

Discussion Paper submitted to the

**Workshop “Studying Pentecostalism in a Transcultural Perspective“**

**(3–5 April, 2014)**

at the

Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies

Cluster of Excellence *Asia and Europe in a Global Context* at Heidelberg University

# **What is Pentecostalism?**

## **Some Historiographical Considerations**

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### **1. The Term ‘Pentecostalism’ as a Pure Signifier**

Although current statistics speak of about half a billion adherents of the so called Pentecostal and Charismatic Movement at the beginning of the 21st century,<sup>1</sup> the broad consensus of the ‘very nature’ of Pentecostalism, which has been achieved through decades of intense research, has recently come under fire: Neither theological nor phenomenological or historical approaches to define the subject have been spared from the attacks of scholars viewing this immense religious phenomenon mostly from a poststructural or postcolonial perspective.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, if one looks at the historical discourse documenting the birth of a Pentecostal Movement out of the radical branches of the Holiness Movement at the beginning of the 20th century, it becomes

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1 See D. B. Barrett and T. M. Johnson, “Global Statistics.” In S. M. Burgess and E. M. van der Maas (eds.), *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements. Revised and Expanded Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), pp. 283-302.

2 See Allan Anderson, *Spreading Fires. The Missionary Nature of Early Pentecostalism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007); M. Bergunder, “The Cultural Turn.” In A. Anderson, M. Bergunder, A. Droogers, and C. van der Laan (eds.), *Studying Global Pentecostalism. Theories and Methods* (Berkeley et al.: University of California Press, 2010), pp. 51-73; Jörg Haustein, *Writing Religious History. The Historiography of Ethiopian Pentecostalism* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011); D. T. Irvin, “Pentecostal Historiography and Global Christianity. Rethinking the Questions of Origins.” *Pneuma* 27:1 (2005), pp. 35-50. For an overview of the various definitions of Pentecostalism see A. Anderson, “Varieties, Taxonomies and Definitions.” In A. Anderson, M. Bergunder, A. Droogers, and C. van der Laan (eds.), *Studying Global Pentecostalism. Theories and Methods* (Berkeley et al.: University of California Press, 2010), pp. 13-29.

clear that even at that time there has been no distinct 'definition' categorizing those people who turned away from their original religious context and now called themselves Pentecostals. Though James Goff's approach<sup>3</sup> to define Pentecostalism by means of the specific theology of its supposed founding-father Charles F. Parham (1873-1929), who distinguished the movement from its predecessors by emphasizing the experience of glossolalia as evidence of Spirit baptism, has become a classic, the case is far from being solved. It is true: The doctrine of speaking in tongues as the only and initial evidence of Spirit baptism gained international recognition through the so-called Azusa Street Revival in 1906 led by Parham's former student William Joseph Seymour (1870-1922), when hundreds of missionaries from American and British Holiness circles spread the news of a second Pentecost all around the world. Yet we can see that many of those who joined the new movement did so albeit they strictly *rejected* Parham's opinion about Spirit baptism, which seemed to divide the Holiness movement into those who have been baptized with the Holy Spirit and those who obviously have not. Actually, the texts of many dedicated Pentecostal activists of the time such as Willis C. Hoover (Chile), T. B. Barratt (Norway), the works of Minnie Abrams (who has recently been declared as founder of Indian Pentecostalism) as well as the activities at the *Stone Church* in Chicago can show that Parham's and Seymour's initial evidence doctrine was far from being acknowledged as the core of Pentecostal theology.

Nonetheless, those people viewed themselves as members of a new *avant-garde* within the missionary field, „united in their conviction that they had a mission to share their special message with the world“:<sup>4</sup> While many of these early Pentecostals – originating from the Holiness context – didn't basically have to modify their original belief, the sources show that the Pentecostal movement was perceived as something completely new, an awakening of the Christian world that would lead to an intense struggle for worldwide mission concerning the upcoming of a second Pentecost – yet a typical concept among the adherents of the Holiness revival of the time! What can be shown here, is that the term 'Pentecostal Movement', which arose at the turn of the century, was at first nothing more than some kind of 'pure signifier' for a largely undefinable difference occurring in the discursive field, something 'completely new' and *avant-garde* in the strict sense of word, that clearly lacked the possibility of being differentiated from parallel historical phenomena by its substance.

