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Borsch-Rast Lecture 2019

Pentecostalism, Individualism, and the New World Order in El Salvador

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Pentecostalism, Individualism, and the New World Order in El Salvador

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The 2nd Borsch-Rast Lecture, 2019[1]
Graduate Theological Union

The Borsch-Rast Prize is named after Frederick H. Borsch and Harold W. Rast. Borsch was Dean and President of the Church Divinity School of the Pacific until 1981, and Rast was founding director and editor of Trinity Press International. The Prize honors a book written by a GTU alumnus/a or faculty member that exemplifies excellent scholarship and presents a new perspective on religious or theological texts or issues, and the laureate is invited to deliver a lecture at the GTU. The 2nd Borsch-Rast laureate and lecturer is Timothy Wadkins, who is Professor of Religious Studies and Theology at Canisius College. A 1988 Ph.D. graduate of the GTU, the Prize was awarded for his book, *The Rise of Pentecostalism in Modern El Salvador: From the Blood of Martyrs to the Baptism of the Spirit* (Baylor University Press, 2017).

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El Salvador is not a typical tourist destination. It has been wracked by earthquakes and frequently finds itself in the way of devastating hurricanes. It is also the smallest, most densely populated, and thanks to

[1] This essay was adapted from my Borsch-Rast lecture given at the GTU on February 12, 2019. Parts of this essay also appeared in and have been adapted from Timothy Wadkins, "Pentecostals and the New World Order in El Salvador: Separating, Consuming, and Engaging," in *Spirit and Power: The Growth and Global Impact of Pentecostalism*, ed. Donald Miller, Kimon H. Sargeant, and Richard Flory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 143-59; and in Timothy H. Wadkins, *The Rise of Pentecostalism in Modern El Salvador*: *From the Blood of the Martyrs to the Baptism of the Holy Spirit* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017).

the proliferation of street gangs, it is now one of the most violent nations in Latin America. Yet, to the delight of El Salvador's tourist bureau, North American Christians have made this country a major destination for spiritual pilgrimage.

It is possible to see these groups each day waiting for their connecting flights to El Salvador at the Atlanta, Miami, or Huston airports. Some delegations are wearing colorful tee shirts that announce that they are part of "Project El Salvador," or "El Salvador for Christ." These groups belong to short term evangelical missionary endeavors and they will engage in street ministries, assist in stadium crusades, volunteer in orphanages, and build homes, all to gain a foothold among the people in order to more easily spread the gospel of Christ and personal salvation.

Other groups, primarily those from North American Catholic Universities and main-line parishes, are going down to El Salvador because they feel immense empathy toward the victims of government oppression and violence that erupted in the Civil War that lasted from 1980 to 1992 and whose effects reverberate to this day. These groups are enamored by the teachings of Liberation Theology, with its revolutionary mandate for a preferential option for the poor, and by the witness of the so-called "church of the martyrs" whose members were viciously murdered by military and government operatives while trying to live out this preference.[2] Most of these delegations will also engage in various social justice initiatives and will spend time building solidarity with those still marginalized Salvadorans whose postwar daily life is now threatened by gang violence and suffocating poverty.

Given the gut-wrenching experiences that accompany such pilgrimages, most of these visitors would be surprised to learn that, apart from left-leaning solidarity organizations, liberationist Jesuit theologians at the University of Central America, and a few radicalized Protestant clerics,

[2] The list of these martyrs, now enshrined on the Wall of Memory in Parque Cuscatlán in San Salvador, includes Rutilio Grande, SJ who was murdered while on his way to say mass Aguilares in 1977, Archbishop of San Salvador and now Saint Oscar Romero who was gunned down while celebrating mass in 1980, the four North American women missionaries who were raped and murdered near the airport in 1980, and the six Jesuits and their housekeeper and daughter who were assassinated while sleeping at the University of Central America in 1989. These ecclesiastical heroes were joined by thousands of *campesinos* who were killed by government military forces, who were often trained in the United States and used U.S. supplied weapons.

the liberationist themes that energized and helped to organize poor Salvadorans during the war have now all but disappeared in popular culture. Older Salvadorans want to put the war behind them, and younger generations have almost no war memories. Fifty percent of El Salvador's population is now under the age of 19 and Salvadoran youth typically have their minds set on North America and its values.[3] If they are not planning to migrate to the United States, they are devoted to finding their way in El Salvador's new capitalist economy of transnational textile factories, call centers, and North American fast food restaurants.

