



GTU

Berkeley Journal of  
Religion and Theology

**Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology**

**Volume 5, Issue 1**

ISSN 2380-7458

---

*Borsch-Rast Lecture 2019*

**Response to the Borsch-Rast Lecture**

Author(s): Margaret R. Miles

Source: *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology* 5, no. 1 (2019): 70-76.

Published by: Graduate Theological Union © 2019

Online article published on: August 20, 2019

---

***Copyright Notice:***

This file and its contents is copyright of the Graduate Theological Union © 2019. All rights reserved. Your use of the Archives of the Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology (BJRT) indicates your acceptance of the BJRT's policy regarding the use of its resources, as discussed below:

Any redistribution or reproduction of part or all of the contents in any form is prohibited with the following exceptions:

- You may download and print to a local hard disk this entire article for your personal and non-commercial use only.
- You may quote short sections of this article in other publications with the proper citations and attributions.
- Permission has been obtained from the Journal's management for exceptions to redistribution or reproduction. A written and signed letter from the Journal must be secured expressing this permission.

To obtain permissions for exceptions, or to contact the Journal regarding any questions regarding any further use of this article, please e-mail the managing editor at [bjrt@ses.gtu.edu](mailto:bjrt@ses.gtu.edu)

The Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology aims to offer its scholarly contributions free to the community in furtherance of the Graduate Theological Union's mission.

## **Response to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Borsch-Rast Lecture**

**Margaret R. Miles**

*Graduate Theological Union  
Berkeley, California, U.S.A.*

Margaret R. Miles is Professor Emerita of Historical Theology and the 5<sup>th</sup> Academic Dean of the Graduate Theological Union (1996-2002). Prior to her return to the GTU, she was Bussey Professor of Theology and the first tenured woman at Harvard Divinity School. Her most recent book is *The Long Goodbye: Dementia Diaries* (2017).

*Published in:* *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology*, Vol. 5, no. 1 (2019)  
© 2019 by the Graduate Theological Union

“We beg you, make us truly alive.”<sup>1</sup>

Professor Wadkins’s prize winning 2018 book, *The Rise of Pentecostalism in Modern El Salvador*, is a fascinating study about a perennial issue in the history of the Christian movements. The earliest Christian authors repeatedly reiterated Jesus’ claim to bring life and to bring it “more abundantly.” A fourth century Eucharistic prayer from Serapion of Thmuis (in Egypt) reads, “We beg you, make us truly alive.” Augustine of Hippo, in 5<sup>th</sup> century North Africa, wrote: “Anyone who thinks of God as anything other than *life itself* has an absurd idea of God.”<sup>2</sup> I will not, as I am tempted, segue into a digression on the struggles within second and third century Christian groups about how this new life should be expressed. Referring to the second century wild diversity of opinions on the issue, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Serapion of Thmuis, fourth-century liturgical prayer.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *De doctrina christiana* 1.8.

apologist, Irenaeus, complained, “Each one preaches himself.”<sup>3</sup> The third-century African bishop, Cyprian, argued that the activity of the Spirit should always and only be channeled through bishops. In the fourth century, churches recognized and funded by emperors, together with assent to creedal language, came to define “orthodox” Christianity. Clearly, from earliest days, Christians have disagreed about how to balance order, [orthodoxy] that seeks to preserve and protect precious beliefs and values, and life [orthopraxy], by which those beliefs and values are experienced and expressed in worship.

I received my doctorate from the GTU forty years ago. Traditional Church History, the history I was taught, pictured early Christianity as advancing by sure and steady steps to ever more accurate understandings of beliefs, doctrines, and practices. But although the Christian “story” is still told this way in many undergraduate classrooms, historians no longer recognize it as accurate or adequate. Desperate appeals to “unity” — the Christian dream — actually reveal the opposite: namely, diversity of belief and practice. By the fourth century every increment of creedal precision prompted groups of Christians to realize that creeds, promulgated by councils, did not accurately represent their experience and values: Montanists, Copts, Armenians, Jacobites, Zoroastrians, Mandeans, Nestorians, and Manichaeans. Most of these Christian groups are still in existence; they are presently being studied by historians who have language skills beyond the Greek and Latin considered adequate for access to the literary remains of early Christianity when I was a student. These heterodox *Christians*—passionate enough about their beliefs to withstand religious, social, and political pressure—are no longer seen by most historians as “heretics.” The history of Christianity is presently told as a history of diversity, much wilder, more unruly—and more interesting—than the traditional story in which gatherings of men, no doubt dressed in the fourth-century equivalent of three-piece-suits, voted on the exact wording of creeds. Today Christian history includes women prophets who refused Paul’s injunction to be “silent in church;” it includes Christians who killed, maimed, or banished other Christians for personal and political disagreements; and Christian congregations that apparently needed to be

---

<sup>3</sup> Irenaeus, *On the heresies*.

admonished that the liturgical “kiss of peace” must be silent and with closed lips.<sup>4</sup> And so, on and on. The history of diversity is the deep history within which Pentecostalism must be placed.

