GLOBAL PENTECOSTAL NETWORKS AND THE PROBLEMS OF CULTURE: THE CHURCH OF PENTECOST IN GHANA AND ABROAD

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Introduction

Many have written on how Pentecostalism travels the globe and how it has become a force to be reckoned with in our contemporary world. For example, Pentecostalism possesses what Thomas Csordas (2007) calls a “transposable message” of salvation, and “portable practices” that included prayer, speaking in tongues and prophecy—homogenizing forms that travel across space and time through processes of missionization, migration, mobility, and mediatization. Joel Robbins (2004, 117) discussed how Pentecostalism successfully adapted itself to the range of cultures in which it is introduced through a process of replication and indigenizing difference. He calls these two descriptions of global Pentecostalism, global homogenization and indigenizing difference, contradictory assertions that are useful in explaining its success (119). Similarly, according to Simon Coleman (2010, 800), Pentecostalism in its global form constitutes what he calls “part cultures, presenting worldviews meant for export that are holistic in one sense but, as we have seen, also in tension with the values of any given host society.” While Pentecostalism can be described as both global in its reach and local in its application, adapting to the tensions between its own values and those of its host societies and cultures, I seek to revisit how we may understand the “global” in the globalization of Pentecostalism through one church’s expanding networks and the simultaneous tensions and limits that arise from its engagement with “culture.”

In the first part of the chapter I ask how networks shape and continue to influence Pentecostalism in Ghana. I do this by looking at the historical context of the regional and transnational networks that anticipated the Church of Pentecost’s (CoP) emergence in the Ghanaian religious landscape as well as the more recent changes within Pentecostalism in Ghana. This is in recognition that a historical approach to understanding Pentecostal networks is important in contextualizing what we understand as globalization. As Frederick Cooper (2005, 92) writes, “the very notion of Africa has itself been shaped for centuries by linkages within the
continent and across oceans and deserts.” These linkages include religious networks. However, instead of assuming the centrality of globalization as a powerful force that has changed the world in radically new ways, Cooper (93) advises that we should qualify any study of globalization within its context of application; historically, spatially and politically, thus also taking into account the boundaries and limits of interactions and connections. Michael Bergunder (2010, 56) has also argued that, in the study of Pentecostalism, an understanding of contemporary synchronous networks “needs to be supplemented by a diachronous perspective.” In providing some historical context for understanding the role of global networks in Ghanaian Pentecostalism I am not attempting to represent all historical facts but aim to use the historical resources available to me in recovering the possible interpersonal and political aims of individuals and groups who helped to establish CoP and influence the dynamics of the changing Pentecostal scene in Ghana.

The second aim of this chapter is to understand how Pentecostal networks are embedded in other discursive networks by exploring the role that culture plays in the formation of global Pentecostalism. Culture, within Pentecostal discourse, is not simply an articulation of group boundaries that are accompanied by a consciousness of shared attributes and their assumed naturalization (Appadurai 1996, 13). Culture also serves as a counter-discourse to Pentecostalism, providing material for explaining everything that falls outside the boundaries of a shared transcendental discourse. According to Kirk Dombrowski (2001, 123), who worked with newly converted members of an all-native church in Southeast Alaska, “Pentecostal church practice allows people to not only stand outside of and against any particular culture, but against culture more generally.” He goes on to say that “this anti-Cultural stance is clear in two aspects of Pentecostal practice—in speaking in tongues and other ‘gifts of faith,’ and in absolute insistence on a transcendent notion of divinity” (123). The problem of culture for Pentecostals is a direct reflection of how Pentecostals view their relationship to the local, from a pre-commitment to a transcendental position. In other words Pentecostalism provides believers with a “transcendental vantage point” through which to view, be skeptical of, and criticize their relationship with culture while allowing them to be part of global culture (Robbins 2010a, 69).

The term global is a part of our imagined and everyday worlds. It is an example of what Henrietta Moore (2004, 73) calls a concept-metaphor; metaphors which have no adequate referent, and whose “exact meanings can never be specified in advance—although they can be defined in