



Pentecostalism and Global Politics: Three Questionable Approaches

Paul Freston

Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada
March 3, 2014

The most basic observation to make about Pentecostal politics worldwide is that *it is extremely varied*. It gives rise to many *different*, and even *mutually contradictory*, forms of politics. Which leads to my second basic observation: *the political impact of Pentecostalism is always smaller than some people hope and other people fear*. Pentecostalism is divided organizationally, socially, theologically... and therefore also politically. In addition, the Pentecostalism of the countries of the global south is generally a faith “of the people”. It possesses neither long cultural and educational traditions, nor a heritage of political participation and of theological reflection on politics, still less a history of intimate collaboration with state power. It is arriving unprepared at new levels of social visibility; for that very reason, it has been transformed in some countries into a political trampoline. It has reached the public sphere, inexperienced but very confident in its own abilities and prospects.

I am going to present three ideas that circulate in the academic literature, and form the background of much media commentary, regarding the relationship between Pentecostalism and politics at the global level.



Paul Freston is a sociologist of religion, and an accomplished scholar on Latin American religions, global Evangelicalism, and Christian-based politics. He is the CIGI Chair in Religion and Politics in Global Context at the Balsillie School of International Affairs and Wilfrid Laurier University. His research has focused on, among other things, religion and democratization, the growth of Pentecostalism in the global south, and questions of religion and globalization.

The first idea is that the growth of grassroots Protestantism around the world, generally in Pentecostal forms, represents an extension and a strengthening of the “soft power” of the United States. In other words, that Pentecostal growth in the global south is creating a standardized view of the world that will function as a sort of “fifth column” or “Trojan horse” of imperialism, by associating American interests with those of God.

I have many reservations about this idea. The so-called “war on terror”, and above all the invasion of Iraq, revealed a deep fissure within global Pentecostalism. In the great majority of Latin-American, African and Asian countries, Pentecostals reacted negatively to the war in Iraq, despite the strong support for it from American Pentecostals. A Brazilian television program shortly before the invasion actually happened featured a phalanx of Pentecostal members of the Brazilian congress. However conservative their parties and “unconventional” their churches, they were unanimous in condemning the imminent invasion. For Spanish-speaking Latin America, research by Padilla and Scott discovered not a single denomination in favour, even in countries whose governments supported President Bush. A South African political party based mostly among charismatic churches, the African Christian Democratic Party, strongly opposed the invasion and condemned ‘American civil religion that says America is predestined by God to save the world’.

With regard to the broader “war on terror”, a 2006 survey by the Pew Forum on Pentecostal attitudes in ten countries around the world asked whether respondents favoured “the US-led efforts to fight terrorism”. In all countries surveyed, pentecostals were similar to the national average, except (obviously) in the religiously-divided country of Nigeria. Only there (71%) and the Philippines (76%) did pentecostals support the ‘war on terror’ as much as in the United States (72); both these countries suffer internal tension between Muslims and non-Muslims. But in Latin America and South Africa, only around one-third of pentecostals supported the “war on terror”, and in South Korea only 16%. In all Latin American countries surveyed (Brazil, Chile and Guatemala), pentecostals were actually slightly less favourable than their general populations; so much for the idea of global pentecostalism as the globalization of the American religious right and as a strengthening of American soft power!

“In the great majority of Latin-American, African and Asian countries, Pentecostals reacted negatively to the war in Iraq...”

A second idea regarding the political implications of global Pentecostalism is a comparison with radical Islamism. Islam and Pentecostal Christianity have become the most popular religions among the poor in many regions of the world, and for that reason some analysts feel that Pentecostalism could also have a terrorist potential.

Once again, there is little likelihood of this. Not that Pentecostals have never been involved in violence! In recent years, there have been attacks or

retaliations by Christians (many of them Pentecostals) against Muslims in Nigeria, in Indonesia and in the Central African Republic. In the early 1980s, the Pentecostal military dictator, Efraín Ríos Montt, terrorized Guatemala and now faces charges of genocide against the indigenous population of the country. Even in Brazil, there have been a few incidents of physical aggression by Pentecostals against the *terreiros* (meeting places) of the Afro-Brazilian religions, not to mention the daily verbal violence in the Pentecostal discourse of demonization directed at these and other religions.

