands of a few selected individuals, without checks and balances or a concern for ethical practices.

This distorted balance of power and unprofessional practices were among the reasons that my informants expressed as eventually leading to their exit. However, differences between congregations, including size, were an important factor for what kind of experiences they had. Informants from small congregations witnessed different standards for congregational leaders and members; in larger congregations, however, leaders were held more accountable for their actions. Regardless of the size, however, was the matter of how lay leaders and volunteers might act in congregations. These individuals, some calling themselves preachers, could spread fear with their judging sermons and prophecies on how the Devil himself would attack someone, as told to my

informant Annikki (all of the names of the informants in this study have been changed for the sake of anonymity). In and around Pentecostal groups, these deviant actors are common, and their actions can have various effects on congregations and individuals, ranging from supportive to destructive.

While some exit stories included these structural elements of power as the main causes of departure from the FPM, others were more personal and lacked any specific organisational or human object of criticism. Different experiences included learning natural and psychological explanations about the nature of reality, changing one's social circle, and emotional alienation from the Pentecostal emotional world. In regards to the latter in particular, given the intensity of Pentecostal religiosity, people with a more calm mentality and personality can feel themselves alienated from the social experience of that religion. For my informant Urho, central features of Pentecostal practices and belief, ecstatic experiences of falling down, speaking in tongues, and worshipping with hands held high presented a culture which he could never relate to. He did not have strong conflicting emotions; the emotional state and its balance just did not resonate with him.

One crucial explanatory factor for cultural distance and un-relatedness (not feeling a relationship with the religion) is the difference between the conversion experiences of first-generation Pentecostals and the socialisation of children of Pentecostal families. The FPM Pentecostal culture has mainly attracted working-class converts, who tend to make a radical separation with their past. Socialised children have not shared this radical separation of past and Pentecostal life, however, leading to less tension in their lives and attitude towards the outside world, other cultures, and ecstatic expressions and practices of religion. (See Mantsinen 2015a.) Another factor for the un-relatedness includes age-inappropriate exposure to frightening elements of religion (such as the Devil and the apocalypse) without proper explanations and emotional support. Although nowadays in the FPM there is a better understanding of human development of cognition and emotions, problems of conduct do still emerge, and due to the large degree of lay involvement in ministry, not all are sufficiently trained.

What is common in all the interviewees' stories is an expressed discrepancy between their personal experience of themselves and the world and what they think the Pentecostal culture promotes. Previously this conflict has been approached through psychology (for example, examining conflicts in one's belief, identity, or cognitive reasoning). Simplified, however, the basic idea is the same: a new, conflicting idea arises to challenge an existing idea and state of balance. This conflict has been described, for example, as dissonance (Festinger 1957), imbalance (Heider 1958), incongruity (Osgood and Tannenbaum 1955),

self-inconsistency (Epstein 1980), or self-discrepancy (Higgins 1987; Stanley and Burrow 2015). A failure to relate to the Pentecostal culture, along with its practices and beliefs imposed by social pressure, can cause an emotional-cognitive break from it. If we follow the basic assumption that people seek balance in their life (for example Festinger 1957), a discrepancy will lead to a search for a solution from another place. If there is no alternative solution available, as was the case for some of my informants, they can find themselves adrift without any social and emotional support.

One possible way to study this imbalance would be to detect stress factors and the pressure point at which the exit would happen. Such analysis should include individual factors, but also the social field and the available compensators and possibilities. If there is no easy way to leave and switch to an existing alternative and more balanced position, stress and pressure can begin to grow and cause problems. Also, if the stress level is high, the rupture can be brutal. This was the case for a few of my informants, who experienced problems ranging from depression to anxiety attacks and mild psychosis. Some have eased their way into a new position, but for all of them the process has been a journey with potential stress and at least some cognitive challenges in finding a new identity in another reality. Therefore, it is also important to study which factors influence the quality of the exit process.

For some of my informants, the discrepancy arose as a result of concrete actions, such as being subjected to an exorcism or a prophecy of an impending attack by the Devil. For others, it was a result of losing a meaningful relationship with the religion – or never having had one. This includes a lack of personal relevance around such experiences as speaking in tongues. Pentecostalism can be an intense experience. People with a different temperament, who may wish for a more peaceful life or religion, can easily feel disconnected from the culture of their parents. Social ties can compensate to some degree, but they cannot overcome everything.

All leavers and their experiences are unique, but individual stories can be lost in popular discussion on the particular religion and group they are leaving, including its shortcomings and downfalls. A general analysis of social dynamics also dismisses the variety of issues and reasons which are specific to each case. Not all who leave become atheists or join another religious group. It is important to determine other positions as well, and to analyse the processes leading to them. In my research, I have worked to define the leavers, their positions as leavers, and their processes of leaving. As a result, I have proposed two specific typologies: leaver processes and leaver positions. The former introduces the cultural positions of leavers, defined by factors of their relation

to religion in general and religion in particular. The latter introduces the main causes which influence the process and how a person copes with the process. (Mantsinen 2015b.)

