

Martin Lindhart (ed.), *Practicing the Faith: The Ritual Life of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011, vi + 344 pp., \$95.00/£55, ISBN 978-1-84545-770-9.

This edited volume examines, from a ritual perspective, Pentecostal-Charismatic groups (PCGs) that are the fastest growing religious movements in the world today. The authors, who are anthropologists, ethnologists or sociologists (with one theologian) collected rich and diverse material on healing, deliverance, personal devotion, public engagement. Their work covers several regions such as Chile, South California, Fiji, Kenya, and Sweden. After an introduction by the editor, eleven chapters examine various issues relevant to the field. Overcoming the diversity of subjects, the unity of the volume is provided by the general ritual perspective and by the methodological implications of employing such a perspective.

The volume is outstanding for six primary reasons. First, it provides what amounts to the most fruitful methodological approach of recent years in the study of PCGs: a pragmatic sociology leaving a large space for the phenomenological approach. This path was opened by Thomas Csordas who in 1994 proposed “a cultural phenomenology of charismatic healing”. This approach is particularly relevant, as Martin Lindhart points out in his introduction, because it overcomes the fact that “life [in the PCGs] tends to evade analysis based on more classical perspectives on ritual” (p. 2). Furthermore, the introduction by the editor is an important contribution in that it provides a superb view of the state of art in anthropology on the subject.

The second reason for the success of this volume is that the subject of rituals, rarely addressed in relation to such groups, is not only dealt with here but also assumes a central place in the analysis. Csordas had already opened the way with his 1983 “Rhetoric of Transformation in Ritual Healing”, but few followed suit until now. As noted by Lindhart in his introduction, this lack of interest in rituals should be understood in relation to the fact that such groups “themselves insist on the lack of ritual of their church life” (p. 2). Spontaneity is “a fundamental criterion for events and phenomenological experience of the sacred” (p. 5). In chapter ten, Gretschen Pfeil addresses two common forms of worship practice—testimony and sermon—and demonstrates how these practices work as anti-ritual. In this respect, ritual is an issue that crystallizes the complexity of PCGs because their “liturgy” embodies “inspiration rather than human careful preparation” (p. 6).

A third strength of the volume is that its contributions are all empirical case studies of PCGs focusing on different aspects of ritual practice. Some authors tackle the success of these groups. Joel Robbins (chapter 1) provides a comprehensive look at the phenomenon in which he distinguishes several features, including PCGs’ rapid “spread across cultural and linguistic barriers” (p. 49) and their “ability to build thriving social institutions in settings in which few others are able to survive” (p. 49). Simon Coleman (chapter 7) examines the role of the charismatic voice in the Word of Life Church of Sweden as “proselytizer”, “prophet” and “preacher”. This set of figures engages the listener “because it provides access to two speaking worlds at the same time – the human and the divine” (p. 216). In the same vein, Paul Gifford (chapter 6) notes, by analysing the statements of members of Nairobi’s Winner Club, that, whatever the tensions and inconsistencies with their ritual proclamations of the fulfilment of the Scripture, the leaders of the Church engender hope by providing stories

that demonstrate the way to success. Thus, “these churches have developed a winning formula” (p. 194). Some authors are focused on discourse as Jon Bialecki (chapter 9) shows when he describes the negotiation of meaning in his paper on deliverance; he argues that framing healing as deliverance is an act of self-classification and that it allows a detachment in case of failure. Others are interested in the commitment of the body as Jacqueline Ryle shows in her text about Fiji (chapter 2). She notes that attenders are invited to approach and kneel around the altar, the place usually reserved for the priest. Thus, “to invite people into the sanctuary is inviting them into the holiest and most powerful part of the church space” (p. 93). Similarly, Lindhart “explores how divine interference and human powerlessness are constituted as fundamental features of Pentecostal ritual life” (p. 221). The positioning of bodies or simply the bodily engagement in worship, among members of the Pentecostal Church in Chile, constitutes a major way to feel the power of God (chapter 8).

Fourthly, several contributions also question the cultural consequences or the cultural interconnections of the rituals of faith. Chapter three by Kelly Chong is noteworthy in this respect since her observations show that, when looking at gender issues and patriarchy, religious practice does not lead to feminine emancipation. In the South Korean evangelical female cell groups she studied, women are re-domesticated within a South Korean patriarchal system through repentance for sins or disobedience. Therefore Chong observes how religion encourages women to recommit “to the existing family and gender system, helping to reproduce the current family/gender arrangements” (p. 122).

Fifthly, another quality of the book lies in the results of two longitudinal qualitative surveys. The contributions of Csordas (chapter 4) and Martyn Percy (chapter 5) focus on the routinization of rites. Following a Weberian perspective, the authors show that great charismatic fervour is followed by a slow and sustainable process of routinization. The main emphasis in these two chapters is the observation that members deal with the transformation of practice. Csordas follows the evolution, division and transformation of charismatic groups while Percy is back on the site of the Toronto blessing of the mid-1990s. The two authors “offer specific ritual approaches to understand how PCGs handle the routinization process by hyper-ritualization in the form of regulation and behavioural codes” (p. 32).

The sixth contribution, which also highlights a weakness, comes in the last chapter of the book (chapter 11) dealing with the political and public impact of collective rituals. David Smilde describes the activities of three major evangelical tendencies surrounding the election of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. By bringing the crowds together, the PCGs (even those described as “neutral” by the author) participate in a collective rite of prayer for the nation, leading to a political positioning. Ending the book with a paper on the political impact of the ritual opens a new front without actually confronting it. Like Smilde here, Gonzalez (2008)¹ has already shown how metaphors of revival carry potential political overtones and how revivalistic practices mingle spiritual and political dimensions. What is then the impact of this new political use of collective rites in PCGs? The book concludes by raising the issue

¹ P. Gonzalez, “Reclaiming the (Swiss) nation for God: the politics of Charismatic prophecy”, *Etnográfica*, 12(2), 2008, pp. 425-451.

without really dealing with it, and the work would have gained in sharpness by addressing directly, in a separate chapter, the political dimension of collective rituals in the PCGs.

Another limitation of the volume is that it has no concluding chapter. Such an essay would have added much by comparing contributions, discussing their import and situating the new questions raised in each chapter in a wider perspective. A focus on the difficulties of articulating between the individual and collective levels of ritual for PCGs (few contributions have clearly distinguished the two levels) would have also helped frame more clearly the central issue of the book.

In conclusion, the work realised by this collective not only demonstrates the relevance of their perspective but also makes a fruitful qualitative contribution to ethnographic and sociological approaches to PCGs. The focus on ritual in this stimulating volume sheds new light on Pentecostalism regardless of whether the PCGs are located in the West, Asia, Africa or Latin America.

Christophe Monnot
University of Lausanne, Switzerland