

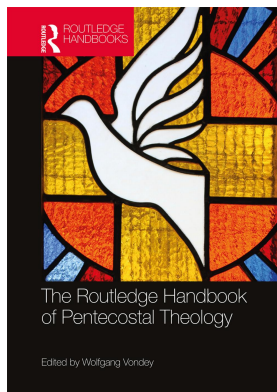
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10

CULTURE

Disruption, accommodation, and pneumatological resignification

Néstor Medina

The contexts, beliefs, and concrete experiences and expressions surrounding the idea of “culture” are often neglected as sources in the history of Christian thought but are indispensable resources for understanding Pentecostal theology. At the same time, the concept of “culture” as we know it is inherently flawed and often ill-defined. Understanding the manner in which Pentecostals, in their multiple expressions, deal with “culture” is a complex question which few Pentecostals have engaged. On one hand, some answers may be gleaned by revisiting inherited debates on “culture.” In these debates, three key issues helpfully illuminate the complexity of the conversation. First is the contested nature of the label “culture” itself. Second are recent deliberations about the complicity of Western European and Euro-North Atlantic expressions of Christianity and missionary movements in the colonization of entire communities across the globe. A third issue is the way the debates on the relationship between the cultural realm and Christianity, Christ, and the gospel (see Chapter 20), have developed over the last century.

On the other hand, part of the complexity of the question of Pentecostal theology and “culture” relates to the ways in which Pentecostals actually engage with the cultural dimension as part of their cultural traditions. In this chapter, I argue that it is important to view these engagements as threefold: Pentecostals move across a spectrum of choices, (1) sometimes displaying outright cultural disruption and (2) other times displaying great accommodation. This fluidity is unlike Richard Niebuhr’s popular notions of the “Christ-against-Culture” and “Christ-of-culture” and beyond notions of accommodation and adaptation to modernity (Droogers 2014). Yet, within the same movement, the fluid back-and-forth dynamic puts on display how (3) Pentecostal communities weave their own cultural network of relations which borrow from the available material in the larger social context and immediate cultural traditions even as they resignify them. This dynamic thus demonstrates a rich process of culturalization and cultural cross-fertilization inspired by the belief in the power of the Spirit. I begin by defining the cultural terrain before interrogating the colonial cultural heritage and inherited debates. The main portion of this essay then examines the spectrum of choices evident in Pentecostal theological reflections on the cultural domain.

The cultural domain

There exists a tension in the manner in which scholars generally engage the theological questions on the cultural domain. When scholars deploy the term “culture,” they often mean other cultural groups including other religious traditions; at other times it may refer to the larger social context or *the world*, or it refers to non-Christians people and societies. Many Pentecostals also display this same tendency to use “culture” to mean a number of different phenomena. For example, Michael Bergunder (2010) uses the term with no qualification including specific cultural theoretical currents. Similarly, André Droogers (2014) deploys culture to point to current “global” cultural changes like modernity, globalization, and transnationalism. However, a growing number of Pentecostal scholars from multiple cultural traditions across the globe challenge us to rethink the use and scope of this category.

The uncritical and imprecise use of the label “culture” in the singular carries a self-referential and colonializing understanding of Europeans as racially and culturally superior (Brett 1868; Tylor 1878). The now contested idea of an overarching *culture*—as shared by all human beings and cultural communities in the world in the same way—emerged as Europe sought to distinguish itself from the rest of the world when the European colonizers were confronted with other peoples of the world, along with their traditions (Hall 2000; Medina 2018, 98–150). The universalist perception of culture is at the root of the European assumption that the rest of the world was backwards, undeveloped, and savage (Tylor 1878; Rousseau 1761). Europeans concluded that Europe’s others had to be treated as children who needed their *mature* (European) sibling to (*civilize or culturally*) elevate them (Ginés de Sepúlveda 1951), at best, or who were reducible to brute commodities to be sold, owned, and exploited, at worst (Gilroy 1993). In light of the interrogation of the legacy of colonization, and in view of the growth of Christianity (including Pentecostals) in the global South, the notion of “culture” as a universally shared experience, and which refers almost exclusively to the larger social context, is no longer tenable. This shift, which marks an appreciation of the enormous cultural diversity of the world’s population, is in fact the result of the global South’s rejecting of European and Anglo North Atlantic colonialism while reclaiming its own voice (Medina 2018).