Once again, however, the Pew survey of 2006 presents a more hopeful picture. To the question whether there should be religious freedom for religions other than one's own, Pentecostals replied in the affirmative at the same rate as the general population of their countries. And the comparison with Islam is unconvincing for other reasons. Pentecostalism has a very different relationship to the state, to territory and to the use of force. It sees itself as a return to primitive Christianity. And, of course, the Christianity of the first three hundred years (unlike Islam from its very beginnings) was distant from political power, totally unable to use force, and indifferent to questions of territory. It constituted a voluntary, transnational and virtually powerless community. It was often persecuted, not persecuting. Thus, however much some Pentecostals today succumb to the "temptations" of power, of force and of territoriality, the idealization of these origins and the normativity attributed to the New Testament (which was wholly composed during this period of political impotence) constitute a brake on such ambitions. In addition, the usual Pentecostal discourse of "victory", of being a "winner" or an "overcomer" (key words in worship songs and in sermons), is opposed to the sentiment of self-victimization which often underlies the recourse to political violence.

A third idea about global Pentecostal politics is that it will promote a wave of "new Christendoms" in Africa and in Latin America. There is more to be said for this idea than for the previous two, although I think that in the last analysis it is highly unlikely, if only because of Pentecostalism's internal divisions. Even so, as a rather marginalized religious community which nevertheless has a strong sense of its own destiny, Pentecostalism is frequently attracted to the dream of converting the ruler, or of electing one of its own members as president, seeing this as the height of its political aspirations and as a panacea for the problems of the country. There is little understanding of politics as a system; instead, there is the recurrent "messianic" hope in an "evangelical" or "born-again" president, and a belief in the possibility of the "people of God" exercising power in an unambiguously positive way.

So we are talking of a triumphalism which is potentially dangerous for democracy. There is a whole

"In this triumphalist theology, this traditionally apolitical religious community is unable to see itself as one political actor amongst many; it has to see itself as the most important."

theology behind this, rooted in a reading of the Bible which fuses the two Testaments, transferring the divine promises to ancient Israel to the “evangelical” community of today. This is generally combined with the new ideas of “spiritual warfare”, according to which social blessings are obtained by ritualistic means and the “people of God” should rightfully be governing. In this triumphalist theology, this traditionally apolitical religious community is unable to see itself as one political actor amongst many; it has to see itself as the most important. But, since these Pentecostal theocrats have no “sharia law” to implement, it is uncertain what policies would result. The most probable outcome is that they would soon be involved in opportunism and corruption. Something along those lines has already occurred in Zambia, where a Pentecostal president declared the country to be a “Christian nation” and performed a ceremony to cleanse the presidential palace of nefarious spiritual influences left over from the previous occupant, but in the end had to leave power immersed in accusations of corruption and abuse of human rights.

The case of Zambia and other examples from Africa and Latin America show Pentecostals to be very susceptible to the prevailing political culture in each national context. The ideas of spiritual warfare ascribe a country’s problems to the fact that the wrong people are in power, and we are the right people. There is no concept of political apprenticeship, nor of painstaking construction of a movement over many years, through education and institutional development.

The political rise of Pentecostalism in Latin America and Africa in the last two or three decades has been clearly a phenomenon *of democracy*, in the sense of occupying spaces opened up by democratization. But has it also been a phenomenon *for democracy*, in the sense of strengthening and deepening democracy? It is not so easy to answer that question. Firstly, Pentecostalism’s innumerable internal divisions limit its potentially destabilizing impact, just as much as they limit any positive impacts. But perhaps we can recognize that, of the various Christian churches, some are better at some things, and others are better at other things. For a democratic transition, for bravely opposing a brutal dictatorship, it is better to be a hierarchical and transnational church with historical connections to the elite (which in Latin America means the Catholic Church). But for the long and more diffuse process of democratic consolidation, Pentecostals might be more useful, because they are anti-fatalist and teach ordinary people to exercise leadership in public spaces.

Pentecostals, therefore, do not fit into the negative stereotypes of being dangerous for democracy, potentially violent, and subservient to the worldview of the American right. But neither do they fit their own cherished self-image as carriers of political blessings for their countries.