

Michael Wilkinson. *The Spirit Said Go: Pentecostal Immigrants in Canada.* Series 7, Theology and Religion, volume 247. New York: Peter Lang, 2006. 129 pp. \$57.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8204-6394-0.



Reviewed by Denis McKim

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Staggeringly, since its inception in the early twentieth century, Pentecostalism has amassed as many as five hundred million adherents.[1] As such, it is the world's fastest-growing segment of Christianity. As eclectic as it is expansive, the global Pentecostal communion encompasses a multitude of subgroups drawn from virtually every nation, with individual congregations varying widely over issues ranging from theology to church polity. Yet for all of their diversity, Pentecostalism's various constituent parts, at root, are bound together by unmistakably evangelical characteristics, such as an energetically extemporaneous style of worship, a widespread belief in miracles and portentous supernatural signs, and paroxysms of spiritual euphoria that culminate dramatically in devotees speaking in tongues.

Canada is by no means immune to Pentecostalism's seemingly bottomless expansionary appetite. The denominational community has expanded sharply over the last thirty years, and, while precise membership statistics are notoriously difficult to pin down, more than four million Canadians are thought to belong to a branch

of "experiential" evangelical Christianity (an inclusive category consisting of both Pentecostalism proper and several autonomous groupings that share the denomination's essential traits) (pp. 16-18). Significantly, the wider Pentecostal community's swelling ranks are in large measure attributable to an influx in recent decades of Pentecostal immigrants from non-Western nations. Bringing with them an array of distinctive values and cultural practices, recent arrivals from East Asia, Africa, and Latin America are dramatically altering the denominational fabric. More precisely, through interaction with their native-born counterparts, these newcomers are both changing and being changed by contemporary Canadian Pentecostalism. The profound impact that transnational migratory patterns have had on the evolving Pentecostal community in this country is the focus of Michael Wilkinson's vividly illustrated and pithily written recent book, *The Spirit Said Go*.

A professor of sociology at British Columbia's Trinity Western University specializing in global Pentecostalism and the sociology of religion,

Wilkinson has also served, during the mid-1990s, as an assistant pastor at a Pentecostal church in downtown Toronto. His duties while at this post, he candidly explains, included acting as a liaison between the principal congregation and a separate group of Ethiopian-Canadian Pentecostals with whom they shared the facility. In carrying out his responsibilities, Wilkinson became intimately acquainted with Canadian Pentecostalism's fluctuating character. In fact, his unique background, coupled with his careful research and judicious analysis, allows for a penetrating investigation of this extraordinary Christian community.

Wilkinson is chiefly concerned with the myriad ways in which global flows of people, ideas, and traditions are shaping the development of Canadian Pentecostalism. Such patterns, he contends, are typified by "relationships and practices that both globalize and localize religious life" (p. 5). Specifically, he argues that while global Pentecostalism is indeed characterized by a distinctive set of characteristics and customs, its worldwide proliferation has also served to illuminate "the many cultural variations" and "specific forms" that exist beneath the broader denominational tent (p. 22). Put differently, while the denomination's growth has invariably contributed to the propagation of Pentecostalism's vital features--not the least of which is its unabashedly exuberant approach to worship--it has also underscored the denomination's regional, cultural, and organizational heterogeneity. Central to this apparent paradox is the emergence of an extensive web of reciprocal as well as transnational social and institutional networks. Inextricably bound up with Pentecostalism's meteoric rise, these mutually reinforcing networks are fuelling a process of intra-denominational diversification. In sum, then, a virtually unchecked pattern of expansion has led to both the globalization and the particularization of this remarkably protean denomination.

Such phenomena, Wilkinson asserts, are radically transforming Canadian Pentecostalism's sociocultural landscape. Indicative of this tendency are the increasingly flexible policies employed by the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC), this country's largest Pentecostal grouping. For example, Wilkinson explains that, in the late 1990s, a deal was struck between the PAOC and the Korean-Canadian Pentecostal community, who, in addition to pursuing formal affiliation with the PAOC, sought to preserve institutional links to their homeland. Previously, resistance on the part of the Canadians to such an arrangement had brought about the departure of a principally Korean congregation from the Canadian Pentecostal fold. Seeking to avoid another rupture, the PAOC, in this instance, opted to allow the Koreans to maintain "dual affiliation" with both Korean and North American churches. In keeping with this trend, comparable agreements have been reached in recent years with a variety of Pentecostal immigrant communities from such places as Ghana and Ethiopia. The accommodative tack adopted by the PAOC can thus be seen as a response to the changing ethnic and racial composition of Canadian Pentecostalism. Writ large, the evolving character of the PAOC is illustrative of the tremendous impact that transnational migratory flows have had on the Canadian Pentecostal community. The evenhanded, assiduous manner in which Wilkinson assesses this theme is his book's most admirable achievement.