For these and other reasons, Pentecostals would do well to use the language of *the cultural* domain, or of *cultural* realms, in the plural, as the working category to speak of the multiple forms of being and living in the world by different peoples and how these relate, impact, and condition their understanding of Christianity, Christ, and the gospel. Additionally, the cultural domain also refers to the broad range of ways and dynamics through which human groups create codes to make life meaningful and guide human activity. Though Geertz’s (1973) semiotic approach is useful, the cultural dimension goes beyond the production of meaning. Instead, the cultural realms together weave the web of relationships and connections that humans create and develop, which enables them to live life, interact with each other, their immediate environment, and the divine, all of which they change, recreate, reconfigure every moment as they live life (Medina 2018, 13–50). It is a fluid and dynamic process of constant reconfiguration. In Pentecostal contexts, the cultural realm also refers to the internal dynamics of socialization by which believers borrow “with ease” cultural elements from the communities of which they are part in order to make sense of the gospel message and to live out their Pentecostal experience. Understanding these key dynamics can help theology resignify such cultural elements.

Interrogating the cultural colonial legacy

Cultural communities and believers in the majority world have been interrogating the connections between Christianity and the Western European and Euro-North Atlantic cultural traditions. Pentecostal scholars in some contexts have begun to reflect on this question as well. For centuries, ideas of how Christianity should be lived and celebrated, and how the divine mystery must be understood and spoken about in theological language, were deeply shaped and conditioned by the Western European and Euro-North American cultural and intellectual traditions. Claims of the biological, ethnic, cultural, and intellectual (and theological) superiority of Europeans over the rest of the world were blended together in an undifferentiated hegemonic discourse, which has historically excluded the knowledge, traditions, customs, religions, peoples, and cultures from the rest of the world (see also Chapter 40). European expressions of Christianity and missions often operated as vehicles for the expansion of European cultural ideas.

Thus, any Pentecostal reflection on the theological questions of the global cultural realms must confront the colonial legacy of Western Christendom. The rejection of the colonial cultural legacy becomes even more necessary as Christianity grows in the majority world, as the majority world produces its own expressions of theology, as many expressions of Christianity in the global South mirror the expressions in the global North, and most importantly, as we consider how Pentecostals engage the cultural traditions of which they are part (van de Kamp 2013; Medina 2018, 153–164). Early Pentecostal missionaries, along with their missionary zeal, also exported their cultural traditions, including their Eurocentric theological views of local cultural customs and cultural artifacts, as well as Eurocentric ideas of how to live out the Pentecostal experience. In the words of Allan Anderson (2017, 32):

The early Pentecostal missionary thinkers assumed that the Gospel message and Christian theology was the same for all cultures and contexts, and so they tried to relate this “constant” Christian message to indigenous cultures. Hodges termed it the “universal” Gospel, which was “adaptable to every climate and race, and to every social and economic level.”

This colonial legacy among Pentecostals must be reexamined as part of the larger inherited debates in which Pentecostal mission has developed (see Chapter 26).

Inherited cultural debates

Discussions on how Pentecostals “engage” the cultural contexts are part of a larger set of debates on the relation between the cultural dimension and Christianity (Medina 2018, 151–310). Whereas some of the first scholars to engage this question insisted on a level of compatibility between these two, even while privileging the role of Christianity over the cultural context (Herridge 1888; Machen 1913), others furthered the conversation by arguing for diverse cultures as expressions of humanity’s divine imaging (Van Til 1959; Schilder 1977). Similarly, some cultural critics highlighted how the cultural fabric was designed to aid in perfecting humanity (Arnold 1890). Despite the fact that these scholars operated within a Eurocentric hierarchy of values, they nevertheless opened the door to consider the intertwined nature of “religion” (read Christianity) and the cultural contexts. These were some of the questions which Paul Tillich (1948) addressed when he considered how “religion” — which he described as ultimate concern — connected with the cultural context. And it was

in order to articulate this intimate correspondence that he uttered his now classic dictum: “culture” is the form of religion and religion the content of “culture” (Tillich 1948, 16–17). As Tillich saw it, the cultural dimension attained its highest expression at the juncture at which it enables humans to comprehend their finitude even as they quest for the infinite—the ultimate concern. These are foundational theological questions.