These post-war changes have been accompanied by an immense religious sea-change as well. Today, Catholic clergy in El Salvador are younger, more theologically conservative, and typically less politicized. The small liberationist-oriented Bible study cells known as Christian Base Communities have now either broken up or mutated into devotional and discipleship-oriented spiritual groups. Even more surprising, great numbers of post-war Salvadorans have dropped out of their traditional moorings in Catholicism altogether and have moved toward the altars of Evangelical conversion and Pentecostal experience. According to the latest polls, Roman Catholic allegiance in El Salvador has dropped from 90% at the beginning of the War in 1980 to 50% as of 2010. At the same time Evangelical Christianity has grown from 15% in 1980 to 40% in 2010, and some three quarters of these Evangelicals identity as Pentecostal.[4] It is no exaggeration to say that a multifaceted, enthusiastic, and Spirit-filled Evangelical revival has erupted in El Salvador. This religious eruption is seriously challenging the historic hegemony of Roman Catholicism and creating a new marketplace of competitive religious pluralism.

Modern Pentecostalism has its roots in a series of revivals that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in various places across the globe but became especially pronounced in the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles, which began in 1906. This revival, led by William Seymour, a black Holiness preacher whose parents had been slaves, lasted for nearly a decade, and was responsible for spawning a rapidly growing

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[3] Roy C. Boland, *Culture and Customs of El Salvador: Culture and Customs of Latin America and the Caribbean* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), chapter 2.

[4] Wadkins, *Pentecostalism in Modern El Salvador*, 13-15.

global movement. Early Pentecostals, including those Pentecostal missionaries who planted churches in El Salvador beginning in 1914, had very definite beliefs about what they called the Baptism of the Holy Spirit with speaking in tongues as its evidence.[5] Today however, this movement, in El Salvador and across the world, has experienced immense fragmentation and what now grounds Pentecostal spirituality is not the experience of speaking in tongues, but the fundamental conviction that, just as in the biblical world, God can and does embody and empower individuals and regularly intervenes in the world of human affairs. Through the agency of the Spirit, God not only forgives sin, but induces ecstasy, causes believers to dance and sing and even lose control of normal bodily comportment, delivers them from demonic oppression, heals their infirmities, speaks to them directly through words of prophecy and in dreams, directs them according to a divine plan, leads them through suffering and difficult circumstances, and sometimes blesses them with success and prosperity.

In the San Salvador metro area, there are at least twenty Spirit-filled churches each having attendance figures of more than five thousand. Two Salvadoran churches, the Baptist Tabernacle and Elim Mission International, have memberships of over 80,000 congregants and each church has numerous satellite churches throughout Latin America, Europe, and North America.[6] The crowds that gather in these very large churches stagger the imagination, but the reality is that even greater numbers of Salvadorian Evangelicals and Pentecostals belong to one of the thousands of very small congregations of less than 100 members. It is nearly impossible to walk through poor urban barrios or tiny rural villages and miss hearing the pulsating music, fiery preaching, and shouts of praise from one of these storefronts or often half finished, concrete churches.

What has precipitated this religious resurgence? Why is it primarily a Spirit-filled or Pentecostal phenomenon? In this essay I argue that in all its complex diversity, this religious eruption is intrinsically connected to recent social and cultural changes which have altered the consciousness of

[5] Ibid., 93-96.

[6] Tabernáculo Biblico Bautsta, http://www.tabernaculo.net; Misión Cristiana Elim, http://elim.org.sv.

individual Salvadorans and modernized El Salvador. To better explain these connections, I will employ testimonies of three Salvadoran Pentecostals as case studies. Each story illustrates both the immense variety and cultural adaptability of Pentecostalism and how this spirituality is intertwined in El Salvador's new world order of individualism and modernization. Although each testimony is presented in the first person, these testimonies are redacted from what were originally long interviews.[7]

Separating from the World: Alberto

I was born in Chalatenango, a region in the North West of El Salvador, which was fiercely contested during the civil war. I was raised in a large family of nine children, overseen by a single mother. Although my family was Catholic, we rarely went to mass. In desperation over unemployment, when the war ended in 1992, I left my family to find work in San Salvador. I was only 16 and, with a failure to find work, I quickly began to associate with gangs. Over the course of two years I committed several armed robberies and became addicted to methamphetamine. A year after I left home my mother became ill and died, leading me into a tailspin of depression.

