

PENTECOSTALISM:
TOWARDS A MOVEMENT OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION
IN THE PHILIPPINES¹

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In the last decade or so, Pentecostalism in the Philippines has developed from its humble beginnings into an accepted Filipino religious tradition. It has become a significant spiritual renewal movement within several major Filipino Protestant denominations. What used to be predominantly a movement of the poor is now beginning to expand more into the middle class strata of society. What was once the “white man’s burden”² to evangelize the world has now become a great concern for Asians and will continue to increase in the coming century. Simon Chan, an Asian Pentecostal theologian believes,

The Pentecostal phenomenon in Asia cannot be properly understood without considering the larger religious context and in more recent years, the socio-economic context of Asia.”³

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¹ An earlier version was presented at the Theological Symposium for Asian Pentecostal Leaders, the 18th Pentecostal World Conference, Seoul, Korea on September 21, 1998.

² “White Man’s Burden,” a poem written by British poet Rudyard Kipling as exhortation to America to annex the Philippines.

³ Simon Chan, “Asian Pentecostalism, Social Concern and the Ethics of Conformism,” *Transformation* 11/1 (1994), pp. 32.

Even more so in the Philippines is the need to also understand its political context, which up until today struggles with the consequences of its colonial past.

Pentecostals in the Philippines are now beginning to be involved in social and political change. Recently, for the first time in Philippine political history, two Pentecostal groups publicly endorsed their presidential candidates. This paper will examine some of the sociological, psychological and theological factors that account for the growth of Pentecostalism as a movement of social transformation. The challenge of this paper is to articulate the implications of Pentecostal growth and its institutional relationship to society since there is little research done on this subject.

1. PHILIPPINE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL REALITY

Spain ruled the Philippines for nearly 330 years until 1898 when it was ceded to the United States of America. In 1898 the United States was an ally. By February 1899, it was an enemy. After liberating the Filipinos from Spain the Americans resisted the notion of Philippine independence, "In a very unpopular war, the American Army destroyed Philippine independence at a huge cost in Filipino lives. Tragically, John Hay's 'little war' with Spain had been inflated by American imperialism into a major disaster for the Philippines."⁴

It was not until 1946 that finally the Philippines achieved full political independence, following four years of occupation by Japanese armed forces during World War II. However, even after giving the Filipinos their much-delayed independence, the U.S. domination continued. In exchange for U.S. war reparations, a number of benefits was bestowed to the U.S. including major trade benefits, a 99-year lease on military bases and equal rights with Filipinos in the exploitation of Philippine natural resources. Fifty-two years later, the Philippines finds herself lagging far behind most Asian countries.

⁴ Excerpted from *Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia* (Learning Company, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997). John Hay was U.S. Secretary of State during President William McKinley's administration.

Wilfredo Fabros in *The Church and Its Social Involvement in the Philippines* writes:

The reality we have to face in the Philippines is the fact that the economic system which existed at the turn of the century and which still operates today does not provide the Filipino enough food, shelter, and clothing. This system has impoverished the peasant in the countryside as well as the laborer in the urban center. This is the basic Philippine social question. Its origins go back to four centuries of Spanish colonization, which introduced farm tenancy, and to four decades of American rule, which perpetuated tenancy to serve the interests of the colonizers and the Filipino elite.⁵

Filipinos for centuries struggled against the power of colonialism. It is significant that this struggle for freedom is considered "the most fundamental aspect of Philippine history."⁶ Together with it is the search for a better life. Dorothy Friesen's illuminating book about the current situation in the Philippines informs us that "No country in all of Asia has had a longer continuous colonial heritage in the modern period."⁷ Although the Philippines has successfully freed herself from the colonial rule of the United States when the last American sailor departed from the former U.S. naval base in December 1992, the struggle goes on. Today the U.S. still plays a dominant role in the country's economic, political, and cultural life. Economically, the Philippines is still dependent on global institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and APEC. Although the U.S. military bases are gone, American military presence in the country is still strong through such military treaties like the Mutual Defense Treaty, the Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement, and with the coming approval of the Visiting Forces Agreement. Journalist and

⁵ Wilfredo Fabros, *The Church and Its Social Involvement in the Philippines, 1930-1972* (Quezon City, Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1988), pp. 3-4.

⁶ Renato Constantino, *The Philippines: A Past Revisited, vol. 1: Pre-Spanish-1941* (Quezon City, Philippines: Renato Constantino, 1975), p. 85.

