Religious expression in contemporary Brazil has undergone unprecedented change: the “largest Catholic country in the world,” while still having more Catholics than adherents of other religions, is now also home to a number of Pentecostal churches, groups, movements and practices. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, Pentecostalism is a significant segment of Christianity in Brazil, and it is hard to find academic studies or newspaper articles on the subject that do not resort to expressions such as “Pentecostal spree,” “the revenge of God,” “undeniable rejection of secularization,” “exponential growth,” or “evangelical turn round,” among other phrases. Census data, especially for 1991, 2000 and 2010, show rates of growth that are hitherto unseen.

However, this impression of continuous growth is misleading: the most recent census shows that growth is slowing, and that many of the largest Pentecostal churches are losing members. Further, Pentecostalism has not simply ‘grown’: it has changed and branched into new forms. This chapter is concerned primarily with this second point, taking a social-anthropological perspective but also informed by historical contexts and developments. Given the abundance of literature and the huge diversity of Pentecostalism in Brazil, the chapter will focus on four topics: (1) the main characteristics of Pentecostalism in Brazil, highlighting in particular the use of the body in rituals; (2) Pentecostalism in a peripheral urban slum context; (3) the electoral breakthrough of Pentecostals into politics from the 1980s; and (4) contemporary developments in Pentecostal worship that relate to social changes promoting body practices that aim at emotional and physical well-being.

The Pentecostal Spirit in Brazil

Studies on the origins of Pentecostalism agree that the movement began in Los Angeles and Chicago (Dayton 1987; Burgess et al. 1988; Hollenweger 1997). Members of Presbyterian, Baptist and Methodist churches in the final two decades of nineteenth century experienced being touched by the Holy Spirit and the ability to speak unknown languages; the new movement emerged out of
a context of religious revivals and the earlier “Holiness Movement.”1 Among those affected were American migrants from Sweden and Italy who felt a call from God to establish Pentecostal churches in Brazil (Duncan 1985; Mendonça and Velasques 1990). The first two Pentecostal churches were the Congregação Cristã do Brasil (1910) and the Assembléias de Deus (1911), and these remain among the largest in Brazil a century later.2

From the beginning, Pentecostal worship was characterized by improvisation, instability and unpredictability. This is consistent with the Pentecostal view of the Holy Spirit, which, following the events described in the Book of Acts Chapter 2, manifests whenever, wherever and however it wishes. Thus, decisions about what to sing are spontaneous; there is no way to predict how much time will be spent engaged in glossolalia, or what form it will take; exorcism and healing depend on the revelation of the presence of evil during worship; and pastors allow the Holy Spirit to speak through them, rather than prepare sermons in advance. More generally, Pentecostal worship encourages body expression. Unlike older Protestant churches, where worshippers hold hymn-books and adopt a rigid posture, participants at Pentecostal churches move their heads while they sing, they raise their arms, clap, dance, shake and shout, and so on. The pastor and the congregation both frequently interject with “amen” or “glory to God.” Instead of words to be listened to passively, there is a dialogue between the leaders on the pulpit and the congregation. Sometimes the body loses control, going into ecstasies or possession.

Pentecostal practices thus relate to a view of the body that is radically distinct from the Protestant matrix from which the movement emerged.3 Healing, exorcism and glossolalia all act on people’s bodies or through them: healing and exorcism place the body at the center of a religious scenario in which pastors speak over them, while glossolalia is a form of collective ecstasy

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1 Details of the social context can be found in the works of the scholars of Pentecostalism cited here; most of studies on the origins of Pentecostalism in Brazil are based on the same references.

2 Their origins are explored in a pioneering study by Emile Léonard in 1953 that is little-quoted by scholars of Pentecostalism in Brazil. Léonard’s primary sources included texts by Luigui Francescon, the founder of the Congregação Cristã, and publications by the Assembléia de Deus, especially its magazine Mensageiros da Paz (Peace Messengers), the magazine of the Assembléia de Deus. Accounts of the founders of the Assembléia de Deus have since been published by the church (Vingren 1973; Berg 1995).

3 The difference between the earliest and the most recent Pentecostal churches relates to intensity, new rhythms, the use of technology, and so forth; worship space has also been rethought to facilitate bodily manifestations and intense appeals to the emotions.