Many of the theological questions, implications and understandings of the relation between the cultural realms and Christianity, Christ, and the gospel were revisited in the work of Richard Niebuhr. However imperfect, Niebuhr (1956, 32, 259) provided a rubric for evaluating how Christians historically have interacted with, understood, and interpreted their larger cultural context. Much like earlier thinkers, Niebuhr saw the cultural domain as the result of human activity. However, he changed the debates by broadening the category “culture” as encompassing a general, universal even, phenomenon which was expressed in multiple ways and which was shared by all humans, though expressed in a wide variety of cultural traditions in the world. Despite the fact that Niebuhr’s examples remain within a Eurocentric understanding of Christian expressions, he did emphasize that the general phenomenon he called “culture” was the aspect without which humans cannot function. Many scholars have mistaken Niebuhr’s work as a blueprint for understanding the relationship between the cultural and the Christian domains, but many others have taken him to task for some of his shortfalls (Tanner 1997; Carter 2007; Carson 2008; Long 2008). With the emergence of anti-capitalists, liberationists, and post and decolonial currents, our understandings of the dynamics, conditioning power, and pastoral implications of cultural traditions on the manner in which people live their faith has changed significantly (Elizondo 1975; Gorringer 2004; Espín 2007). These recent and diverse proposals help us identify key social-cultural markers like gender (see Chapter 36), class (see Chapter 40), race (see Chapter 39), physical ability (see Chapter 32), among others, in configuring how theologians think about the cultural dimension within the Christian faith. The question of how Pentecostals engage the cultural dimension should be understood as part of these wider complex, contested, and long-standing debates on the manner in which Christianity, Christ, and the gospel relate to the cultural dimension.

Pentecostals-charismatics: moving across a spectrum of choices

The Pentecostal scholar Michael Bergunder (2010) has studied the cultural question by engaging in a cultural studies analysis. He proposes that the multiple sources of “Pentecostal” revival (e.g. Mukti, Chilean, Azusa Street, etc.) should be understood more like the constitutive parts of a transnational network, which have contributed to the formation of the contemporary Pentecostal movement. Bergunder adopts a more global approach by which he retraces the sociocultural dynamics and key theological Pentecostal distinctives (e.g. tongue speaking) in operation in the formation of the movement. However, his “cultural analysis” approach does not tell us much about how different local Pentecostal communities wrestle and interact theologically with their immediate cultural and social contexts.

Similar limitations are evident in André Droogers’s (2014) discussion of the cultural dimension among Pentecostals. He adopts an anthropological approach to speak of “culture” as a universal experience shared by all. As he reflects on how Pentecostals interact with their immediate cultural context, however, Droogers seems to conflate the larger social context (as culture) with people’s local cultural traditions. His question (Droogers 2014, 203), which asks how Pentecostals deal with general culture and social processes characteristic of the societies in which they operate, reveals this slippage. As a result, he makes unwarranted

“global” affirmations about Pentecostals in attempting to provide something like a “global” rubric for understanding how Pentecostals engage the larger sociocultural context (Droogers 2014, 195–97) and thereby makes invisible the nuances of how multiple communities engage particular, broader social developments at the local level. We must be careful about how we expect Pentecostals to offer a truly global contribution to Christian theology.

Today’s dominant theological questions and concerns relating to ethnoracial background, cultural tradition, and gender have been present among Pentecostals since the beginning (McRobert 1988; Espinosa 1999; Qualls 2018). Moreover, recent liberationist, post- and decolonial and Latina/o theological approaches demonstrate how central ethnoracial and cultural issues are in thinking theology and understanding people’s religious experiences and expressions (see Chapter 8). In what follows, I provide a sample of how Pentecostals engage in this complex process of cultural engagement moving from outright rejection and disruption of cultural traditions toward accommodation of cultural elements. However, understanding Pentecostals as inhabiting a liminal space between accommodation and disruption or continuity and discontinuity with their immediate cultural and larger social contexts is only half of the picture. As I argue in the third section, in the same move of the dynamic cultural dance between accommodation and disruption, Pentecostal communities are actually engaged in complex processes of cultural reconfiguration and resignification.

