

REVIEW ESSAY

Michael Wilkinson, ed., *Canadian Pentecostalism: Transition and Transformation* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2009).

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Canadian Pentecostalism: Transition and Transformation, a collection of thirteen essays edited by Michael Wilkinson, is a welcome addition to a previously understudied topic in Canadian religious history. Reading this book as an historian, I found myself engaging with the essays in a variety of ways, not the least of which was to imagine the rich possibilities that exist for the emerging literature as we continue to probe into questions about the history of Canadian Pentecostalism, particularly the persistent question: What makes Canadian Pentecostalism distinct? While there are several clues toward a more complete answer to that question in this collection, Michael Di Giacomo, expresses it very well, when he maintains that there are indeed some Canadian particularities in this country's expressions of Pentecostalism. He wisely concludes that Canadian Pentecostalism is and was "Not quite British, not quite American, but quite Canadian" (35).

Although not all of the essays in this collection purport to be historical in nature, I read them with the eyes of an

historian. Yet beyond disciplinary loyalties, one quickly recognizes that the interdisciplinary nature of the collection is one of its strengths, and for historians of religion, crossing disciplinary boundaries is fruitful because of the suggestive nature of the approaches that are represented here.

The book is organized into three sections. I. Origins and Development: with articles by Michael Di Giacomo “Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in Canada: Its Origins, Development, and Distinct Culture;” Thomas A. Robinson, “Oneness Pentecostalism;” Peter Althouse, “Apocalyptic Discourse and a Pentecostal Vision of Canada;” and Randall Holm, “Canadian Pentecostal Spirituality.” II, Aspects of the Canadian Pentecostal Experience: including Bruce Guenther, “Pentecostal Theological Education: A Case Study of Western Bible College, 1925-50;” Martin Mittelstadt, “Scripture in the Pentecostal Tradition: A Contemporary Reading of Luke-Acts;” Robert K. Burkinshaw, “Native Pentecostalism in British Columbia;” and Pamela M.S. Holmes, “Ministering Women in the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada: A Feminist Exploration;” and III, Institutionalization and Globalization: with these contributions, David A. Reed, “Denominational Charismatics – Where Have They All Gone? A Canadian Anglican Case Study;” Donald S. Swenson, “The Canadian Catholic Charismatic Renewal;” Stephen Hunt, “The Toronto Blessing – A Lesson in Globalized Religion?;” Michael Wilkinson, “Transforming Pentecostalism: The Migration of Pentecostals to Canada; and Peter

Beyer, "Movements, Markets, and Social Contexts: Canadian Pentecostalism in Global Perspective."

Although it is the first of these sections that I predicted would be most firmly rooted in history, I was delighted to discover that the entire collection provides a great deal of food for thought for historians. Rather than review this book section by section or chapter by chapter though, I have chosen to make my remarks around three themes and three questions which I think are central to our continuing exploration of Canadian Pentecostal history. The themes are: 1) Transnational exchanges: How should we understand the relationships between Pentecostals in Canada and those in other countries? When and how did these exchanges take place, and with what results?

2) Diversity and context: When we probe into this history, it is important to be clear about which Pentecostals are we speaking? From when and where are we drawing the examples we invoke for our case studies? Why and how do we arrive at those choices about the sources we explore? 3) Women and gender: What about the women? How can we understand the ways in which the roles of women and men changed over time in the history of Pentecostalism in Canada? How and by what means were these roles socially constructed in various contexts?

Turning first to the questions around transnational exchanges over time, we focus on that first set of questions: How should we understand the relationships between Pentecostals in Canada and those in other countries? When and how did these exchanges take place, and with what results?

In answering this question, I found the third section of the book “Institutionalization and Globalization” to be particularly stimulating. For example, in the chapter “Transforming Pentecostalism: The Migration of Pentecostals to Canada,” Wilkinson emphasizes the transnational relationships, practices, and organizations in the current phase of globalization. Speaking as a historian, I would posit that this transnational focus holds great promise, not just for contemporary happenings, but especially for the history of Canadian Pentecostalism as well. While some attention is beginning to be paid to the Canadian-American exchanges that happened in the early days of the movement, Canadian-British exchanges also need to be explored in greater depth. The Hebden Mission in Toronto, for example, has not been widely studied, and although many know of its existence, there has not been a serious analysis of how central this British immigrant couple really was for Canadian Pentecostalism. Randall Holm, in his chapter “Canadian Pentecostal Spirituality,” reminds us that the Hebden’s aversion to institutionalization is the accepted explanation for why we know so little about this important piece of the history of Canadian Pentecostalism. But I want to call for renewed attention to this couple and their work because we have not seriously considered how the Hebden Mission served as a hub of two-way transatlantic communication prior to 1914. The majority of Canadian missionaries departing from Canada in that period passed through it, including Robert and Aimee Semple, who stopped in the UK to visit family on

their way to China. It is significant that even in those earliest days, Canada was both a sending and a receiving society when it came to Pentecostal ideas and personnel. James and Ellen Hebden's story is but one prime example of this fact.

