When is a Pentecostal a Pentecostal?
The Global Perspective of Allan Anderson

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In the sociology of religion there is much discussion and debate about the nature of religion in contemporary societies, if not in a global world.¹ The issues are not simply about definition and whether a researcher employs a substantive or a functional strategy. These debates highlight the contested, if not arbitrary, boundaries of what counts as religion and who is counting. Definitions are never neutral and always problematic. Issues of power and authority are at the root of many disputes over the distinction between “official” and “popular” expressions, colonial encounters, and multicultural contexts. Western concepts of religion emerged at a particular point in history and have shaped our understanding of religion. Not surprisingly, the nature of Pentecostalism and Charismatic Christianity is also hotly debated. Questions about identity, that is, who is a Pentecostal and who is not one, come to the forefront of discussion. Allan Anderson’s An Introduction to Pentecostalism is a very good example of the problem of defining religion and, more specifically, Pentecostalism.² It is also a call for substantial research on Pentecostalism from an inclusive historical and crosscultural context.

Anderson writes an engaging and provocative critique of worldwide Pentecostalism that attempts to understand the diversity of forms and expressions of the movement. To do so he systematically organizes the available data on Pentecostalism to tell a convincing story of a movement coming to terms with its origins, theologies, histories, social qualities, and multicultural expressions. Some theologians may not be convinced, from a sociological perspective, that Anderson is correct. Pentecostal identity, the fairly consistent pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting, is rooted in the local. However, Pentecostal identity cannot be reduced to the local, and this highlights the problem of defining Pentecostal movements worldwide. Global Pentecostalism is rightly understood by Anderson as a loosely held, contested, worldwide movement within Christianity that assumes many forms. To demonstrate his thesis, Anderson addresses the question

of Pentecostal identity, first, by rooting various expressions in their historical and social context and, second, by examining how the local context shaped theological developments.

*An Introduction to Pentecostalism* is an important contribution for scholars of global Pentecostalism, not because it answers all the questions but because it sets out an agenda for future research. The book covers a wide spectrum of sociological, historical, and theological phenomena and raises a number of points for researchers of global Pentecostalism. While it is not possible to deal with all of the questions Anderson raises, I will limit my comments to two points in relation to global Pentecostal research: methodological or conceptual questions, and theoretical issues.

Defining the field of study, including the conceptualizing of Pentecostalism, is a methodological problem that requires some attention. By methodological I am referring to the broader epistemological question and not the specific research strategies of quantitative or qualitative research. The field of study, Anderson argues, must root the local in the global. Conceptualizing Pentecostalism must be inclusive. In other words, there needs to be some thinking about the ways in which researchers study Pentecostalism and the kinds of knowledge produced by those research strategies. Anderson raises this issue very clearly when he critiques the dominant story of Pentecostalism as shaped through the lens of research from the United States and, specifically, the ways in which it is rooted in Azusa and classical Pentecostalism.

Anderson attempts to find a way out of the problem of narrowly defining Pentecostalism as a single homogeneous group. For Anderson, family resemblance does not mean that all members are identical. The challenge is to hold the many varieties of Pentecostalism loosely. Peter Beyer’s approach to a cross-cultural analysis of religion points to the kind of research that needs to be conducted in order to understand better what Anderson is saying. Only by thoroughly understanding the specific forms and then applying a comparative and historical perspective can scholars of global Pentecostalism come to a fuller understanding of similarities and differences among Pentecostals. Surveys of Pentecostalism only give us a taste of the diversity. Further understanding will come with detailed studies in all the regions covered. Comparison of the many cases can then be made in multiple directions to see how social context shapes local and

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