One day, while playing basketball with my friends, an elderly woman along with other women from a cell group associated with the huge megachurch, Elim, approached me. She told me that I needed to pray with her, and when I refused to kneel with her and pray, she kicked me and demanded that I kneel. Her authoritarian ways convinced me that she might have been sent by God, and so I knelt. The very next day, while riding on a bus, I overheard an evangelist on someone's radio who seemed to know my needs. "I know where you are," the preacher said. "You are in despair over the death of a loved one, you are trapped by life in the streets, and you think there is no way out. God wants to heal your heart right now." "I do not know what came over me," but right there on the bus I got on my knees and prayed the way the evangelist told me to. I asked to be forgiven

[7] I have changed the names and some circumstances described in the first two individuals in order to protect identities. The third, Pedro, is a pastor at Elim and nothing has been altered in his testimony. See Wadkins, *Pentecostalism in Modern El Salvador*, chapter 7.

and for Christ to come into my heart."

The results were profound. Christ immediately took away my desire for meth and helped me feel like I was loved, a feeling I never received in my family. Shortly after my conversion I was baptized in the Holy Spirit. I cried for days and could hardly keep from speaking in tongues all the time. After eighteen months at a Christian half-way house, I was able to re-enter the world as a new person. I developed my artistic skills and along with an amigo started a bus painting operation. I also met Sylvia, and two years later we got married.

Supplemented by my wife's income from sewing at a Korean owned textile factory in San Bartolo, we earn just enough to keep our six children in school, and the bills paid. My goals are simple—to make sure my children get an education and have a better future. Today our lives are almost completely dominated by our involvement in a small inner-city Prince of Peace church, and our pastor is an elderly woman. The church is really our extended family. "Some people think we are strange because the men wear long sleeve shirts to church, and the women wear dresses and veils and sit separately from the men. But we take the scriptures seriously and we believe strongly that we should not be conformed to the world." As a Pentecostal, I continue to speak in tongues and I hear the Lord speaking to me through dreams.

Had Alberto been born at the beginning of the twentieth century, he most likely would have grown up as an illiterate, landless farmer who worked on any number of agricultural, mostly coffee producing haciendas that were owned by a small group of wealthy families that formed a ruling oligarchy with immense political power. His world would have been ordered according to a kind of sleepy feudalism that favored elites and locked him and his fellow peasants in place with no social mobility. Even his Catholic religion would have normalized and legitimated this social order. Much like the authority of social elites, the Catholic church represented sacred authority. This authority reinforced the immutable fact that, even if he wished for something different, there was no salvation outside the Church's domain, and there was no society beyond the one into which Alberto was born.[8]

It is different today. A century later, with several brutally crushed uprisings and a bloody civil war under its belt, El Salvador has gradually begun to open its doors to greater levels of democratization and to the global market economy. With the welcoming of structural reforms, the dollarized economy, and transnational trade zones which escalated after the ratification of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), this tiny country has increasingly been absorbed into the globalizing processes engineered especially by the United States.

Such changes have not been altogether positive. El Salvador is now nearly 70 percent urbanized and 45 percent of the Salvadoran population earns less than two dollars per day.[9] With the steep plunge in the living standards of the mostly urban poor, the only hope for many is to illegally migrate to the north. Over two million, mostly poor Salvadorans now live in the major cities of the U.S. Despite money that these immigrants send back to El Salvador, which helps relatives and raises El Salvador's overall economy, migration has led to the disintegration of the Salvadoran family and to the escalation of gangs and violence.

It is in this context that the most typical expression of Salvadoran Pentecostalism can be understood. Like Alberto, most Pentecostals in El Salvador are poor. Their embrace of Pentecostal religiosity involves a series of breaks from former connections in favor of something altogether new and more stabilizing. It begins with conversion. From the perspective of poor Pentecostals, conversion is an intense, dramatic turn, resulting from the excruciating psychological pain and guilt over a life lived with few choices other than those of the street. Conversion amounts to a fundamental rupture from the past and a reorientation toward something new and different which helps to heal psychological wounds, brings release from guilt over personal failings, and spawns the development of a disciplined and even more productive way of life in the context of the complex and difficult new world spawned by modernization.