Disruption

Stereotypes concerning the disruption and break of Pentecostal with the larger social context have varied from social anomie (Willems 1967) to return to medieval feudal social relations or even attitudes of social escapism (Lalive d’Epinay 1968; Martin 2011). Others have claimed that the break with the larger social context also includes a break with modernity. Pentecostal communities on the ground do not adopt their own “style of modernity” (Droogers 2014, 196) but break from it even while taking advantage of the present globalization networks to become a transnational movement (Vásquez and Marquardt 2003; Garrard-Burnett 2004). The focus on prayer, miracles, the oral tradition, an interpretation of history as receiving its impulse and direction by God, an emphasis on needing the power of the Holy Spirit to understand the divine mystery, the rejection of individualism by situating the person in community, and the primacy of faith as opposed to reason as central tenet, helps us appreciate how Pentecostals construct their own sphere of meaning-making in ways that radically undermine modernity’s positivism.

At a more local cultural level, conversion to Pentecostalism often requires a radical break in lifestyle including from one’s previous religious affiliations (Droogers 2014, 204). In many contexts where there is a culture of gang violence, Pentecostals become an alternative to a life and culture of violence; a radical break with the previous lifestyle and culture ensures the safety of the newly converted (Brenneman 2011). The Maya in the countryside of Guatemala and the indigenous communities in Alaska stand against their indigenous, ancestral religious practices encouraging new believers to abandon those practices (Green 1999; Dombrowski 2001). Yet the relation with indigenous, ancestral religious practices is more nuanced. In fact, Pentecostals often travel well in “parts where people are attentive to the workings of spiritual beings” (Lindhardt 2017, 50). But the corresponding beliefs and practices are not entirely rejected. Despite all that can be said of the cultural rupture which Pentecostals undergo upon conversion, an overemphasis on discontinuity with local cultural traditions and the larger social contexts paints a limited and distorted image of how Pentecostals engage and navigate their cultural contexts.

Cultural accommodation

A tension can be identified as Pentecostals stand in between breaking with the larger social context or local cultural traditions and accommodating cultural elements that help them to articulate themselves and their Pentecostal experience. Though the fundamental theological underpinnings may remain relatively static, on the ground there is greater fluidity of the manner in which Pentecostals interact with their immediate cultural traditions. Westman (2013) identifies this ambiguity. Responding to Dombrowski (2001), he notes that Cree Pentecostals in Alberta are not irrevocably “against” their traditional cultures. What actually happens is that at times they seem to “accept” and at times they seem to “reject . . . the traditional cultural context or given cosmological principles” (143). Cree Pentecostals use Pentecostalism as an interpretive frame and practical alternative to less preferred aspects of their own culture, which are perceived as running against the Christian faith.

More precisely, since the cultural domain points to the dimensions that shape and condition the manner in which people create meaning, understand reality, and interact with each other, the environment, and the divine, it should not come as a surprise that Pentecostals’ particular expressions are deeply embedded in and carry elements of the cultural traditions to which people belong. For example, Inuit Pentecostals in Qikiqtarjuaq—a small region in Nunavut—are “enacting their culture in a manner consistent with their understanding of Christianity . . . not opposing the two” (Westman 2013, 151). Admittedly, shamanism and animism are often condemned as anathema by many Pentecostals, but that does not mean that people have in fact abandoned their allegiance to indigenous practices nor that they have broken with inherited religious traditions (Green 1999).

