

Book Review

The New Canadian Pentecostals

Adam Stewart

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In *The New Canadian Pentecostals*, Adam Stewart is confronted with a dilemma. According to Statistics Canada, Canadian Pentecostalism declined 15.3 percent from 1991 to 2001. Although other denominations in Canada have been decreasing over the last several decades, the decline of Pentecostals in Canada represents a shift from the remarkable growth they experienced the century prior. What is troubling for the author is that the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC), which accounts for 60 percent of Canadian Pentecostals, did not record a similar decrease but, in fact, showed an increase in numbers. The author proposes a hypothesis that the decline in affiliation according to census reports can be explained in terms of a “significant transformation of religious identity and experience from traditionally Pentecostal to generically evangelical categories” (p. 7). In other words, the inclusion of census categories such as “Christian,” “Apostolic,” “born again Christian,” or “evangelical,” captures a percentage of Canadian Pentecostals who self-identify in this way while in fact attending Pentecostal, and specifically, PAOC churches.

The author uses a mixed methods research design that explores his hypothesis in three Ontario PAOC congregations in and around Waterloo: Freedom in Christ, Elmira Pentecostal Assembly, and Elevation. The research is conducted over a twelve month

period and includes in-depth interviews of 42 people, a non-random online survey instrument, and content analysis of other artifacts. The research is limited, however, by its small sample size and consequently no generalized statements can be made about Pentecostalism in Canada as a whole. Moreover, Stewart makes no attempt to place his findings in an explanatory metatheory such as secularization or upward mobility. He believes that placing findings in a metatheory prematurely would distort the findings because there are so little data on the Pentecostal faith in Canada. However, the narrowed focus on three Pentecostal congregations allows for a thick description of those congregations and their shifting identity, beliefs, and practices.

According to Stewart, generic evangelicalism is in the process of colonization of Protestant denominations in a way that transforms them from their traditional and denominational identities, theologies, and practices to homogeneous versions. Contrary to David Bebbington, who defines evangelicalism according to the categories of conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism, Stewart follows the current sociological view that defines evangelicalism as a subculture of belonging. Consequently, he calls into question Grace Davie’s “believing without belonging” thesis and supports Danièle Hervieu-Léger’s “belonging without

believing” thesis (p. 7), though, in this case, particularized in a way that shifts believing from traditional Pentecostal identity, belief, and practice to generic evangelical ones. Increasingly, generic evangelicalism is taking on therapeutic, individualizing, and homogenizing qualities that have implications for religion in Canada. Consequently, generic evangelicalism is eroding denominational boundaries, theology, and traditions, while increasing the importance of parachurch organizations and religious networks. A question that arises but is not addressed (and perhaps outside the scope of the author’s concerns) is whether or not the therapeutic culture in evangelicalism has been influenced by Pentecostalism-Charismatic Christianity. Consequently, the work also has implications for understanding the development of evangelical religious culture, and more broadly the postmodern religious turn to the therapeutic.

Stewart then investigates the influence of generic evangelicalism on Canadian Pentecostal identity, belief, and practice. His findings reveal that only a minority of churchgoers interviewed identified themselves as Pentecostal (14 percent), or latently identified as Pentecostal (33 percent), and that the majority identified themselves as generically evangelical (52 percent). Congregants are generally not self-identifying as Pentecostal even as they attend Pentecostal churches. He finds that the Pentecostal belief and practice of Spirit baptism and speaking in tongues—if supported at all—have likewise been transformed from the traditional view as empowerment for evangelism and mission to a more therapeutic view that offers psychological benefits and a deepening relationship with God for recipients. None of the interviewees supported the official PAOC doctrine of initial evidence. Other

Pentecostal beliefs and practices such as healing, miracles, and supernatural phenomena did not have the same level of transformation as Spirit baptism. Stewart proposes that the reason lies in the fact that these beliefs already have a therapeutic capacity in the assumption that God wishes to heal, protect, and deliver believers.

This scholarship makes an important contribution to the field. The study of Pentecostalism in Canada has been sorely underrepresented by the Canadian scholarly establishment and university presses for reasons that are not altogether clear. This work brings another layer of understanding to the development and transformation of religion in Canada. Although not its primary focus, the work says something about evangelicalism in Canada. Moreover, it supports and extends the sociological work on Pentecostalism in the United States. For instance, Margaret Poloma and John Green noted that in the evangelicalization of the Assemblies of God, traditional Pentecostal beliefs and practices of Spirit baptism and *glossolalia* were in decline, but claims of healing, prophecy, and other charismatic phenomena were still highly reported.

The value of this book is that it probes deeply three cases of Pentecostal identity and highlights discrepancies between what Pentecostals self-report and their shifting identities, beliefs, and practices. The limitation of the data means that the study needs to be replicated on a much larger scale in order to validate the hypothesis and account for regional, ethnic, and transnational similarities and differences of Pentecostalism across the religious landscape. Nevertheless, scholars in the sociology of religion, religious studies, and Pentecostal studies will find Stewart’s monograph of interest.