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[8] Howard J. Wiarda, *The Soul of Latin America: The Cultural and Political Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

[9] Patricia Christian, Michael Gent, and Timothy Wadkins, "Protestant Growth and Change in El Salvador: Two Decades of Survey Evidence," *Latin American Research Review* 50, no. 1 (2015): 140-159.

For Pentecostals, conversion is also complimented by an infusion of supernatural power. Pentecostal's like Alberto are saturated by the experience of the miraculous. This begins with an initial experience of divine power, a "filling" of the Spirit that is accompanied by embodied supernatural manifestations such as speaking in tongues, physical healing, dreams, visions, prophetic words, dancing, singing, crying, or being slain in the spirit. The most important of these supernatural effects is healing, which also amounts to a dramatic rupture from illness to wholeness. Given the fact that medical care is limited for the poor, it is understandable that the poor would gravitate toward spiritual communities where direct healing is an expectation. Converts typically describe a personal healing or a healing of a family member as the instrument that led to their conversion. Yet healing also extends beyond the physical, and includes such things as domestic abuse, adultery, alcohol and drug addiction, and especially the healing of self-perception. Respondents often report that the Holy Spirit gave them a new sense that they were fundamentally important to God. Neither conversion nor empowerment by the Spirit eliminates life's problems for the poor Pentecostal, but it does change their orientation in terms of outlook and behavior. Despite the distress of underemployment, converts typically feel optimistic about the future. They also join communities of like-minded believers, where, lashed together like logs on a raft, they feel empowered to navigate the perilous seas of poverty and corruption and the crosscurrents of temptation that could potentially pull them under.[10]

Church communities like Alberto's are typically withdrawn, alternative enclaves of spiritual support, separated from what they perceive to be a demonic world. Yet they are also more than that. Such churches are also egalitarian organizations. Even when there is one dominant personality in charge, there is nevertheless a sense that all forms of service in the church are shared ministries, whether someone is a janitor, a secretary, an usher, a song leader, a cell group leader, or a pastor.

The by-product of such egalitarian cloisters is that congregants learn the values of moral responsibility and the various skills of participatory

[10] David Martin, "Evangelical and Charismatic Christianity in Latin America," in *Charismatic Christianity as a Global Culture*, ed. Karla Poewe (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 85.

democracy. Women in these churches are becoming especially empowered and many emerge in positions of pastoral leadership. Despite the overarching canopy of biblically based patriarchy which, according to St. Paul means that women are to be subservient to men in all things, it is Salvadoran women who often lead men into the faith. Once the men cross over into the household of faith, they abandon the more blatant aspects of *machismo*, and become husbands and fathers who forsake bars, brothels, and gangs and turn inward toward their families, sometimes even contradicting the literal reading of scripture by submitting to the authority of a woman pastor.[11] As a result of these conversions, family life becomes more stable and more socially productive. Children begin to stay in school and small-scale property ownership begins to take place, coupling redemption with at least the possibility of social betterment.

Consuming the World: Tanya

I have been a Christian for as long as I can remember. I was raised in a strict Baptist home and when my parents migrated to Brazil during the Civil War, I stayed in El Salvador to finish college. This was a period of strong rebellion away from my Christian roots. I turned away from God, became a model and television news anchor, and went to a lot of wild parties. But increasingly the lifestyle of shallow romances and immense alcohol consumption made me feel empty.

A few years ago I accepted an invitation from a friend to attend the Central Christian International Church located in the hills above San Salvador. CCI was founded by a former architect who received a call into ministry through a supernatural vision. In just a decade CCI has grown to nearly 5000 members and it intentionally caters to more affluent members of the professional classes. Its services are lively, but in comparison with other Pentecostal churches they are intentionally toned down and not disruptive. You might notice someone crying in worship but never speaking in tongues, dancing or shouting. There is, however, an abundance of

[11] Elizabeth Brusco, "The Reformation of Machismo: Asceticism and Masculinity Among Columbian Evangelicals," in *Rethinking Protestantism in Latin America*, ed. Virginia Garrard-Burnett and David Stoll (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 143-158.

professional sounding praise music, led by an accomplished song leader and accompanied by one of several different bands with backup singers.