I was interested not only in the exit processes, but also their outcomes. For this I sought first to locate the current cultural positions of my informants. While Brinkerhoff and Burke defined one's individual sociocultural position towards religion with factors of religiosity and communality (Brinkerhoff and Burke 1980: 42–44), Richardson, van der Lans, and Derks (1986) put importance on which actors (for example, self, community, outsiders) are relevant in the exit. To categorise exit types, Streib and his research group used Troeltsch's and Bourdieu's categories to define clear positions between which people move (Streib et al. 2009: 25–32, 97–99, 235–238). These and other definitions are important to define the nature and event of an exit. In my work, however, I have been more interested in how ex-members position themselves towards their past, namely, their subjective positioning and relation to cultural categories. For this, I find how one relates to religion in general and one's own religion in particular to be relevant defining criteria of subjective location. (Mantsinen 2015b.)

I divided these two criteria into four-by-four set of category locations. With relation to religion in general, the groups were: member of another religious group, religious individual, agnostic, and atheist. With relation to religion in particular, the groups were: accepting, understanding, critical, and rejecting. These positions also help us to accept the complexity of the categories. For example, being an atheist does not have to presuppose hostility towards a religious group. One can be an understanding atheist, as seen in the attitude of Suvi, a young educated woman, towards her former congregation. She explains charismatic phenomena with psychological models, and she has no direct connection to Pentecostalism anymore. Nevertheless, she still speaks of the social importance of the congregation to its members, and she would not dare to condemn that specific religion altogether. In contrast, Kyllikki has switched to another religious group and considers Pentecostalism dangerous for people.

As I analysed the stories and answers of my informants, I found two major common denominators which influenced how they had experienced their exit processes: the severity of their experiences and the number of Pentecostals in their family (namely, the number of Pentecostal generations). The latter also translates to the nature of parental conversion experiences, which can have a significant effect on one's socialisation and cultural immersion in Pentecostalism. In my research, I have found that converted parents tend to have more conservative morals than socialised parents, who approach their religion as

GRAPH 14.1 Types of leavers from Finnish Pentecostalism

an inherited culture rather than life-altering experience, an interruption. In addition, social support in the form of Pentecostal friends added to the family factor, and group size compensated for the intensity of personal experiences. For the main defining factors, I named the four constructed leaver types as “survivor,” “struggler,” “alienated,” and “withdrawer.” (Graph 14.1.)

Among my informants, those who had had intense experiences but enjoyed sufficient social support – such as Saima, who was part of a larger group of leavers from a small congregation – described themselves as “survivors,” as they had found new groups and acceptance in their lives. Having traumatic experiences and a lack of support, Annikki still struggled to find her place and peace. In contrast to her case, “alienated” individuals had social support and had not had intense experiences. For example, Urho still has many Pentecostal friends but simply has no connection to the Pentecostal emotional world. As a more private person, Suvi was at peace with her experiences, but a gradual shift towards another peer group and interests led her to withdraw from Pentecostalism. These four leaver types help us to understand major themes in the exit processes. However, the lines between them are not definite, and some individuals could be located in-between two or more types. Every situation is unique and should be approached as such.

4 Conclusion

The FPM has not been successful in remaining relevant for a large number of children who grew in Pentecostal congregations. The reasons for and consequences of exits are numerous. Social support has been one important factor in how leavers have processed discrepancies in their personal experiences in the Pentecostal cultural field. While some reject religion altogether, others find the problem to lie with Pentecostal congregational culture, not Christianity or religion in general.

Social support can help in the exit process, but leavers usually also leave networks of support before gaining new ones. This has led a few of my informants to feeling disconnected. Families can provide a buffer against strict congregational teachings, such as restrictions surrounding alcohol and sexual behaviour. However, religious culture in the family can also be a reason for leaving. Converted parents restrict their children more often than those parents with a Pentecostal background.

Reasons for leaving Pentecostalism vary, but a crucial issue for children of Pentecostal families is the generational difference in culture and habits. Traditional Pentecostal culture often reflects the conversion experience, radical separation from the past and “the world,” and the intensity of religion of first-generation Pentecostals. Subsequent generations do not share that tension, and therefore their experience of life and religion can lead to a personal crisis.

The case of Pentecostalism raises a few noteworthy issues. The first issue involves the different consequences of conversion and socialisation for subsequent generations, as explained above. A second issue is the problem of continuation of culture in Pentecostalism. This has not been a key interest of research in the academic field, as researchers are used to approaching Pentecostalism as a conversion-centred, expansionist religion with phenomena which intrigues them. However, the intensity of first-generation Pentecostal converts’ religion and the poor adjustment of subsequent generations to this culture, which they have not lived and they cannot relate to, are not only peculiar to Finland. Third, approaching apostasy as an emotional-cognitive discrepancy prompting cultural mobility can help us understand the process of leaving religion, in general and from Pentecostalism in particular.

Acknowledgment

The research has been funded by Kone Foundation.

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