Wilkinson also provides an insightful sketch of Pentecostalism's brief, dizzyingly eventful history. This includes a succinct discussion of the Azusa Street Revival. Taking place in Los Angeles between 1906 and 1909 under the charismatic auspices of the African American preacher William J. Seymour, the revival, in conjunction with a contemporaneous surge in evangelical enthusiasm experienced in such wildly disparate locales as Wales and India, played an instrumental role in the crystallization of Pentecostal Christianity. However, lively depiction of the denomina-

tion's foundational epoch notwithstanding, *The Spirit Said Go* offers precious little in the way of historical context. One wonders how contemporary Canadian Pentecostalism compares with other transnational evangelical movements that have altered the tenor of British North American and Canadian Christianity. How, for instance, does contemporary Canadian Pentecostalism measure up to, say, the late eighteenth-century "New Light" itinerancy of the New England-born Henry Alline; to the evangelical Presbyterianism imported from Scotland that galvanized much of nineteenth-century Cape Breton; or, more recently, to the American-inspired fundamentalism espoused by Thomas Todhunter Shields and William "Bible Bill" Aberhart, which figured prominently in the formulation of a socially and doctrinally conservative Christian culture in both central and western Canada? Are there meaningful parallels that unite these various movements, or are they, in fact, products of wholly unique cultural, political, and economic milieus, bearing at most a superficial resemblance to one another? Historically inclined readers may lament the short shrift that such questions receive. Given Wilkinson's expressly sociological background, methodology, and orientation, though, it would be ungenerous to carp about such shortcomings.

A more reasonable criticism is that Wilkinson might have gone a good deal further in exploring the substance of Pentecostalism's emotional appeal. Since at least the publication of S. D. Clark's pathbreaking *Church and Sect in Canada* in 1948, it has been commonplace for historians of Christianity in this country to assert that evangelicalism typically finds a receptive audience among the afflicted, displaced, and disconsolate. Wilkinson's work seems to bear out such an interpretation. Many of the respondents surveyed in researching the book had emigrated from such countries as Sri Lanka and Ethiopia, which have been beset in recent decades by violence and civil strife. In addition, four of the six immigrant Pentecostal congregations studied by Wilkinson did

not have a single member reporting a yearly household income that exceeded fifty thousand dollars, and not one congregation had more than 11 percent of its members living in households whose aggregate annual earnings surpassed such a mark. Presumably, then, unfavorable economic circumstances are, in many instances, compounding the difficulties that many of these newcomers have been forced to endure. What is it about emotionally unbridled evangelicalism--and, in this particular case, Pentecostalism--that is so appealing to communities, such as the vulnerable, hard-scrabble lot studied by Wilkinson? One could be forgiven for inferring that its unambiguous emphasis on sinfulness, struggle, and eventual redemption offers a refreshing, cathartic respite from the all-too-trying realities of everyday life. Regrettably, however, Wilkinson neglects to fully investigate such possibilities, leaving the reader to speculate as to why these groups find so much solace in Pentecostal doctrine and liturgy.

Despite this gripe, Wilkinson's is a learned, eminently perceptive examination of the countless ways in which global migratory patterns are transforming the culture of Canadian Pentecostalism. Readers interested in contemporary trends in transnational migration, Canadian Christianity, and especially Canadian evangelicalism will find that the time that they devote to this book will be handsomely repaid. Ultimately, Wilkinson's thoughtful, balanced account accords well with John G. Stackhouse's assertion regarding the wider Canadian evangelical community--namely, that rather than being an obscure sect or a wacky American outgrowth, it can more accurately be viewed as a multifaceted, increasingly sophisticated religious community that merits "a serious look" from scholars and mainstream society alike. [2]

Notes

[1]. Allan Anderson, "The Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: World Christianities c. 1914-*

c. 2000, vol. 9, ed. Hugh McLeod (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 89-106, esp. 106.

[2]. John G. Stackhouse Jr., *Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century: An Introduction to Its Character* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 204.

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