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3 See James R. Goff, *Fields White Unto Harvest. Charles F. Parham and the Missionary Origins of Pentecostalism* (Fayetteville/London: University of Arkansas Press, 1988).

4 Allan Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth. Pentecostalism and the Transformation of World Christianity* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 43.

## 2. The Retroactive Effect of Meaning

The paradox of being able to distinguish a discursive object from parallel historical phenomena by name, while at the same time being unable to describe its differences in essence, can be conceptualized by looking at Slavoj Žižek's critique of the theory of Descriptivism: For Žižek, the reference of a *signifiant* to a *signifié* cannot be traced to the fact that the attributes of the labeled object are somewhat "comprised in the meaning of the word".<sup>5</sup> From his point of view, it's rather the act of a "primal baptism"<sup>6</sup> that creates the relationship between the name and the object, "and this link maintains itself even if the cluster of descriptive features [...] changes completely".<sup>7</sup> In other words: "[I]t must be part of the meaning of each name that it refers to a certain object *because this is its name*, because others use this name to designate the object in question."<sup>8</sup>

"[W]hat constitutes the identity of the designated object beyond the ever-changing cluster of descriptive features – what makes an object identical-to-itself even if all its properties have changed [...] is *the retroactive effect of naming itself*: it is the name itself, the signifier, which supports the identity of the object."<sup>9</sup>

This 'surplus', this 'more' that lives in the name, "has no positive consistency – because it is just an objectification of a void, of a discontinuity opened in reality by the emergence of the signifier."<sup>10</sup>

If we apply this theory to the Pentecostal movement, we will note that its identity is in the first place not constituted by a set of specific attributes, but by the pure mechanism of producing the object *Pentecostalism* by simply naming it, and to distinguish the Pentecostals from other groups.

Speaking with one that today is seen as one of the pioneers of Pentecostalism, the Methodist missionary Minnie Abrams of India (1865–1912) gets the point: "We are called Pentecostal people, and we are."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the term 'Pentecostalism' initially marks "nothing but a 'pure difference': its role is purely structural, its nature is purely performative [...]; in short, it is a 'signifier without the signified'".<sup>12</sup> So the impossibility of an adequate definition of the Pentecostal movement is credited by the fact that its 'nature' is virtually a 'non-nature', and the vital error of trying to catch its essence by substantial categories is to perceive the "embodiment of a certain lack [...] as a point of supreme plenitude".<sup>13</sup>

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5 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London/New York: Verso, 1989), p. 98.

6 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 98.

7 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 98.

8 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 102.

9 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 104.

10 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 104.

11 M. F. Abrams, "How the Recent Revival was Brought About in India. The Power of Intercession." *The Latter Rain Evangel* 1/10 (July 1909), pp. 6-13, here p. 13.

12 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 109.

13 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 110.

### 3. Filling the Lack

The lack produced by placing the pure signifier ‘Pentecostalism’ into the missionary discourse could only be compensated by substantially justifying this ‘surplus’ created by the retroactive effect of meaning. Concretely: Against the backdrop of the emerging institutionalization of the young movement (starting at the latest in 1914 with the foundation of the *Assemblies of God* [AoG] in the US), the term ‘Pentecostal movement’ as a marker of pure difference was no longer sufficient to support the identity of the signified phenomenon. Substantial characteristics had to be found to legitimate the claimed difference between the Pentecostal and the Holiness movement. Theological doctrines were supposed to edge the profiles of the forming sub-groups. Last but not least, *historical narratives* helped to establish the knowledge that Pentecostalism was not merely a simple secession from the older Holiness movement, but something substantially new and revolutionary. From this perspective, it is certainly not a coincidence that the first Pentecostal history book was published in 1916 by AoG’s *Gospel Publishing House* – only two years after its formation. In this work, AoG presbyter B. F. Lawrence states that the Pentecostal movement is of divine origin, as its ascent (contrary to other religious phenomena) was quite a spontaneous event which virtually came ‘out of the blue’ and as such had no historical antecedents: „The Pentecostal Movement has no such history; it leaps the intervening years crying, ‚*Back to Pentecost.*‘ [...] this work of God is immediately connected with the work of God in New Testament days.“<sup>14</sup>

