RELIGION AND GLOBAL FLOWS

Michael Wilkinson

INTRODUCTION

In 1980, Eusabio Perez was invited by the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC) to go to Toronto and pastor the newly-formed Iglesia Evangélica Hispana. The growing congregation was meeting in a United Church facility on St. Clair Avenue with approximately one hundred and fifty Spanish-speaking Christians in attendance. Life for the congregation was changing quickly. Initially, they were a small group of Spanish-speaking Christians who began meeting in the 1960s through the efforts of Rev. Paul and Dorothy Sorensen, former PAOC missionaries in Argentina. By 1970 they were attending the Danforth Gospel Temple so that their children could learn English in Sunday School, while the parents attended a Spanish-speaking class and worship service. The small group consisted of people from diverse backgrounds religiously (not all were Pentecostal but identified themselves as evangelical) and from various countries in Central and South America. Several issues challenged the congregation including cultural diversity, theological distinctions, and social and political differences. In 1977 they moved toward resolving some of these issues by seeking and approving a motion for affiliation with the PAOC. Yet, their diversity would still continue to challenge the congregation.

Perez was a pastor in Cuba for eleven years before escaping his country of birth. He made his way to the USA and found himself working in a congregation in New Jersey with the Assemblies of God. He was not in the USA very long when he received an invitation from the PAOC to lead Iglesia Evangélica Hispana, illustrating the role of transnational networks for securing ministerial services. Through his leadership the congregation flourished and in 1982 they purchased their own building from a German PAOC congregation that moved to the suburbs. The purchase of the building coincided with their anniversary celebration and the beginning of what they now call the ‘Parade of Nations’.
Iglesia Evangélica Hispana is a Spanish-speaking congregation but it is not culturally homogeneous. Rather, it is a multicultural congregation with members from over twenty different countries. In the late 1990s when I visited the congregation, they were still dealing with cultural and social differences. Perez explained that much of his time is spent helping parishioners deal with conflict over language, politics, and religion. Many are very loyal to their countries of origin. They are also especially proud of what they have accomplished in Canada and particularly what they have accomplished with their congregation. The ‘Parade of Nations’ is an invention of Perez, which serves to link Spanish-speaking Pentecostals with each other, their home countries, and the new country where they live. Each year the congregation celebrates their anniversary with an event that is over three hours long. Each group in the congregation will march into the auditorium carrying the flag of their country and singing its national anthem. This will continue until every country represented in the congregation has had their flag paraded, and the national anthem sung. On the weekend that I visited Iglesia Evangélica Hispana the congregation was extremely excited about this event. There was a special speaker, Rev. Jerónimo Pérez originally from Latin America and now in the USA, where he resides in Florida. His radio broadcasts are sent back to Central and South America from his new base. The musical guests were from Mexico and added to the cultural and global quality of the celebration.

The climax of the event was the actual Parade, when flags from twenty-two countries were waved and members from the community and the congregation rose to their feet to sing their national anthem. During the event many cried, clapped, shouted, sang, and saluted. Eusebio Perez, originally from Cuba, shouted “Viva la Cuba” as he waved to the flag and cried. At the conclusion, children came marching into the auditorium waving banners reading “Jesus is Lord” and singing “The Lord Reigns”. Perez explained that this is an important time when they can thank God for the country they were born in, the new country that they now live in, and the world that needs revival. Many Spanish-speaking Pentecostal congregations in Canada have adopted the tradition as they plant new congregations throughout the country.

The ‘Parade of Nations’ illustrates a hybridization of religion, culture, and politics. It illustrates how globalization impacts upon migrants, and the role that religion plays in the social spaces that are ‘betwixt and between’. The event has no cultural origin in any one Spanish-speaking country. It is a site where the flows of migration and religion converge to