Book Review


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In the limited literature on Canadian Pentecostalism, no author has been more prominent than Michael Wilkinson. Building on prior works such as The Spirit Said Go (2006), Canadian Pentecostalism (2009), and Winds from the North (2010), sociologist-of-religion Wilkinson—partnering with historian Linda Ambrose—offers a fresh, century-long history of Canadian Pentecostalism, focusing on the themes of organization and institution-building in the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC), the denomination that comprises some two-thirds of classical Pentecostals in Canada.

A witness to early Pentecostal revivals in Canada reminisced: “We met to worship in the most humble mission halls. We were few in number, under great reproach. Money was scarce—there was no organization—and almost everyone believed that at any moment the Lord would come” (p. 19). Analogously, Wilkinson and Ambrose describe the early ethos: “Pentecostals hoped for the Kingdom of God, and they believed it was coming. Signs and wonders, spiritual gifts, and a growing number of Pentecostals made that reality seem imminent. Many... did not believe that membership was required or that a denominational structure was necessary” (p. 179).

But what then? “After the revival, Pentecostals organized. What was once a movement of renewal among Protestant Christians became, within twenty years, an institutionalized church” (p. 179). Unlike some scholars (and many practitioners) of Pentecostalism, Wilkinson and Ambrose do not view Pentecostal institutionalization as unfortunate, but as necessary and even salutary, allowing the fruits of revival to be conserved and transmitted. In its theoretical underpinnings, this volume is indebted to Max Weber’s sociology of charismatic leadership, although the broadly Weberian approach is further inflected by a stress on “boundary-setting” and “cultural repertoires” (p. 8).

Pentecostals first appeared in the Canadian census of 1911, numbering 515 people. Exactly a century later, this number had grown to 478,705, thus representing almost a one-thousand-fold increase (pp. 12, 36). Leaders in Canadian Pentecostalism included Ellen Hebden, R. E. McAlister (and family), A. H. Argue (and family), and Aimee Semple McPherson. This book addresses the challenges...
of ministerial training, the founding of colleges, the commissioning of domestic and foreign missionaries, the 1940s Latter Rain Revival, conservative gender roles and limitations on women’s ministries, ecumenism between Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals, relations between English- and French-speakers, relations between those of Indigenous and European descent, the rise of ethnic congregations among recent immigrants to Canada, and such recent hot-button issues as abortion, divorce, homosexuality, and same-sex marriage.

The PAOC did not celebrate its centennial in 2006—a century after the year that revivals brought tongues-speaking both to Los Angeles and to Toronto—but in 2019, a century after the governmental chartering of the PAOC denomination. Charter, not charisma, marked the date. This lends support to the authors’ claim that “in spite of the popular notion that Pentecostals were only about experiencing the Holy Spirit and not theology or organization, with the PAOC we observe that there was an incredible amount of energy spent on organizing” (p. 5). They ask specifically “how the PAOC organized, established its identity, and constructed a subculture that served the organization” (p. 6). Pentecostal revival appears in this volume largely as a disordering force, disrupting the prevailing ideas and practices of the pre-Pentecostal churches, and inevitably followed by a re-ordering process that established a new ecclesial and experiential pattern.

Like the Assemblies of God in the USA, the PAOC accepted the Finished Work position, rather than the Methodistic three stages of conversion, sanctification, and Spirit baptism. Regarding the “new issue” of Oneness theology, the distinction between the two contending parties in Canada long remained unclear. R. E. McAlister—later a doctrinal arbiter in the PAOC—was the very person who launched the controversy by preaching in 1913 on baptism in Jesus’ name at the camp meeting near Los Angeles. McAlister held a Oneness view until well after the 1919 PAOC charter was signed. Beside McAlister, Canadian Oneness believers who later changed their views included A. E. Adams, C. F. Baker, G. A. Chambers, and W. L. Draffin. The Western provinces of Canada—mostly Trinitarian and opposed to Oneness teaching—remained organizationally linked to the Assemblies of God in the USA until 1925, when they were joined to eastern congregations of Canada. A hybrid Presbyterian/Congregational model allowed for fellowship between autonomous congregations, organized geographically, and guided by superintendents. The PAOC had no official doctrinal statement until 1926.

Bubbling below the surface of early Canadian Pentecostalism was the question as to whether there should be any formal organization at all. The Hebdens, who played a crucial, initial role, were staunchly anti-organizational, stating that “we have no connection whatever with any general organization of the Pentecostal people in Canada ... and extend the right hand of fellowship to every member of the body of Christ” (cited p. 49). Though admitting that initially “we took the position that God was forever through with organization,” George Chambers noted that “we finally woke up to the fact that some order and system was needed and right” (cited p. 54). Organization was needed to combat the self-appointed itinerant preachers and “con-men” who posed as Pentecostals to raise money (p. 54). Beginning in 1948, the Latter Rain Revival in Saskatchewan was
perhaps the most challenging movement the PAOC ever faced, since this was a
division that emerged from within the denomination and that seemed strangely
to blend top-down leadership (through contemporary apostles and prophets)
with anti-denominationalism (asserting that believers were part of a single, mul-
tidenominal “city church” in each place).