⁷ Dorothy Friesen, *Critical Choices: A Journey with the Filipino People* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 162.

historian Stanley Karnow concludes that “pervasive use of English throughout the Philippines is an enduring legacy of U.S. colonial rule.”⁸

Philippines today is readily viewed with contempt especially among neighbor-countries in Asia because of its government’s inability to provide for the basic needs of its people. Because of the country’s desperate economic condition, Filipinos prefer to work abroad and are more known today as domestic helpers, “hospitality girls,”⁹ contract workers, nightclub singers and dancers. It is rare nowadays to see good publicity about the country.

The aforementioned are indications of the present reality of the perennial struggle for independence.¹⁰ Despite current political and economic reforms, the country is still beset with a \$50 billion-foreign debt, rising unemployment, and poverty. The shape of politics has not changed much. Today with the election of a new president, traditional politicians particularly those that were identified with previous regimes are making a comeback. The church continues to be confronted with issues that impact the Filipinos’ quest for a better life.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF PENTECOSTALISM AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

Through the years sociologists have formulated theories regarding the development of a social movement. Donald G. Matthews sees several components as requirements for the development of a social movement. In his essay in *Religion in American History* by Mulder and Wilson, he outlines the following as noticeable elements:

1. The Great Awakening developed from a few converts to an expansive network of small groups all over the country.
2. A host of charismatic leaders dedicated to the evangelization of the new country led the Great Awakening.

⁸ Stanley Karnow, *In Our Image: America’s Empire in the Philippines* (New York: Random, 1989), p. 453.

⁹ A euphemism for prostitutes.

¹⁰ Real independence is freedom from any form of foreign aggression to all areas of society. A look at the country’s labor problems, economic growth rate, etc. affirms this view.

3. This leadership routinized the movement and began the process of institutionalization.
4. Their theology created a sense of ideological separation that helped to solidify the group experience.¹¹

The first Assemblies of God (AG), U.S.A. missionary to set foot on Philippine soil was Benjamin H. Caudle, who arrived in September of 1926.¹² His ministry though not very long accomplished some measure of success in terms of conducting home bible studies, university bible classes, evangelistic meetings and Christian literature distribution. Due to physical constraints particularly with reference to Mrs. Caudle, the first missionaries decided to go back home. For a while, the Assemblies of God work in the Philippines was suspended; however, as Esperanza puts it, "events worked out" in realizing plans for establishing Assemblies of God churches. The influx of Filipino laborers to the States paved the way for them to be exposed to the graces of the Pentecostal outpouring. Eventually they themselves became missionaries to their own people and pursued the earlier vision of developing AG churches in the Philippines.¹³ The first one who was involved in this endeavor was Cris Garsulao who became a Christian while studying in a university. His conversion led him to commit himself to the ministry. After his Bible school training in San Francisco, California, he went back to his hometown, southwest of the Philippines. The events that followed led to a beginning of something great in the development of Pentecostalism in the Philippines. Several other Filipinos with similar experience of that of Garsulao blazed the trail in other parts of the country bringing the Pentecostal gospel to their own people. Later, a group of Filipino AG preachers in the States joined their efforts together in organizing the Philippine Assemblies of God

In December of 1939, Leland E. Johnson and his family arrived in Manila as the appointed missionary. The coming of the Johnsons was

¹¹ Albert G. Miller quoting D. Matthews in "Pentecostalism as a Social Movement: Beyond the Theory of Deprivation," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 9 (1996), pp. 101-102.

¹²Trinidad Cabanilla Esperanza, "The Assemblies of God in the Philippines" (M.R.E. Thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1965), p. 17.

¹³ Esperanza, p. 19.

only the beginning of the influx of AG missionaries to the Philippines. Even during the invasion of the Japanese forces, the work continued, though hindered by unfavorable circumstances wrought by the cruelty of war. Several American missionaries remained and were a source of strength and inspiration to the locals. During this time a good number of both missionary and local outreaches were started all over the country.

Another major Pentecostal group is the Foursquare Church in the Philippines. In 1931 Vicente Defante, a U.S. Navy cook became a convert and later worked with Aimee McPherson. After attending L.I.F.E. Bible College in California he went back to the Philippines as a missionary. He returned to his home in Iloilo City and before long the first Foursquare church building was erected in 1937. By 1949 Foursquare churches increased to thirteen from various parts of the country. There were eight in the Visayas region and four in Luzon. Later the work spread to Mindanao with missionaries helping from the U.S. breaking grounds for a new Foursquare church there. In 1958, the denomination was organized into four districts: Northern Luzon, Luzon, Mindanao and Visayas.

