In this impressive anthology, the anthropologist John P. Hawkins, who is the sole author of 15 of the 26 chapters and contributor to the remaining 11, presents the reader to a well-founded thesis about why Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity could grow so exponentially among the indigenous Maya in Guatemala. Furthermore, he gives solid arguments why his explanation of Pentecostal expansion is workable in Latin America in general and indeed throughout the post-colonial Christianized global south. Hawkins also launches the new term “Christian Pentecostalism”, which includes both classic and neo-Pentecostalism and renewed Charismatic Protestantism and – most importantly – the huge Catholic Charismatic movement. Finally, the book attempts to give a new definition of religion, built around the notions of gift and reciprocity. All three proposals will be addressed further below, after looking at the book’s content.

The theme of the book is the huge religious change happening among the Maya in Guatemala, where Pentecostalism and Charismatic Catholicism are increasingly replacing both orthodox Catholicism and hybrid Maya Catholicism (traditionalism) as the dominant religions. Today around 70% of the population in the communities studied belong to one of the two new ecstatic groups. Hawkins’ main thesis is that the “move from relatively sedate Maya Traditionalism and thoroughly sedate Ortho-Catholicism to various forms of trance-inducing, tongues-speaking, bodily animated, electronically hyper-amplified ecstatic Christian Pentecostalisms” (p. 2) was due to a gradual collapse of the maize growing subsistence economy, escalating from around 1950 and onward. The collapse was the consequence of massive population growth and a resulting land shortage. As the existing religious traditions were unable to address and solve the subsequent economic crisis adequately, an accompanying cultural crisis paved the way for the explosive growth of “Christian Pentecostalism”.

The book is divided in three parts. The first part contains ethnographic descriptions of the different religious groups in the field sites, the communities of Nahualá and Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán in the western highlands of Guatemala. The second part offers a historical contextualization for the religious change, and the third part proposes various synchronic theoretical approaches and perspectives on the rise of Christian Pentecostalism in Guatemala. Throughout the book, Hawkins convincingly relies on classical
sociological, socio-linguistic and economic theory: Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Saussure, and Mauss, to mention the most prominent.

In the first part, the anthology presents the ethnographic findings of a field school conducted in 2003, where the students studied lived religion in the communities mentioned above. The eleven chapters in this part are co-authored by Hawkins and various former students. The chapters provide rich ethnographic descriptions of how the three different religious traditions (Maya Traditionalism, mainline Catholicism, and Christian Pentecostalism) were practiced at the time of the field study. The chapters let the informants speak and provide the reader with essential context, without historicizing or theorizing unnecessarily.

The second and shortest part of the book presents concise historical chapters on the connection of maize, religion, and cultural and material production among the Maya from pre-colonial times until today. Hawkins shows how the Maya cultural crisis that would lead to widespread religious change from the 1970s and onward took its beginning much earlier. Detailed tables and graphs demonstrate how population growth and land shortage gradually began to strain the traditional socio-religious system of maize self-subsistence from the beginning of the 20th century.

In the third and last part of the book, Hawkins addresses the rise of Christian Pentecostalism among the Maya from a variety of theoretical angles, identifying push and pull factors both within the changing cultural and political context and within the competing religious traditions. The six chapters are too rich to do justice here. I would therefore like to concentrate on Hawkins’ three proposals mentioned above.

According to Hawkins, Christian Pentecostalism is the religion of people living through rapid societal and cultural change. When communally oriented subsistence farming is challenged by population growth and the introduction of new, often neo-liberal, economic forms of transaction, traditional “sedate” forms of religion cannot cope with the new conditions. This is due to their interconnectedness with local forms of social organization. These new conditions are often linked to sometimes life-threatening malnutrition and existential uncertainty. For Hawkins, Christian Pentecostalism expresses a cry of angst in a culturally collapsing world (p. 11). At the same time, it provides people with the tools to manage the uncertainty of the new condition: A close-knit religious community with high moral standards and mutual support, which has a strong focus on physical and emotional healing through prayer and ecstasy (p. 291). The religious worldview of the new church communities remains enchanted. But whereas – in this case – Maya Traditionalism and mainstream Catholicism fostered an attitude of passive resignation towards the outside-coming, chaotic forces, Pentecostalism encourages activism aimed at individual and commu-
nal reform and adaption. Pentecostalism thereby provides Mayas with a road to modernity that does not compromise key cultural values (p. 313). In dialogue with literature about Pentecostalism and Charismatic Catholicism throughout Latin America, Africa and the U.S., Hawkins makes it probable that there is a deep connection between changes in production and culture and the rise of Christian Pentecostalism, which despite all local differences, can explain its success throughout the post-colonial Christian global south.

The term ‘Christian Pentecostalism’ has been invented by Hawkins to include both Pentecostalism and Charismatic Catholicism (and Protestantism). He does so in order to re-direct scholarly attention away from the Protestant-Catholic divide and towards a more relevant distinction between a ‘sedate’ traditionalist, Catholic and Protestant religiosity and the new ecstatic Charismatic/Pentecostal religiosity, which is currently sweeping the global south (p. 272).

In chapter 25, Hawkins rejects the “rational actor within a religious market-model” in understanding conversion and religious change in Latin America. He finds this way of thinking too individualist and utilitarian as it misses both the reciprocal character of religion and the social and political scope of Christian Pentecostalism (pp. 292–293). From this critique, he goes on to propose a new definition of religion based on Mauss’ notion of the gift: “I suggest that giving gifts to and expecting reciprocities from nonhuman entities constitutes the universal essence of religion and provides the basis for a definition of religion ...” (p. 323). The basic gift that sets everything in motion, is the gift of life in child-birth: “Thus giving gifts to the unseen of the universe – through sacrifices, libations, promises of service, participation in worship, tithing, and so forth – extends the knowledge inherent in the experience of birthing and raising children within society to the surrounding physical environment, indeed to the universe” (p. 324). New definitions of religion are rare, and there is much to be discussed in Hawkins’, but he should be welcomed for proposing and opening the discussion anew.

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