The impulse to a more academic historiography of Pentecostalism has also been given by an AoG scholar: Ten years after Lawrence, Stanley H. Frodsham came up with a monumental work<sup>15</sup> that was heavily based on source material and set the keystone for an academic discussion that should last till the present day. Quite a number of historians have worked in documenting the beginnings of the Pentecostal movement ever since, thus helping to fill the lack of the signified with historical substance in the form of several historiographic narratives. Besides the afore-mentioned James Goff, church historian Vinson Synan has a large share in constructing Pentecostalism as a movement that began in the US at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was ‘exported’ by American missionaries throughout the world.<sup>16</sup> This filling of the lack with an identity that sees Pentecostalism mainly as a US-American variety of Christianity has been contradicted during the last decades: A number of researchers have criticized this historiographic concept that could easily be misunderstood as a ‘usurpation’ of the movement, predominantly by white Americans. With this in

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14 Bennett F. Lawrence, *The Apostolic Faith Restored* (St. Louis: Gospel Publishing House, 1916), p. 12.

15 See Stanley H. Frodsham, *With Signs Following. The Story of the Pentecostal Revival in the Twentieth Century. Revised Edition* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House 1946).

16 See e.g. V. Synan (ed.), *The Century of the Holy Spirit. 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal 1901-2001* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001).

mind, Walter Hollenweger has propagated some kind of 'black origin' of Pentecostalism already back in the sixties and located the roots of Pentecostal spirituality in the worship practices of Afro-American churches.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, former Pentecostal minister in South Africa Allan Anderson draws a picture of a cosmopolitan and global movement right from the beginning by presenting a model of a 'multi core' origin of Pentecostalism that took place in the shape of several parallel awakenings all over the world at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>18</sup> That way, even academic historiography has its part in filling the lack created by the 'primal baptism' of a pure difference on the name 'Pentecostalism' (a lack which of course is in charge of the impossibility to tell what Pentecostalism 'really is'). Hence, one could say: The history of the Pentecostal movement itself is the direct result of the retroactive effect of naming the 'object' by the pure signifier 'Pentecostalism'.

#### 4. Conclusion

Finally, if we look at the historiography of Pentecostalism in general one must admit that its character has become more and more global through the decades, as Michael Bergunder has pointed out. Having been characterized primarily as a US-American movement in the first half of the 20th century, Hollenweger's objection against a middle class white-American interpretation of Pentecostalism has carried the concept of a cosmopolitical movement containing various religious phenomena around the world including the so-called Neo-Charismatic churches in the Third World. However, Bergunder estimates that a world-wide religious phenomenon such as 'global Pentecostalism' would exist not until the 1970s, as the historical connections of the so-called 'Third Wave' with early-20th-century North-American Pentecostalism seem to be fairly loose.<sup>19</sup> From this point of view, the beginning of global Pentecostalism would be no more than 40 years ago. Or, in other words: The discourse on the 'pure signifier' Pentecostalism has fundamentally changed the character of the signified object since Hollenweger's 'black roots' concept by creating some sort of new Pentecostal movement which is considered a global religious phenomenon with about half a billion adherents today. With this in mind, one could say that Walter Hollenweger is the inventor of Pentecostalism – and at the same time, he's the one who has abandoned it.

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17 See Walter J. Hollenweger, *Enthusiastisches Christentum. Die Pfingstbewegung in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Wuppertal/Zürich: R. Brockhaus, 1969).

18 See Anderson, *Spreading Fires*; Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth*.

19 See Bergunder, *The Cultural Turn*.