And so we come to present-day Pentecostalism in El Salvador in which, to quote Professor Wadkins, “an unbounded wild expressiveness is now sweeping across all sectors of Salvadoran Christianity.”<sup>5</sup> The remarkable rise of Pentecostalism is occurring against a back story of social change and human suffering. A major demographic transition occurred in twentieth century El Salvador: <sup>6</sup> In 1950 “El Salvador was 75% rural; today it is 75% urban” and “over 50% of the population is under the age of nineteen.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, from 1980 to 1992 civil war convulsed El Salvador, overturning the more-or-less tacit collaboration of the state and the Roman Catholic Church which had long “enjoyed hegemonic status in “the land named for the Savior.”<sup>8</sup> According to 2017 and 2018 reports by the World Economic Forum, El Salvador is ranked first “in a ranking of countries where organized crime has the greatest impact on society.”<sup>9</sup>

In sharp contrast to El Salvador’s situation before the civil war, wealthy landowners do not control Pentecostalism; it is a “movement from below.” Most members are poor, but “some are wealthy and socially and politically prominent,”<sup>10</sup> but empowerment by the Spirit is decidedly egalitarian<sup>11</sup> and independent of education or formal authorization. Male and female leaders are from the same social niche as their congregations.<sup>12</sup> Diversity among Pentecostal churches is evident in El Salvador. For example, for many Pentecostal congregations, speaking in tongues is not

---

<sup>4</sup> Tertullian, *De prae. haer.* 41.3; Athenagoras, *Sup. Chris.* 32.3; Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 3. 12, Strom. 3.2.11. For discussion, see L. Edward Phillips, *Liturgical Studies*, vol. 36, *The Ritual Kiss in Early Christian Worship* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> 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: Baylor University Press, 2017), 47.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 23, 199.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>9</sup> Roberto Saviano, “The Migrant Caravan: Made in USA,” in *The New York Review of Books* LXVI, no. 4 (March 7, 2019), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Wadkins, *The Rise of Pentecostalism*, 112.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

the required mark of a “Spirit-filled” person that it has been in North American Pentecostalism.

A description of a world view should be one in which those who are studied could recognize themselves.<sup>13</sup> Professor Wadkins goes well beyond examining Pentecostalism as a phenomenon to be either observed or described by its leaders, including detailed interviews with members of various Pentecostal and charismatic congregations on personal, political, and social issues—from views on abortion to their use of modern technology. Interviews include individuals who represent a range of different interests, beliefs, values, and degrees of expressiveness in worship.

It is striking that in postmodern El Salvador, globalization and capitalism have produced “no sign of religious erosion.”<sup>14</sup> This makes El Salvador very complex and interesting. Most North Americans, armchair sociologists, are all-too-eager to project the North American and Western European experience in which modernization *has* been a factor in declining religious loyalty.<sup>15</sup> But this projection falsifies religious experience in in El Salvador.

The religious back story of Pentecostalism in El Salvador receives considerable attention in *The Rise of Pentecostalism*. El Salvador was—and is—a Roman Catholic country. Yet Pentecostalism, a North American, Protestant-inspired movement, has also developed and been supported in the Charismatic movement within the Roman Catholic Church. Polls suggest that about 50% of Latin American Roman Catholics are self-identified charismatics.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, Evangelical Protestantism within which Pentecostalism emerged in El Salvador, is not a simple reaction to a hierarchically-organized and socially embedded Roman Catholic Church. Doctrinal differences are not a matter of contention. Rather, different emphases and ecclesiastical governance characterize differences between Pentecostalism and the church in which most Salvadorans are likely to have

---

<sup>13</sup> Brad Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Wadkins, *The Rise of Pentecostalism*, 198.

<sup>15</sup> “[P]olls suggest that 1 in 5 United States citizens self-identifies as “disaffiliated from any formal religion.” Ibid., 197.

