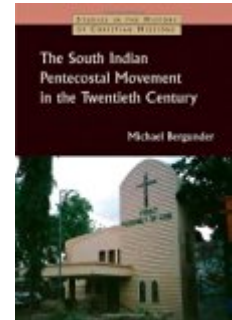


Michael Bergunder. *The South Indian Pentecostal Movement in the Twentieth Century.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008. xii + 380 pp.p Plates \$40.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8028-2734-0.



Reviewed by Roger E. Hedlund

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Commissioned by Gene Mills (Florida State University)

Modern Pentecostalism is neither a creed, nor an institution, but a vast global network. It was ever so from its beginnings about one hundred years ago. Such, at least, is the thesis of the author of this well-documented study. Michael Bergunder is professor of the history of religions and mission studies at the University of Heidelberg and a leading authority on Pentecostalism in south Asia. The present study was published originally in German, now in this excellent English translation, and is based on the author's meticulous field research in India carried out in Tamil and in English over a period of several years. He summarizes briefly the historical and theological roots of Pentecostalism in the nineteenth-century popular Holiness movement of North America, then moves to developments in India both prior to and following the famed 1906 Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles. Links are many. Yet, Indian Pentecostalism has a distinctive character of its own growing out of its Hindu social and religious context.

This book treats a subject of considerable importance in the study of religion and of Christian history and theology. At the time of writing, an estimated 20 percent of south India's Protestants were Pentecostal; that this remarkable growth was achieved during the past one century alone makes this study a landmark publication. Yet, despite an eventful one hundred years of history, as the author states, "Indian Pentecostalism has remained rather invisible in the academic writing on Christianity in India" (p. 14). Publication of this erudite study establishes Bergunder as a leading authority on south Indian Pentecostalism.

Bergunder proposes a new style of historiography in which he applies a two fold methodology involving *diachronous* historical connections and *synchronous* interrelations. The former traces historical sources and scrutinizes hagiographical accounts and oral testimonies, which are subjected to hermeneutical suspicion. In the latter, Bergunder maps the communication networks between the various institutions and personalities. These

two approaches underlie the structure of the book. Part 1 consists of six chapters on the history of Pentecostalism, while part 2 provides eight chapters on beliefs and practices of south Indian Pentecostals. Discussion is lively and full of interesting personalities and details, bound to create interest and stir debate not only in southern India but in Sri Lanka and other regions of south Asia.

One of the significant conclusions of the study is that miracle healing and exorcism “establish a strong phenomenological connection with traditional Indian popular religion, and it is here where one can most convincingly show that the south Indian Pentecostal movement is a quite indigenous version of Indian Christianity” (p. 166). This, in my opinion, is one of the most insightful findings of Bergunder’s project, and establishes Pentecostalism as a contextual Indian religion. Pentecostal scholars and Indian Christian theologians will want to consider the implications. Much more needs to be written on this point.

Indigeneity is a profound consideration of far greater dimensions than the nineteenth-century “three-self” methodological proposals of Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn. Nevertheless, the impact of the “three-self” paradigm on the global Pentecostal movement through the instrumentality of Melvin Hodges and the Assemblies of God is not to be underestimated. Further discussion of this point is wanted and needs to be supplemented with considerations of the more subtle influences of Scandinavian Pentecostalism on Indian and global Pentecostalism. Here is scope for additional research.

Bergunder states that “there is no such thing as contextual theology within Indian Pentecostalism,” but is that really so (p. 252)? Theology may be oral as well as written, and theologians are not limited to paid professionals in seminaries and universities. Some of the more creative Indian theologians that I have met were not trained in theological institutions. The author mentions sev-

eral younger Indian Pentecostal scholars as hope for developing contextual Pentecostal approaches to Indian theology in the future. With this conclusion I concur. Yet, I wonder to what extent these creative minds will escape the inhibitions and constraints imposed by inherited Eurocentric systems and institutions. I once heard P. J. Titus say that Pentecostals needed to develop their own system of theology, and that they usually borrow from the Baptists and then supplement it with Pentecostal doctrine. Pentecostals belong to the free church tradition. They are evangelicals with some distinguishing doctrines and a distinct identity. Perhaps it remains for south Indian Pentecostals to take up Titus’s challenge. That, however, is beyond the scope of the present study.

I wish Bergunder examined more extensively the explosive twentieth-century Pentecostal growth worldwide—particularly in Africa and Latin America but also in Asia—of which south Indian Pentecostalism is one facet. That too, regrettably, is outside the parameters of Bergunder’s investigation.

This book is essential for the study of Pentecostalism and religion in south Asia. All future investigations of the subject will have to interact with Bergunder’s findings and conclusions. Three important appendixes add value to this important study: a forty-five-page appendix of selected biographies, a list of missionaries in leadership, and a compilation of church statistics. An additional list of interviews and a bibliography as well as maps and an index will be of assistance to researchers. The publisher and editors are to be appreciated for including this significant volume in the History of Christian Missions series.

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