In the nurturing fellowship of CCI my life dramatically changed. I loved the fact that the church was clean, orderly and clearly designed by someone with affluent tastes, and I liked the Pentecostal atmosphere that was much less demonstrative than other mega churches I had visited which were very loud and wild. Through the ministries at CCI, I renewed my commitment to Christ, got out of the party lifestyle and with the help of some business associates at the church I started what has now become a very successful real estate business. Now my social center is CCI. I sing in one of the worship bands, and I attend a weekly Bible study. At CCI, I have also experienced the filling of the Holy Spirit. I have never spoken in tongues like they do at other Pentecostal churches. But I do have very deep mystical experiences, people have been healed by my touch, and frequently God speaks to me through my dreams.

I believe that God has a very distinct plan for my life that has been marvelously revealed to me. A few years ago, I began to pray for a husband. I asked for someone who was educated, a working professional, who spoke English like I do, and even someone who has brown eyes like I do. At CCI we are taught that if you have enough faith, you can ask God for anything, and he will give it to you. While I was in the airport in Rio, en route to San Salvador, after visiting my parents, I met the man of my prayers, a British citizen who plays professional soccer for one of our Salvadoran pro teams. By the way, he has brown eyes! We dated briefly back in San Salvador and were married a short time later.

My husband and I are not without problems. I feel badly that he is not yet a Christian even though he goes to church with me, likes our pastor, and appreciates the fact that our services are interpreted into English. I am also worried about our inability, thus far, to have children. Medical tests have revealed that the infertility problem lies with me and despite an operation I had in Europe, we still have been unsuccessful. I have been really praying about this however, and I know that God will give us the desires of our heart and allow us to have children. God has given me a promise through the biblical story of Abraham and Sarah, who, because of their faith, in their old age were rewarded with an heir.

While Alberto's subculture is an expression of Pentecostal separation from a dangerous and demonic world, Tanya's subculture consists primarily of second and third generation evangelicals who have migrated to CCI from other churches and have not experienced radical conversions.[12] These congregants do not demonize the outside world but perceive it as a relatively safe environment where Gods' blessings can be enjoyed. They are not ascetic, but they are nevertheless characterized by a supernatural spirituality and depend on God to help them navigate through all the complex possibilities that the world offers. This spirituality is particularly displayed in the idea of knowing the will of God. In this attitude, they identify deeply with the supernatural worldview embedded in the stories of the Bible that depict God leading His people by changing historical circumstances, such as opening the Red Sea, providing Abraham with an heir in his old age, or even punishing Jonah, who was swallowed by a big fish because he refused to go to Nineveh. Pentecostals like Tanya believe that the pattern of God's direction revealed in such stories is normative for today. This direction often comes through an important insight while reading scripture, or by being led to read a specific biblical text. It is often heard through the medium of dreams, in visions, during prophecies at church, while listening to Christian music, or in deep mystical states of prayer.[13]

In Tanya's Pentecostal circles however, the revealed will of God often coincides with a consumerist orientation—a mechanized spirituality that connects the will of God with the abundant desires of the modern, more affluent believer. In the spirituality of Tanya's subculture, the present and future are typically collapsed, and heaven can be realized on earth in the expectation that God will deliver whatever one desires whenever one wants it. With the coins of faith and surrender to God, you can order up anything and expect an on-time delivery—a husband with brown eyes, a new car, a better job, fertility to conceive—and like a transcendent vending machine, God will deliver anything and everything, anytime you want it.[14]

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[12] Central Christian International Church, http://www.ccisansalvador.org. See my discussion of this church in Wadkins, *Pentecostalism in Modern El Salvador*, chapter 8.

[13] Instituto de Opinión Pública, *El Pentecostalismo y la Cultura en El Salvador Moderno* (Universidad Francisco Gavidia, 2011). Questions 27.1, 27.2, 27.3, 27.4.

Not everyone in this subculture gets what he or she wants from God always and immediately. Yet most stories move in the direction of success and victory. These individuals believe that God wants them to stop suffering and He wants to give them the desires of their hearts. Nevertheless, they are often tested by God until they learn the formulae of faith and surrender. After all, when Abraham finally learned to believe the promises of God, his elderly wife Sarah conceived.

Tanya's subculture also represents a more collectivist consumer orientation. As this movement has mutated more and more in the direction of large mega-churches it has rapidly taken on the symbolic structures of trans-national market societies. New churches are springing up which look more like big box stores in mega malls than traditional churches and usually have *international* in their name. Preachers dress like American businessmen and mimic the flamboyant preaching style of American television evangelists. Churches are filled with the latest high-tech equipment which can project on big screens, keep congregants entertained, and "manage" the way in which the Spirit is moving. They are also acquiring airtime on television, or else buying their own stations where they market their particular "brand" in order to appeal to broad, worldly wise sectors of the population.