In fact, the relation between Pentecostals and their cultural traditions is so intimate that they unwittingly carry elements from the larger cultural context to which they belong in their expressions. This reality is especially evident among indigenous communities all over the world, from African Independent Pentecostals, to “Inuit Pentecostalism in Quaqtaq, Québec, [which] bears the imprint of Inuit Shamanism” (Westman 2013, 150), to the hidden African cultural and religious traditions that have made their home in Puerto Rican Pentecostals (Cruz 2005). In other words, the Pentecostal experience is deeply immersed in people’s cultural traditions (Medina 2018, 13–50). We see this back-and-forth dynamic also among Latina/o Pentecostals whereby Pentecostal ethics, theology, and hermeneutics are inconceivable without drawing on Latina/o cultural tradition and customs (Villafaña 1993; Soliván 1996; Medina 2015), as well as among Pentecostal British Jamaicans (Beckford 2000).

Moreover, we know that Pentecostals, since their inception, have adopted inherited cultural patriarchal structures—and projected those beliefs onto the biblical text—which has prevented women from flourishing and developing their talents as leaders within the movement (Chapman 2004; Espinosa 2009; Castleberry 2017). In some contexts, some churches remain silent even in the presence of physical and sexual abuse (Castro 1989). Feminist scholars remind us that what is afoot is an all-out structural control of women’s minds, bodies, and sexuality. For our purposes, questions of gender among Pentecostals, particularly the manner in which women encounter great obstacles to their flourishing in various positions of leadership, are directly connected to the degree with which these communities accommodate the Pentecostal experience to their immediate cultural contexts and traditions and what the attitudes toward women are in those contexts. As I will argue in the next section, gender issues remain contested among Pentecostals.

Finally, political participation and the embracing of the capitalist ethos are two aspects that can help us elucidate how Pentecostals engage local cultural traditions and dynamics

in the form of accommodation. More political participation among Pentecostals seems to be the result of a self-appreciation as having come of age and of being ready to enter the political arena as full citizens (Sepúlveda 2006). In Guatemala, for example, the Pentecostal involvement in politics has contributed to a shift in their eschatological orientation from pre-millennial perspectives toward a post-millennial position (Medina 2016). In other contexts, political involvement has contributed to sustained attempts to influence the direction of an entire country as in the case of Brazil, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Costa Rica (Steigenga 2001; O'Neill 2010), to name a few.

Admittedly, many churches are adopting a capitalist ethos. Droogers and others appropriately highlight the various ways in which Pentecostals have become adept at taking advantage of the infrastructure of capitalist economic exchanges and globalizing markets for the benefit of expanding their reach as a “successful” transnational movement and a valid option in the religious market place (Medina and Alfaro 2015). Pentecostals have not only become adept at crossing physical borders, they have also become savvy at utilizing social media, telecommunications, and transportation technologies to strengthen and preserve transnational networks. The commodification of the pentecostal experience can be seen in the way the capitalist ethos has crept in by way of an embracing of the prosperity gospel (Matos 2002; Attanasi and Yong 2012). And in other contexts, an overemphasis on membership numbers, a focus on social upward mobility, and the adoption of Anglo North American cultural traits and liturgical style put on display how the capitalist value system and notions of success are translated into spiritual success, particularly among mega-churches (Holland 2011; Medina Bermejo 2014). These aspects provide a sampling of how Pentecostals interact with their immediate cultural and social contexts. Pentecostals do not entirely reject local cultures but selectively choose elements to accommodate to in order to articulate the “Pentecostal” logic. In so doing, they unwittingly ensure the survival and expansion of the movement.

Dynamic resignification

The rise of globalization, increased urbanization, the emergence of mega-cities, and improved communications and media technology have contributed to the spread of Pentecostalism across the world. Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that Pentecostal theology simply “reflects the characteristics of the worldwide global change” (Droogers 2014, 212). As Pentecostalism continues to change and expand among immigrant communities in the global North and increase in the global South, the rich cultural tapestry of the majority world is contributing to shaping and reshaping, configuring and reconfiguring, how the Pentecostal experience is lived and articulated theologically in those different contexts. Global migration in both directions, transnational connections, and “reverse” missions are also contributing enormously to this mix, making the various expressions of Pentecostalism from the global South present in the northern hemisphere.