Following World War II, Canadian Pentecostals shared in the era’s prosper-
ity and “return to normal[cy]” (p. 86). As soldiers returned, conservative gender
roles predominated in Canada. PAOC members largely shared these views and
this led to a throttling back of the opportunities for women’s ministry that had
existed in the era of Ellen Hebden and Aimee Semple McPherson. During the
1960s, Canadian social mores were liberalizing, as signified by the Criminal Law
Amendment Act in 1968–1969. The PAOC then “engaged the political realm
with a growing sense of confidence but also moral panic about the proposed
legal changes” (p. 10). Via conservative politics, Canadian Pentecostals aligned
with non-Pentecostal Canadian evangelicals, beginning in the 1970s, cresting
in the 1980s, and subsiding in the 1990s, as the Canadian electorate rejected
Pentecostal positions on abortion, divorce, homosexuality, and same-sex mar-
rriage. Evangelicals and Pentecostals in the USA, in contrast, first engaged these
issues in the 1980s and maintained a stronger presence in national-level politics
through the 1990s, the early 2000s, and even today.

On inclusiveness, the PAOC’s record has been inconsistent though improving.
It welcomed non-English-speaking, ethnically European congregations (French,
German, Finnish, Slavic, etc.), yet the denomination long belonged to a partner-
ship of denominations that was almost entirely Caucasian. Black Pentecostals
in Canada formed separate congregations and denominations—such as the
Canadian branch of the Church of God in Christ, with C. L. Morton (1897–
1962) as a leader. Beginning in 1934, and continuing for about a decade—until
the statement was quietly removed—the PAOC officially discouraged black–
white marriages. French Pentecostal leaders were long treated as second-class in
PAOC leadership and decision-making. When the Vatican invited Pentecostals
in 1972 to dialogue with Roman Catholics, this was not initially embraced by
the PAOC, nor was Ronald Kydd’s participation welcomed. Today the PAOC,
like other Pentecostal groups, does not endorse same-sex relations or same-sex
marriages.

Increased immigration led Canadian Pentecostal leaders to seek to evange-
lize and to serve the newcomers. Yet, since a majority of these immigrants were
already Christian, these newcomers brought growth to the PAOC, and the estab-
ishment of new, non-white-majority congregations. From 2008 to 2012, 81 con-
gregations closed in Canada, while 104 new congregations commenced, most
associated with recent immigrants. Today the greatest impediment to further
advance in Canada may be that “activities like evangelism and conversion are
frowned upon, spoken of pejoratively as proselytization, and generally not wel-
comed” (p. 17). Korean-Canadian pastor Jacob Joo says that “intolerance is the
bad word” and “evangelism is almost a crime” (cited p. 166). Meanwhile, a recent
influx of non-charismatic evangelicals into Canadian Pentecostal churches has
diluted the charismatic emphasis in certain congregations.
This book evokes critical questions. While secularization theory is treated in the book, no conclusions emerge, other than the authors’ statement that their “cultural analysis ... shifts our attention away from secularization and the problems of institutionalizing charisma ... [and] shifts our attention away from the competitive qualities of Pentecostalism that lead it to outperform other religious organizations” (p. 34). While no one would expect an historical study to prognosticate, it would be helpful to know whether Canadian Pentecostalism fits with secularization theories.

Another issue is that Pentecostal revival is treated as an early-twentieth-century event that never recurred. The authors show little sympathy for Joshua Ziefle’s claim that the intention of the Latter Rain Movement of the 1940s was “to re-Pentecostalize Pentecostalism” (p. 82)—an assertion like that of sociologist Margaret Poloma in regard to the Toronto Blessing of the 1990s. What, moreover, of the 1960s and 1970s mainline Charismatic renewal movements? Can a classical Pentecostal denomination such as the PAOC be analyzed historically and sociologically as a stand-alone entity? Is it unaffected by the other Spirit-based movements swirling around it?

To be sure, the PAOC has a numerical and institutional predominance in Canada that none of the US Pentecostal-Charismatic denominations possesses. But since the Canadian-originated Latter Rain Movement affected the whole Anglophone charismatic world and even parts of Africa, one wonders if there was not a response or reflex in the PAOC from which the Latter Rain members were ousted. Might the Latter Rain Movement’s disfellowshipping by the PAOC have caused the PAOC to become a different sort of denomination than it might otherwise have been?

What do we make of the fact that not only classical Pentecostalism, but also the Latter Rain Movement, the mainline Charismatic Renewal, and the Toronto Blessing movement, all found a place in Canada’s crowded Charismatic history? Did the robust institutionalization and denominationalization of Canadian Pentecostalism—against the wishes of the Hebdens and others—make the Canadian soil ripe for the emergence of such unstructured and innovative initiatives as the Latter Rain Revival and the Toronto Blessing movement? At the risk of sounding Hegelian, perhaps the “thesis” of an institutionalized PAOC unwittingly evoked an “antithesis” in the form of competing spiritual movements of a non-institutionalized character?

After the Revival will be essential reading for all serious students of Canadian and North American Pentecostalism, and especially for all those who seek to understand the processes of routinization and institutionalization in the Spirit-filled movement, whether in Canada or in other global regions. George Chambers, pastor of a Mennonite Church in Toronto near to Hebden, is quoted in this book as praying: “O Lord, we want revival but not that fanatical stuff” (cited p. 42). Wilkinson and Ambrose show us how Canadians sought to be revived but not fanaticized.