The net effect of these secularizing processes is that, especially among younger congregants at CCI, this modern Christian ethos has dissipated interest in older, poorer, more localized, and less sophisticated versions of Salvadoran Pentecostalism. Congregants at CCI typically describe the churches where they were raised as overly moralistic, loud, disorderly, and even dirty.[15] Suffice it to say that these congregants would not be comfortable in Alberto's tiny Pentecostal church. Yet, when Ablerto's children grow up, especially if they get an education, and experience social mobility, they will no doubt want to attend a church like CCI.

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[14] Sturla J. Stalsett, "Offering On-Time Deliverance: The Pathos of Neo-Pentecostalism and the Spirits of Globalization," in *The Spirits of Globalization*, ed. Sturla J. Stalsett (London: SCM Press, 2006), 198-212.

[15] This is an impression drawn from some 20 interviews at CCI.

Engaging the World: Pedro

I was born in La Poppa, a very poor Barrio within metro San Salvador, and my father abandoned our family when I was 2 years old. Although my mother took me to my first communion, we never practiced the Catholic faith. My family was very poor and in order to finish high school I had to work fifty hours per week on night shifts. After high-school graduation I acquired a job at a beer making enterprise and through hard work I became a manager.

In 1980 my wife persuaded me to come with her to Mission Elim church. I usually played soccer on Sundays so I was reluctant. But I was struck by the emotionalism in the church, and the pastor's message cut deeply into me and I became convicted of my many sins. When the time came, I was the first to go forward to accept Christ as my Lord and Savior and after this my life changed dramatically. After I was baptized in the Holy Spirit, I began to devote myself to ministry. At that time, Elim was still a church of only about 1000 and was meeting in a tent. Within 8 months I became a deacon and as Elim began to grow very rapidly, I eventually became a cell leader and two years later a supervisor of cell groups.

Eventually I began to feel conflicted about my work at a brewery especially because El Salvador was a country with high rates of alcohol addiction. I began to feel like we were producing atomic bombs and contributing to the breakdown of our society. But these problems were solved when in 1990 I was asked to become a full-time zone pastor at Elim. By then, under the leadership of Mario Vega, Elim had become a very large church, well over 10,000 members.

*Increasingly my ministry led me to the barrio of Iberia**,** one of the most violent and gang-ridden sectors in San Salvador. I wanted to do something different than just preach to the kids of Iberia and try to win them to Christ. You see these are barrios of immense poverty, with people who feel alone, with families at risk, with escalating episodes of violence… I did not think it would do them any good to tell them of the love of Jesus unless we practiced that love… We needed to help make this neighborhood safe, we needed to help this community become transformed so that people*

could regain a sense of identity, so their children could go to school and they could find work that could help them out of poverty.

By the winter of 2009 we began to develop a plan for Iberia, which eventually led to a Christmas dinner with gang leaders and their families which Pastor Vega and I hosted. It was amazing and terrifying at the same time to be breaking bread and eating chicken with some of the most violent young men in all of Latin America. Shocked by such compassionate attention, however, the gang leaders strategized with us about what sorts of programs would help them get some of their material and economic needs met. What came from this was the development of a profitable bakery where gang members are trained as bakers, distributors, and bookkeepers, and a small bleach factory where they make and sell bleach as a cleaning supply. Today the gang violence has been neutralized in the neighborhood, and two years ago we opened up what is now a thriving elementary school as well. In addition, several gang members have become Christians and are actively participating in cell groups.

Over the years I have become critical of my Pentecostal tradition. They live in a bubble of emotionalism that has no windows that look outward… It is not enough just to make Jesus our Savior, or to have a deep experience with the Holy Spirit. These are both important…but we must also wake up to the fact that the Holy Spirit moves, not just inside of us, but wherever there is chaos, violence and poverty as well. Evangelism is therefore not just about soul winning…it is about an integrated, redemptive engagement with all spheres of society, whether anyone becomes a Christian or not.

