

Yannick Fer, *Pentecôtisme en Polynésie française. L'Évangile relationnel*. Genève : Labor et Fdes, 2005. 498 pp.

The history of Pentecostalism in French Polynesia, more precisely in Tahiti and the surrounding islands, is fascinating. This book, written by French sociologist Yannick Fer, is worth reading for various reasons. One of them being, that it is not written by a theologian, missionary or church leader, permitting a different angle, an other approach, to the development of Pentecostal churches and charismatic groupings in this part of Polynesia.

Dr. Fer begins the book by positioning Pentecostalism as a typically protestant phenomenon, emphasizing the importance of the Bible, the christocentric focus and the common priesthood of believers. Later he will come back to these premises in order to compare the charismatic live style and ecclesial dynamics of Pentecostal churches with that of the historic churches. In the end he will argue that Pentecostals have (and to a lesser degree also charismatic believers in the Protestant churches) brought their respect for the "Word of God" and their individual faith commitment to its logical consequence by reconfiguring their lives in view of their relationship with God, the community of believers and society at large.

But let us begin properly with the first section of the book (pp. 21-182). Yannick Fer presents a detailed historical account of how the Pentecostal movement came to French Polynesia. It began with the Hakka Chinese who were originally brought there to work on the plantations. It is fascinating to go through the sociological dynamics and see how Pentecostal practices gave these Chinese Christians, quite literally, a new lease on life. This historical section is entitled "L'invention du pluriel" and carries the development through to three phases of pluralization. First because Protestantism, brought by the White missionaries, received a Chinese dimension. Second, because the Chinese Pentecostals were faced with communicating the gospel to the Polynesians, and thirdly, because the introduction of the French Assemblies of God and later the work of Youth with a Mission brought about a trans-cultural religious reality to Tahiti. As a result we can follow in Fer's account how Pentecostal faith contributes to a radical emancipation of their believers. This section alone is worthwhile studying, for everyone that is interested in missionary dynamics, especially as it applies to multicultural urban centers in our times, finds a wealth of comparative information.

The author focuses in the second section (pp. 183-336) on the institutional role of the church by educating the believers to apply their faith to the development of their new life. Again, the sociological approach, including anthropological sensitivities, allows for a reflection of how the faithful experience nurture and development in the context of the religious family and in the face of God. Much attention is given to the importance of evangelism, the use of charismatic gifts, and the formation of the believers for ministerial activity. All of this happens in the community and the authority of the institution (church or denomination) is present: in an almost invisible, but very effective way. It is in this part of the book where its subtitle "Relational Gospel" is filled with meaning.

Yannick Fer and Gwendoline Malogne-Fer talked with many church goers and pastors alike. The third section "Mobilis in Mobile" (pp.337-469) focuses on the conversion experiences shared and in what ways the believers began to invest in their living relationship with God and the "brothers and sisters". The book sheds light on the social consequences that result. Most significant of all, however, is the development of the believers into persons that are "curious" to go further, to experience more with the Lord, experience a new calling or simply achieve a religious mobility that is at its core part and parcel of the Protestant gospel, encapsulated in its focus on a personal God, the Scriptures, and the redeeming quality of grace. In the end it is argued that Pentecostalism is a force to be reckoned with in terms of its power to individualize faith and de-institutionalize religious structures in the twenty-first century. For a Pentecostal with a historical awareness, it will be evident that the charismatic tension between the individual and institutional order was already present during the Azusa Street revival.

Dr. Fer's book is a masterful piece of fieldwork that took several years to compile and where more than 130 interviews were analyzed and eventually brought in to the book itself to provide the narrative basis for his reflections. To study this book would give any Ph.D. candidate an idea how to proceed if he or she would want to research the faith and practices of a particular group. Although the author is always at pains to make clear that his findings apply to the French Polynesian context, I have a hunch that it would be quite similar in the streets of Manchester, the barrios of Mexico or the slums of Manila.

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