In these two-way exchanges, Wilkinson observes that there has been "a thickening of social ties especially since the early 1990s." This observation was intended by the author to help us to think about contemporary developments in Pentecostalism during this era of globalization. But I posit that "thick social ties" were also in evidence in a variety of ways in earlier periods as well. I make that claim, not as a sociologist like Wilkinson, but as an historian. Again, Canadian missionaries illustrate this point very well as a thick social network of Canadian missionaries was developing. One example of this from my own research involves a Winnipeg missionary, Sophia Nygaard, who served for many years in Liberia. During World War Two, there was, as the *Pentecostal Testimony* explained in December 1941, "small provision for steamship travel to and from West Africa." In August 1944, when she was set to return to Africa from a period of furlough, Nygaard took a plane for the first time, to return from North America to Liberia. Because of the technology of flying, it was necessary to make frequent refuelling stops, and doing so meant that she networked with missionaries all the way along. She visited, for example, with Canadian missionaries who were stationed in Trinidad and Brazil. Writing en route from the hotel where they had a layover in Brazil, Nygaard remarked:

“How small the world seems when we travel so fast!” This is a telling statement, and one that we need to pay attention to as historians, in order to understand the ways in which transnational ties have developed over time, due in no small part, to the history of technological change and its impact on international travel.

The second theme that I would like to highlight from the Wilkinson collection is that of diversity and context. Here I want to pay attention to questions such as: Which Pentecostals are we speaking about? From when and where are we drawing the examples we invoke for our case studies? Why and how do we arrive at those choices about the sources we explore?

While we are eager to document the history of Canadian Pentecostalism and note both its ties to, and its differences from, the rest of the world, we need to be careful to continually remind ourselves that there is great diversity within Canadian Pentecostalism, and painting with too broad a brush stroke can be counterproductive in our attempts to understand the movement historically and accurately. The essays in this collection remind us to attend to this.

As we collect and collate the various aspects of Canadian Pentecostal history, careful analysis calls us to pay attention to the varieties of form, expression, and experience that have characterized Pentecostalism in Canada. For example, although the PAOC is the largest grouping of Pentecostals in Canada, it is by no means the only one, nor can we draw generalizations based on this one organ-

izational grouping. Nevertheless, because of its size and because of the archival resources that exist, studies based on PAOC sources do tend to dominate. This is true of the Wilkinson collection, but at the same time, there are frequent reminders about the diversity of Pentecostalism's expression in Canada. A good example of this is Thomas A. Robinson's chapter on "Oneness Pentecostalism," an expression of Canadian Pentecostalism that today is largely isolated but at one time it deeply divided the faithful.

Peter Beyer, in his chapter "Movements, Markets and Social Contexts: Canadian Pentecostalism in Global Perspective," offers three "high points" for Canadian Pentecostalism (1900s to post WWI; 1960s rise of mainline charismatic renewal; and 1990s neo-Pentecostal renewal). Beyer comments "without suggesting that these seminal developments were caused by contextual factors, it is nonetheless striking that they correspond to identifiable and much discussed transitions on the wider global scale ... far from isolated as hinge developments, whether in the religious or broadly secular spheres" (266). At the same time that Beyer calls attention to these broad developments though, he also maintains that "Pentecostalism's fate in particular localities or regions depends not just on how well the movement manages institutional dilemmas or even on the kinds of larger global trends discussed above, but also on the shifting character of what one might call "local markets." This dual focus on both the broader context and the particular circumstances under which Pentecostal episodes developed in Canada is pre-

cisely what we need to bear in mind as we pursue the history of Pentecostalism in Canada. We must always be asking ourselves those two questions: What else was going on at the same time (elsewhere and at large) and what was the specific context in which the events and actors were grounded?