Pedro is an example of the egalitarian, bottom-up nature of this movement. Like virtually all the pastors in the *Elim* church, Pedro became a Christian at *Elim* and as his leadership skills began to be recognized, he moved up the ranks into pastoral leadership. Pedro also represents a growing number of Pentecostal leaders who have moved out ahead of their congregations and have become deeply engaged with the problematic social realities of El Salvador and increasingly critical of the evangelical and Pentecostal tendencies toward otherworldly social separation. Mario Vega, Pastor General of Elim told me that he and many of his staff are beginning to address structural evil in the country. "It is not enough just to preach the

gospel or even give aid to the poor," Vega told me, "We must speak out against and attempt to change those social structures that cause poverty. In recent radio broadcasts and newspaper advertisements, *Elim* has denounced policies that are contributing to such things as gang violence and poverty. In addition, the church is now engaged in job training programs, promoting recycling as a form of Christian concern for the environment, and, at the risk of severe criticism, testing for HIV.

This orientation toward social ministry has been growing within Latin American Evangelicalism and particularly in El Salvador, thanks to emergent pastoral training programs and resulting theological literacy among some Pentecostal leaders.[16] Pentecostals like Pedro are emerging as a new Pentecostal intelligentsia in El Salvador. They are increasingly educated, theologically trained, culturally engaged in ministries that focus on social issues, and they are pushing fellow Pentecostals in decidedly new theological directions, primarily toward a different way of reading the Bible. Virtually every Salvadoran Pentecostal affirms that the Bible is God's inspired revelation. But most Pentecostals are wedded to a personalized focus on those biblical narratives that highlight the miraculous works of God. Ignoring the social ministry of Jesus, they reduce the Bible to a manual for personal spiritualty and morality. Pentecostals like Pedro are challenging this hermeneutic. These Pentecostals have moved toward a reading of the Bible that is Christ-centered and expands the notion of personal salvation to include all aspects of the created order—social, cultural, political, and ecological. Pentecostals like Pedro continue to embrace the gifts of the Spirit and miraculous intervention of God in their lives. But this supernatural orientation is now just one corner of their spirituality.[17] It is worth asking whether over time, this more rationalized and socially conscious reading of the Bible will erode the deeply emotional and otherworldly ethos of traditional Pentecostalism, represented in Alberto's and Tanya's religious cultures.[18]

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[16] In part this influence is coming from the Latin American Theological Fellowship, whose teaching materials are being implemented in various local contexts. See Daniel Salinas, *Latin American Evangelical Theology in the 1970s* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

[17] Wadkins, *Pentecostalism in Modern El Salvador,* Chapter 7.

Individual Empowerment in the New World Order

The portraits of Alberto, Tanya, and Pedro represent the most significant tendencies in Salvadoran Pentecostalism: to separate from, consume, and engage the world. Alberto's separatist orientation is still the most dominant Pentecostal expression in El Salvador and Tanya and Pedro represent newer ways that the movement has mutated and adapted, primarily in those sectors with greater degrees of wealth, social mobility, and education. What is it about Pentecostalism that makes it so adaptable to the complex structures of Modern life?

As noted earlier, a massive cultural shift has taken place in El Salvador at almost the same pace and during the same time period as the Pentecostal surge. Perhaps the greatest religious indicator of this cultural shift is the rapid decline in Catholic allegiance. At the beginning of the twentieth century, El Salvador's population was primarily rural and poor. In the hacienda culture of the countryside, power and authority were vested in the distant, aristocratically controlled institutions of government, the military, and locally, in a wealthy oligarchy of landholders who wielded power, and sometimes violently exploited the poor. The Catholic Church did not dehumanize the poor in the same way, but it did deflect the social inequality by assuring the poor that, if they were obedient to the sacramental requirements of the faith, their present sufferings would be offset by future rewards in heaven. The church itself, like the social order it supported, was a static hierarchical institution, not a dynamic organization of like-minded and equally empowered believers. Catholics who came to mass were passive recipients of what this institution provided in the same way that they related to the social order to which they belonged by virtue of birth. For the typical rural peasant, self-determination in religious, political or economic matters was still mostly inconceivable in a society that *corralled* the many and held them in place but was *controlled* by a few.