One of the particularly attractive characteristics of Pentecostalism in the world is its capacity to articulate itself through cultural elements of local cultural traditions. This characteristic has given the movement the impetus and dynamism to move across peoples, boundaries, cultures, knowledges, customs, and traditions. Pentecostalism (and more generally Christianity in the southern hemisphere) has entered into a complex, rich, and multilayered process of reconfiguration and resignification. These communities engage in a borrowing process of cultural elements that resonate with the Pentecostal experience in order to articulate themselves even while rejecting elements of those same cultural traditions. As they engage in that borrowing process, Pentecostals establish new relations with the larger social context

and local cultural traditions in ways that go beyond simple dualistic models for Pentecostal theology: hard-and-fast antithetical framings, on one hand, or wholesale embracing of cultural traditions, on the other. Instead, Pentecostal theology enters a deeper level of contested interaction, resignification, and cross-fertilization of cultural values and symbols, which end up transforming local cultural traditions. This unintended transformation is the outcome of living out the Pentecostal experience and how Pentecostals imagine this experience in relation with the Holy Spirit. I conclude by offering a few examples of the discussion on the cultural domain that illustrate the continuing need for further development and refinement of Pentecostal theological reflections on the cultural realms.

Conclusion

The cultural domain is a significant resource for Pentecostal theology. Pentecostal theological reflections on the cultural dimension engage with a range of responses from disruption to accommodation to resignification. Among cultural traditions, where beliefs of ancestor worship, nature spirits, spiritual rituals, and shamans are common, a wholesale rejection of cultural traditions does not often take place. Theologically, those spiritual beliefs and practices are often resignified as part of the presence of evil and the domain of the devil (see Chapter 30). Such re-interpretation and reconfiguration of the symbolic spiritual world is then relocated in the light of the power of the Spirit and the spiritual battle in which Pentecostals find themselves.

The question of women and gender concerns is a clear indication of how Pentecostals move beyond surface accommodation and into reconfiguration. Though there are reasons to be concerned about how Pentecostals reproduce patriarchal structures, it would be a mistake to think that women are ever passively accepting their condition of oppression and submission. Some commentators argue that women have engaged in an internal cultural change within their church communities (Arróliga 1989; González 1992; Brusco 1995; Nadar 2004). Some women scholars have also argued how in a climate of being “anointed by the Spirit,” women are elevated within their immediate church communities and their larger cultural context and gain significant religious and cultural power (Lorentzen and Mira 2005; Castleberry 2017). As a result of how Pentecostals interact with the larger social and cultural contexts, inherited gender roles are changing, even though the discourse of women’s submissive role seems to remain intact (Santos 2012; Medina 2015). These few examples show that cultural processes in terms of gender among Pentecostals are not stagnant. Present theological configurations, however, are always the result of the active engagement and agency of Pentecostals with the larger social context and local cultural communities.

The way in which Pentecostals negotiate their relationship with the larger social context and immediate cultural tradition is evident in Pentecostal responses to questions of social change. Pentecostal theology is often discounted as having no interest in social issues (see Chapter 40). Such a perspective is sorely mistaken, since Pentecostals have often been instrumental in helping people out of alcoholism, drug abuse, prostitution, gang affiliation, and other social maladies. We also know that the majority of Pentecostals have been and continue to be socially and economically poor. Yet many of these churches have begun to enter their social context in order to change social structures (Campos 2001; Lindhardt 2012). Though Miller and Yamamori (2007) overstate their claim concerning the “vacuum” left by liberation theology, there is no denying that among Pentecostals there is a growing segment of people committed to social change as an offshoot of their own Pentecostal experience of the Spirit.

My point is that as Pentecostals engage in the process of reconfiguration, cultural codes of poverty and relations are negotiated and recalibrated. Instead of relaunching and preserving inherited social and cultural norms and practices, in some contexts an affirmation of people as “children of God” and “baptized in the Spirit” results in the dignification of believers, particularly the socially and culturally disenfranchised (Campos 2001; Maduro 2009). To be declared “a child of God baptized in the Spirit” carries within itself a profoundly culturally transforming power both of the immediate culture as well as the larger social context. In this and other aspects, Pentecostals enter into a complex in-depth process of creative cultural resignification and, in so doing, in transforming the cultural traditions of which they are part. In that same process, their own theological tradition is transformed.

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