Along with other smaller Pentecostal groups, we see a pattern of social development akin to the "Great Awakening" in America in 1720. From just a handful of converts the Pentecostal movement flourished to an expansive network of small groups all over the country.

The second component mentioned by Matthews has to do with "a host of charismatic leaders dedicated to the evangelization of the new country led the Great Awakening." The early leaders of the Pentecostal movement in the Philippines were "charismatic" leaders not primarily because of their human abilities but their dynamic experience with the Holy Spirit. The uninhibited worship style of the services and dynamic preaching of the Word appealed to the people. The Filipinos having a strong spirit-world belief system are very much attracted to Pentecostalism's emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit. This mainly accounts for the rapid growth of the movement in the late fifties and early sixties.

Later these various Pentecostal groups went through the process of institutionalization. Because most of the leaders were supported by their mother churches in the U.S., the process of institutionalization came naturally and without much difficulty. For the Assemblies of God several other Filipinos with similar experience of that of Garsulao

blazed the trail in other parts of the country bringing the Pentecostal gospel to their own people. Later, a group of Filipino Assemblies of God preachers in the States joined their efforts together in organizing the Philippine Assemblies of God. Their initial action was to request for an appointed Assembly of God missionary to the Philippines to help them achieve this goal. Trinidad Esperanza explains the primary reason for this move:

Their reason for this action was that the Philippines at that time was still under the United States protectorate with a Counsel General as the final seat of authority. A requirement for permitting any outside church denomination to operate in the Philippines was that it must seek registration with the United States Counsel General and have a duly appointed missionary or church leader from the home body in the United States.¹⁴

When Leland Johnson arrived in 1939 he sought approval from the Counsel General to register an organization known as "The Philippines District Council of the Assemblies of God Incorporated."¹⁵ It was only in 1953 that the localized Philippines General Council of the Assemblies of God (PGCAG) was formed.

Not long after local churches were built around the country, mostly sponsored by their counterparts in the U.S., there came the need to train more local workers. Bible schools were then established, initially with foreign counterparts as administrators. Church programs were adopted almost without question.

At the beginning stages of the development of the Pentecostal movement in the Philippines their theology "created a sense of ideological separation that helped to solidify the group experience." This was because the locals merely adopted the theology of their "sponsors." Despite strong persecution from the predominantly Roman Catholic country, the movement continued to grow by leaps and bounds. Arthur Tuggy in *The Philippine Church: Growth in a Changing Society*, writes:

By 1949, 1822 members were reported. In 1952 there were 2,193. Then the Assemblies of God entered a new phase of rapid growth

¹⁴ Esperanza, p. 30.

¹⁵ Esperanza, p. 30.

as the large Bethel Temple in Manila was begun under the ministry of Lester Sumrall. This church, which became the largest Protestant church in Manila, had its beginnings in 1952 and 1953. . . By 1958 the Assemblies of God reported a membership of 12,022 - an increase of almost 500 percent in five years!¹⁶

3. PENTECOSTAL SOCIAL VISION

Pentecostals generally believe social change is only possible through personal conversion and incorporation into the community of faith. Structural change is not usually part of their social agenda. It is however argued by Pentecostals that “effective social change often takes place at the communal and micro-structural level, not at the macro-structural level.”¹⁷ Once personal salvation is achieved, what is readily noticeable is a change in the person’s life - healing effects on family life and on his or her physical health and well being. Pentecostals are committed to rebuilding family life in communities shattered by social and economic dislocations.

Theologically, one major reason for this indifference to structural change or its ambiguity to institutional relationships with society is their eschatology. In David William Faupel’s work, *The Everlasting Gospel*, he points out that eschatology is the key in understanding American Pentecostalism.¹⁸ Pentecostal theologian Frank Macchia alluding to Faupel’s argument elucidates this view “. . . eschatology was not just one of the elements of a four-fold Gospel for Pentecostals but was the driving force and horizon of all other elements.”¹⁹

Pentecostals basically espouse an “other-worldly” eschatology. This type of eschatology includes the pessimistic view of history,

¹⁶ Arthur Tuggy, *The Philippine Church: Growth in a Changing Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 152.