What comes through loudly and clearly to me as an historian is that when we study Canadian Pentecostalism, we need to be very careful to pay particular attention to the context about which we are speaking. Historical specificity must remain central to our analysis. This attention to context must attend to the differences we will only recognize with careful attention to timeframe, regional location, ethnic identity, and theological nuance. It is very important to know for example, that when we speak about charismatic renewal in the 1960s and after, that this was different for the Anglicans David Reed writes about than it was for Catholics that Donald Swenson describes. At the same time, while Robert K. Burkinshaw's important study of the experiences of native British Columbians who took up Pentecostalism is a welcome contribution to acknowledge aboriginal participation, regional and cultural variations preclude us from making any generalizations about First Nations Pentecostals in other parts of the country. More studies of the same kind will be needed from other First Nations in other regions.

The third and final theme that I traced in the collection is that of women and gender. "What about the women?" is the question that launched important new directions for

Canadian social history almost forty years ago. It is important to pose that same question again as we develop a fuller understanding of the history of Canadian Pentecostalism. How can we understand the ways in which the roles of women and men changed over time in the history of Pentecostalism in Canada? How and by what means were these roles socially constructed in various contexts?

At first glance, I expected that only one chapter (that of Pamela Holmes), would deal with Canadian Pentecostal women. I was pleasantly surprised to see that this was not the case, but that several of the authors explored the roles of, and contributions by, women. Martin Mittelstadt, for one, pays close attention in his chapter "Scripture in the Pentecostal Tradition," to the question of women when he points out that the egalitarianism which Pentecostalism is based on is challenged with the example of the PAOC's reluctance to afford women opportunities for ministry and leadership. He concludes that "contemporary Pentecostal women ... continue to make their way through mixed messages." As a historian of women, I am curious to explore why those mixed messages persist and it seems to me that gender history and a closer examination of the social construction of gender roles within Canadian Pentecostalism and Canadian society at large will provide important clues to help answer this question. My current work picks up this task, using a biographical approach to analyze the participation of several early Canadian Pentecostal women, one life story at a time.

Bruce Guenther's chapter on Bible College education in western Canada, for example, might cause us to con-

sider the value of a collective biographical study on the female faculty and alumni. Here I would suggest that the work of historian of education, Charles M. Levi, in his book *Comings and Goings: University Students in Canadian Society, 1854-1973* (McGill-Queens Press, 2003) might serve as a model here. Who were the women who taught at this and other Bible schools? What subjects did they teach? How many of the students were women? Where did the graduates end up? Are there gendered patterns to be found in this data based on region, marital status, and life stage? One example from my own biographical work is that of Beulah Argue Smith, who attended the Bible College in Winnipeg in the 1920s and in the 1960s and 1970s taught music at Eastern Pentecostal Bible College in Peterborough. How many other women were there like her? Peter Althouse's chapter on how Pentecostalism represented both a continuation of the social gospel and at the same a discontinuity with some themes of the social gospel, begs the question about how attention to the writings of female Pentecostals in that early period might add more nuance to these questions.

Pamela Holmes's feminist exploration of "Ministering Women in the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada," the one essay where I did expect to "find the women" did not disappoint. Holmes opens her chapter with a brief overview of the kinds of roles that early Canadian Pentecostal women played including evangelists, missionaries, and partners in pastoral ministry with their husbands. This broad overview serves Holmes's purpose very well – to

establish that women occupied a multitude of roles in the early years of the PAOC – though it is tantalizingly all too brief for anyone interested in and determined to pursue in-depth biographical studies. The bulk of her paper is devoted to the question of whatever happened to reverse that pattern of female engagement in ministry. Holmes makes the case very explicitly that the declining participation of women as ministers in the PAOC as the twentieth century unfolded is “a complex situation” composed of anti-cultural impulses and competing views of authority. These are important pillars upon which our ongoing work of gender history must rest. Again though, going forward historians should be careful to ground these explorations in both the broader contextual developments that were occurring in both the secular and religious worlds, and at the same time, in the specific local and personal situations of the women in question. For that reason, I maintain that a biographical approach holds great promise for the task ahead.

I welcome the publication *Canadian Pentecostalism* because it gives an opportunity to address the kinds of issues that I have touched on in my reflections here; i.e. issues of transnational exchanges, of diversity and context, and of women and gender. What is exciting of course is that now that such a book exists, it will become a standard point of reference for readers and researchers. The introduction by Michael Wilkinson serves as a good overview of the movement and will quickly become an oft-cited source, I predict. Not only does it allow for reflections on the three themes I have identified, but it also pro-

vides an invitation for further reflection and further research into these and other questions. I commend to you Michael Wilkinson and his fellow authors in their important collaborative work, *Canadian Pentecostalism: Transition and Transformation*. This book is, as the editor himself states, “not the final say,” but it is clearly an invitation for ongoing conversations on a subject that is still undergoing “transition and transformation” in so many ways.