Over the past century, however, a break has occurred. It began in the mid-nineteenth century with the break from Spain and continued with the bitter and violent land rights rebellions and massacres of the 1930's, and

[18] Ibid., 160-62.

especially with the violent crucible of the twelve-year civil war that finally ended in 1992. The hacienda culture of the past has now been mostly dismantled and has been replaced by emergent market capitalism and by globalized networks of communication such as cellular technology and the internet. Increasingly, children and grandchildren of rural peasants are now typically city-dwellers who are wage earners like Alberto, and who take their autonomy for granted. Even though still poor and underemployed in a market economy, they are "masterless" people who can move freely and make choices for themselves. For these individuals, the Catholic Church and the social order it has traditionally represented now seems alien, antiquated, and irrelevant. As the polls are suggesting, these individuals often walk away from the Church.[19]

The arrows of causation and conditioning certainly fly in many different directions and the historical sketch offered here remains general. But despite the connective ambiguities, it is nevertheless true that as this pervasive individualism increasingly enveloped El Salvador, Catholic allegiance eroded, and evangelical Pentecostalism surged. The key to understanding this connection is the fact that Pentecostal spirituality is about the individual, and because of this, it is almost tailor made for the modern era of personal autonomy and social portability.

Pentecostal religiosity is individualized in various ways. It is person-centered rather than institution-centered. In evangelicalism there *can* be salvation outside the Catholic Church. There is no necessity for a building, a priest, or a sacrament. The presentation of and response to God's message can take place anytime, anywhere and is not mediated by anything. Alberto's conversion began on a basketball court and culminated on a city bus. Numerous Salvadorans got their first taste of the gospel from radio or television. This person-centeredness translates very quickly into the idea that all persons are equal before God. Given such a priesthood of all believers, it follows that Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity develops person to person, creates voluntary social spaces, and evolves into organizations from the bottom up, literally leveling the traditional social order.

[19] Ibid., 192ff.

Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity is also word based. Unlike the Catholic statues, which St. Bernard famously described as "books for the unlearned," the words of the Evangelical gospel must be personally understood by the individual, and mentally appropriated as a *message* of good *news.* Such news comes via different media—personal communication, radio or television, books, and especially the Bible—but it is always the word—spoken, written, or heard—that informs and persuades the individual.

Pentecostalism is also grounded in free choice. Since the Evangelical gospel is not confined to an institution, it freely and frequently jumps over boundaries. It moves best in a cultural ethos where individuals are free to choose, not only what they might want to do or buy, but also what kind of religion they might want to embrace. In economic terms, free choice also gives rise to methods of persuasion on the supply side of the relationship between religious "sellers" and potential "buyers," which of course leads quickly to today's high-tech marketing of the message that dominates so much of the Salvadoran mega-church ethos.

Freedom of choice is also about mobility and Evangelicals and Pentecostals are on the move, constantly canceling what came before in favor of choosing what will come next. Historically, Protestantism has always upheld the notion of *sola scriptura*, but not everyone interprets the scriptures in the same way, and some individuals get entirely new revelations under the influence of the Spirit, and these revelations cause them to move in different directions, either choosing different churches or creating new ones. Like procreating rabbits, Pentecostalism continuously gives birth to new versions of itself, and the result is the continuous reincarnation of new churches and ministries in a process that mimics exactly the frenetic pluralism of modern market societies.

As we have observed in the story of Tanya, for some more affluent Pentecostals, this reception of the Holy Spirit becomes frosting on the cake of upward mobility. But most Salvadorans are very poor. They feel like economic vagabonds who wander from one informal job to another in the wastelands of the urban-industrial complex. They are crippled by a *power deficiency*. Poor Salvadoran Pentecostals, however, feel empowered. They are saturated by a biblical worldview that is grounded in a supernatural

understanding of continuous divine intervention in their lives. Beginning with the overwhelming experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit, it proceeds to become a lifestyle wherein the believer feels personally directed by God. Such power is also a collective experience, as churches become reservoirs of spiritual re-charging. In such places the redeemed can unburden their souls, get prayed for and even healed. The power in such communities creates in people the sense that they are God's elect and therefore uniquely important persons. Just as important, they are people who experientially know that heaven is not just about gold streets and mansions in the future. It is about heaven realized on earth as God's unbounded love and power breaks into every cultural niche and corner of their existence.

Because individual autonomy is one of the more important hinges upon which the door of modernization hangs in in El Salvador, the highly individualized and life-giving adaptability of Pentecostal spirituality is one of the more powerful forces making this door swing.[20]

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[20] Ibid., chapter 9.

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