¹⁷ “Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness: The Report from the Fourth Phase of the International Dialogue 1990-1997 Between the Roman Catholic Church and Some Classical Pentecostal Churches and Leaders,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 2/1 (1999), para. 43 (p. 119).

¹⁸ D. William Faupel, *The Everlasting Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), p. 9.

¹⁹ Frank Macchia, “Pentecostal Theology,” to be published in *New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*.

which views the transformation of social structures into a just environment as futile. French L. Arrington notes that Charles F. Parham, the leader of the Pentecostal revival at Topeka, affirms also that the prevailing mood of premillennialism was at the very heart of early Pentecostalism.²⁰ Apocalypticism posits a pessimistic attitude towards a significant inbreaking of the kingdom of God in history, understanding the kingdom as solely supernatural in origin and as occurring after the destruction of all things.²¹ Kilian McDonnell, a catholic theologian, looks at the Pentecostals with a similar view. He believes that "the popularity of an apocalyptic eschatology among Pentecostals is a major source of their withdrawal from social action."²²

4. THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF PENTECOSTALISM

I judge the efficacy of conversion experiences on the grounds of whether they help people to be productive citizens, better fathers and mothers, and more responsible spouses.

- Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, p. 25.

At the micro-structural level Pentecostals have made a strong impact. The various programs they have been involved with, such as orphanages and mercy work, can readily prove this. The growth of Pentecostalism all over the world has caught the attention of sociologists and religious scholars. There is an increasing number of sociological research done to explore its impact on Filipino society. Although the movement is gaining more acceptance among the middle and upper class people, its social impact is still much felt among the marginalized masses in the Philippines.

Perhaps the strongest impact Pentecostalism has on Philippine society is its commitment to rebuild families amidst communities shattered by social and economic dislocations. When men are

²⁰ French L. Arrington, "Dispensationalism," *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, eds. Stanley Burgess et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), pp. 247-48 (247).

²¹ Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of the Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), p. 11.

²² Kilian McDonnell, "Ideology of Pentecostal Conversion," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 5 (1978), pp. 105-26 (117).

converted, they become responsible husbands and fathers.²³ He not only gets rids of his vices such as smoking, drinking or gambling but also his *querida* or mistress. When one becomes a Pentecostal in the Philippines, he or she is expected not to have these kinds of vices.

The Pentecostal movement in the Philippines has established structures that empower the poor and the marginalized to have a greater voice and participation in the system. An ordinary Filipino whose opinion is not normally heard, upon conversion acquires a sense of worth, new meaning for life, new disciplines for work and new models for family life. Since the Pentecostals put emphasis on active participation of lay people in the ministry, a convert has opportunity to develop his or her skills for articulate communication and group organization.

The Filipinas like their Asian counterparts usually do not enjoy equal status with Filipino men. In the Pentecostal community they find more freedom to exercise their gifts. Women ministers within the Pentecostal movement are given equal opportunity in terms of church office and ordination. The social space Pentecostalism provides enables women to participate as equals in managing their time, resources and especially their homes.

5. PENTECOSTAL SOCIAL DOCTRINE

While it is hard to ignore the impact of Pentecostalism on Philippine society, there is definitely a dire need to develop a Pentecostal social doctrine that is biblical, context-sensitive and yet true to its tradition. The following are important areas for consideration crucial to the development of a Pentecostal social doctrine. What are the components of Pentecostal social doctrine?

5.1 Eschatology

A revisioning of eschatological passion that is more consistent with the coming of the Kingdom of God in righteousness and justice

²³ The Quezon City (Philippines) Domestic Relations Court lists some of the causes of unfulfilled Filipino marriages. On top of the list is the inability to support a family.

but without the triumphalist and escapist tendencies of earlier convictions must be pursued.²⁴ While this concern is fundamental to the development of a Pentecostal social doctrine, Filipinos and other Asian Pentecostals must be involved in the process of formulating a "revised" eschatology.

5.2 Pneumatology

The Pentecostals' understanding of the role of the Spirit must be liberated from the confines of the individual Christian life and the fellowship of the church to the renewal of the entire creation and the transformation of culture and society. Until today I have yet to hear a prophecy that touches on socio-economic and political issues. This does not necessarily mean endorsing a candidate through prophecy, as did the two Pentecostal groups mentioned earlier. The so-called Pentecostal Revivals of the 60s and 70s in the Philippines were more or less confined to the fellowship of the church. Unlike the Wesleyan revivals and other 18th century revivals, which impacted their corresponding socio-political milieu, the Philippine government is still as corrupt as forty years ago.