<sup>16</sup> Pew Research Center.

grown up. Indeed, a positive relationship can be hypothesized in which the Roman Catholic Church stabilizes beliefs and doctrines that both consider essential to Christian faith, while Pentecostalism emphasizes the Holy Spirit's transformative activity in persons, the authority of the Bible and its supernatural (and distinctly *premodern*) worldview, together with greater engagement of the emotions in worship.<sup>17</sup>

Professor Wadkins's thesis in *The Rise of Pentecostalism* is that Spirit-filled Christianity is "deeply connected"<sup>18</sup> with El Salvador's dramatic "transition into a capitalistic, and globalized postmodern country."<sup>19</sup> Modernism and Pentecostalism, he writes, "grew up together,"<sup>20</sup> and are "inextricably interconnected."<sup>21</sup> The two movements share values; both are suited to "individualized, literate, consumerist, and socially mobile persons."<sup>22</sup> How do the shared values of modernity and Pentecostalism *work* in El Salvador?

Choice — the postmodern presumption that individuals are neither automatically nor inescapably formed by, and limited to, the accidents of their birth and niche in society—is a strong factor that links modernization and "the large, competitive, and pluralistic religious marketplace" of Christianity in El Salvador.<sup>23</sup> "Modernity," with its proliferation of consumer goods — from cereals to telephones to entertainment — is characterized, even defined by its proliferation of choices. People who live in modern societies have become accustomed to, and insistent upon, choices. Indeed North Americans, like modern Salvadorans, are invited to think of ourselves as constituted as individuals by the choices we make.

The culture of choice characteristic of modernity and postmodernity seems to have made it almost impossible for modern people to grow up calmly into the religion of our childhoods. For many — perhaps most of us — a religious belief and practice we can embrace wholeheartedly must be

---

<sup>17</sup> Wadkins, *The Rise of Pentecostalism*, 31.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-54.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

one that we have, within various possibilities, deliberately chosen. By contrast with Professor Wadkins's carefully researched description of the rise of Pentecostalism in El Salvador, I offer in conclusion an unabashedly anecdotal observation. This observation comes with an example: Some time ago I attended a friend's ordination in a self-governing Baptist congregation. Here was Mary in her summer dress, *not* fortified by robes or a centuries-old liturgy, *not* ordained by a bishop or a synod. Mary had grown up in the Roman Catholic Church. Her experience in the church in which she was ordained, she told me, was that of exhilarating freedom from what she called the "empty ritual" she had experienced as a child.

My example continues: My father was a Baptist minister in Canadian churches in which each congregation governed itself. The cohesiveness and even the survival of these churches depended largely on the personality of the minister — my father in his navy blue suit. Even as a child I was aware of the valued spontaneity of this arrangement, but also of its fragility and thus, continuous undercurrent of anxiety. Informed by my childhood experience, my adult choice was/is the Episcopal Church. Vestments minimizing the personality of the priest, written prayers — prayers spoken by my grandparents in England before I was born — connect me to former, contemporary, and future generations, an emphasis on participation in the liturgy of the *Book of Common Prayer*: all these stabilizing factors release me from the anxiety generated by my early experience of the precariousness of less structured worship and church governance. For me, the centuries-old formal liturgy is anything *but* "empty ritual"; it is vivid, profoundly engaging, healing, and challenging. Neither Mary nor I *chose* churches in which doctrine differed substantially from that of our childhood. But we both, coming from our childhood religions, chose different religious experience than that of our childhoods. Religious choices seem to be importantly informed by where a person *comes from religiously*, and by what we have experienced as lacking.

As Professor Wadkins has effectively shown in his book and his lecture, many other factors are involved in the complex picture of Pentecostalism in El Salvador. But for many Salvadorans, a hidden factor in religious choice, not easily observed or articulated in interviews, may have emerged from childhood experience in the formal liturgy of the Roman

Catholic Church, namely, a yearning to compensate childhood worship experience with an “unbounded wild expressiveness.”

Christians today still pray with the fourth-century Egyptian Christian, Serapion: “We beg you, make us truly alive.” And what does “truly alive” mean? For Pentecostals, indeed, for all Christians who choose the form of worship that resonates most richly for us, it means not — or not only — intellectual assent to beliefs, but also the engagement of our bodies and senses in the physical experience of worship in the religion of the “Word made flesh.”

*The Rise of Pentecostalism in Modern El Salvador* offers a detailed picture of Pentecostalism in El Salvador. It also challenges us to think more deeply and honestly about our own religious choices, loyalties, and practices. I congratulate Professor Wadkins on his thought provoking and important book.

## **Bibliography**

- Allen, Danielle S. *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Berger, Peter L. *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation*. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980.
- Gregory, Brad. *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Phillips, L. Edward. *Liturgical Studies*. Vol. 36, *The Ritual Kiss in Early Christian Worship*. Cambridge: Grove Books, 1996.
- Saviano, Roberto. “The Migrant Caravan: Made in USA.” *The New York Review of Books* LXVI, no. 4 (March 7, 2019).
- Wadkins, Timothy H. *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.