5.3 Missions

What should be the role of missionaries in the Philippines in the 21st century? Since a particular social doctrine is primarily shaped by the "context," how should missionaries participate in it? Most "social programs" in the Philippines are still organizationally dependent on foreign missionaries. In order for Pentecostalism to become a real movement of social transformation, the present status of missionary-local relationship must be thoroughly evaluated. Most leaders in key positions were in one way or another trained by missionaries who shared an eschatological orientation, which lacks the concern to transform the existing structures of society.

The recent Philippine presidential elections reveal a form of ambiguity on the part of the leaders. Leaders of PGCAG claim they thought they were only invited to a prayer rally but ended up in a campaign rally, which gave the impression that they were endorsing a

²⁴Macchia, "Pentecostal Theology."

candidate. The role of missionary agencies actively operating in the Philippines today must also be reviewed. Any Pentecostal denomination in the country will always find it hard if not impossible to be involved in structural change where you have missionary counterparts who maintain a policy not to be involved in such kind of endeavor lest their status is threatened.

5.4 Context

Filipino Pentecostals must begin to recognize that context is always local. Theology has yet to be translated into the local culture. As Vinay Samuel points out “most two-thirds world contextual theologians do not write systematic theologies. A systematic theology however wonderful has to be localised to a local community.”²⁵ This in no way means absolutizing a local experience, the gospel is always universal. Pentecostals more often are afraid that too much “contextualization” could result in relativizing the gospel. “It is truth for all people . . . Yet, to relate it to my context I relativize the gospel” maintains Samuel.²⁶

One area that needs careful attention in the Philippines is theological education. Currently, what is taught follows the theology of their western counterparts. Pentecostals adopt their approach without carefully evaluating the relevance to the local setting. Most of the Pentecostal Bible schools merely import their curricula and educational approaches from the United States. The AG Bible schools, particularly the Philippine’s three regional schools, have long been supervised by missionaries which includes financial support. In their curricula, there is very scant or nonexistent emphasis on the local culture. Students, oftentimes through their theological training, are inadvertently detached from the values and needs of the local context.²⁷ Up to the present time, the mission-based education agencies have not taken serious steps to

²⁵ A lecture given by Vinay Samuel “Mission as Transformation” at Oxford Centre for Mission Studies” (Oxford, March 1998).

²⁶ Samuel, “Mission as Transformation.”

²⁷ Most AG Bible schools accredited by Asia Pacific Theological Association follow a manual for Bible School Teaching developed by Asia Pacific Education Office, an educational arm of the U.S. AG Department of Foreign Missions.

solicit local input in developing a contextually sensitive curriculum for Bible schools particularly in the Philippines. Unless the kind of training we give to the pastors and church workers is locally relevant, the Pentecostal church in the Philippines will not be an effective movement of social transformation.

6. CONCLUSION

The ability of the Pentecostals to create a Christian moral alternative that enables greater decision making power is probably the greatest impact Pentecostalism has had on Philippine society. However, as we approach the new millenium, the influence of Pentecostalism is still limited primarily in the family and in interpersonal relations. Pentecostal revivals that took place in the past have made little impact on Filipino society. What would Jesus do when the poor are oppressed, leaders in the government are aggrandizing themselves, rich businessmen monopolize the industry, the weak and the poor are getting to be more and more marginalized, and the rights of the people are not recognized? Yap Kim Hao poses a question for us to ponder:

. . . how do we meet the immediate human problems of the basic food, housing, health, education, and employment? Do we just wait for the change in the hearts and minds of the people who are responsible? Meanwhile people continue to suffer.²⁸

Further study must be carefully done on the social and ethical dimension of the gospel, its implications and ramifications. A renewed interest in reassessing Pentecostal distinctives should be fostered not in the negative sense, but to explore areas that were not articulated in the past, such as the organic connection between Pentecostal experience and social action. This undertaking, however, must not be pursued without being open and sensitive to the Holy Spirit, the one who leads us unto all truth.

The key to the continued growth of Pentecostalism as a movement of social transformation lies in the development of a Pentecostal social doctrine. The challenge in achieving this is still much before us.

²⁸ Yap Kim Hao, *Doing Theology in A Pluralistic World* (Singapore: Methodist Book Room, 1990), p. 137.