Multiculturalism and the Convergence of Faith and Practical Wisdom in Modern Society

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Chapter 11
Great Risk for the Kingdom:
Pentecostal–Charismatic Growth Churches, Pastorpreneurs, and Neoliberalism

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ABSTRACT

Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity (“PCC”) has successfully navigated the challenges modernity poses to religion, growing rapidly in the twentieth century. Toward the end of the twentieth century, however, neoliberalism began its ascent to its current hegemonic status. Neoliberalism reconfigures social institutions as marketized practices with a measurable ‘payoff’. PCC adapted to this challenge in the form of a “growth churches,” adopting many of the characteristics of neoliberalism. In adopting a homogenous model and method of ‘best practice’ in order to facilitate growth; offering a ‘prosperity’ theology that fits well with the development of human capital; and endorsing the universalization of risk through modelling “pastorpreneur” leadership, it is argued in this chapter that growth churches are a paradigmatic example of a late modern religious phenomenon accommodating neoliberalism in a largely uncritical manner. The chapter concludes with some observations that critique this association between neoliberalism and growth churches.

INTRODUCTION

Early twentieth century social thinkers such as Émile Durkheim and Max Weber proposed what has come to be known as the “Secularization Thesis,” predicting that rationalism and science would bring about what Weber called a “disenchanted” world – one with no place for religion (Weber, 1946). Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity (hereafter “PCC”) is a religious form that has ‘bucked the trend’ predicted by the Secularization theory, numbering an estimated half a billion followers worldwide at the close of the twentieth century (Hollenweger, 1997). PCC is perhaps Christianity’s chief riposte to the secularization theorists – far from disappearing, here is a religion being born and growing to an enormous size, all in the modern, ‘post-religious’ age (Jennings, 2015).

While much of PCC’s growth has occurred in the still-developing contexts of the poorer nations of the world – referred to by Elijah Kim (2012) as the “Majority World,” PCC has also demonstrated an ability to adapt and grow in late modern societies, such as the United States, Australia, Canada and Western Europe. Toward the end of the twentieth century, and in the early twenty-first, religion and other social institutions have been confronted with the new challenge of neoliberalism – “a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms” (Brown, 2015, p. 17). In this chapter, I briefly survey PCC’s beginnings and early adaptability to the forces of modernity. Next, I will outline some of the key components of neoliberalism, namely “human capital” and “entrepreneurship,” which work to reconfigure all aspects of the social world in measurable, monetizable form. I conclude by examining a paradigmatic example of PCC’s adaptation to neoliberalism – the “growth church” – and discuss why I think this accommodation is highly problematic.

Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity in Twentieth Century Modernity

PCC was and is a religious sect with a focus from its inception on phenomena that could best be described as ‘ecstatic’, such as glossolalia and divine healing. PCC – to a higher degree than any other form of Christianity – has maintained an emphasis on catalysing tangible religious experience, or what Durkheim might have called “effervescence” (1976). Not only does PCC offer this, but it links to a tradition and a set of rituals and symbols that allow the repeatable catalysation of effervescence (Jennings, 2008).

PCC, which emerged in North America, Wales, and India early in the twentieth century,1 has from its beginnings prioritized evangelism, and in many ways the newly plural societies of modernity were very amenable to the spread of this new blessing. The message and ethos of the nascent Pentecostal movement was spread not only through face-to-face mission work, but the distribution of printed flyers, and eventually through the proliferation of mass-produced books, cassettes, printed music, and other technologies. Thus, the movement adopted not only the Protestant Christian tradition, but also demonstrated an easy capacity to adapt to the modernity in which it emerged.

The early Pentecostals understood the primary characteristic of their movement to be the enigmatic experience they called the “baptism of the Holy Spirit.” How did one know that one was in fact baptised in the Spirit? One can almost imagine Max Weber’s anxious Protestant asking a similar question – how can one know one is truly saved (Weber, 1976)? Unlike Weber’s uneasy Reformed believer, the early Pentecostals had a direct answer: the evidence that one has experienced the baptism in the Holy Spirit was the gift of glossolalia – usually referred to as “speaking in tongues.” Thus, PCC arguably offered a form of assurance and certainty in a rapidly changing world.

More recently, Joel Robbins has also pointed out that PCC possesses the cultural features which allow it to be both simultaneously adaptable to local contexts, as well as maintaining its homogenizing global form (Robbins, 2004). In regards to the latter, PCC lacks a central church or governing body, yet has managed through mass communication to propagate homogenous ecclesial and liturgical forms internationally. To take one example: Hillsong Church in Sydney has promulgated a style that has been copied by many other churches all over the world. This homogenizing effect is further facilitated by the internet and the ease with which large churches like Hillsong not only produce music, but also provide instructional videos on playing the instruments and producing their ‘unique’ sound.

However, the resistance to the process of routinization of charisma observed by Michael Wilkinson is significant in the capacity of PCC churches to embrace the other force latent in globalization – the impetus to indigenization (Wilkinson, 2015). The requirement for each congregation to engage in char-
ismatic – literally “grace-gifted” – ministry means that individuals were encouraged in PCC churches to exercise gifts that fit within the local context. It was critically important in PCC churches that sermons, worship, spiritual gifts such as glossolalia and “prophecy” (inspired speech) be ‘words for the church’ – instances of God speaking in local situations or dealing with particular needs. Further, PCC churches tended to eschew more traditional universalizing practices, such as preaching from the common lectionary, and so sermons and messages were generally topical and relevant to local situations – or at least this was seen as the ideal.

Thus, the movement shares a remarkable unity in mission and emphasis on ecstatic phenomena, and at the same time a capacity to adapt to local contexts and ‘indigenize’. Arguably, this is because PCC is actually a product of globalization, which has shaped its diversity yet nurtured its seemingly fragile unity through mass communication – it does not develop ‘in spite’ of it.

Globalization is one of a cluster of contingencies that has led not only to PCC, but also more recently to a peculiar form of economic rationalization which has come to be known as “neoliberalism.” Isabelle Barker has argued, “Pentecostalism fosters norms and behaviors that harmonize well with the demands of neoliberal economies” (2007, p. 408). It is to this enigmatic phenomenon, and the challenge it poses to social institutions such as religion in general, and PCC in particular, that we now turn.

Neoliberalism, Human Capital, and the Universalization of Risk

Neoliberalism is a contested idea in the literature. In this essay, we will draw on the description of this phenomenon outlined first by Michel Foucault in his 1978-1979 Collège de France lectures, entitled The Birth of Biopolitics, augmented by Wendy Brown’s updated analysis of the more recent shapes and formations of neoliberalism. No attempt is made here at a detailed outline of the history of this phenomenon – a précis of its aims and ideology must suffice.

Foucault was fascinated by neoliberalism, which was then only beginning to take shape in Western Europe and the United States. He traced the outlines of an ideology rooted in liberalism (hence the name) but very different from it, which recentred human existence not around the demos or the democratically elected and governed state, but around the market. For the neoliberals, the freedom and autonomy of the market was to be protected and preserved at all costs. Economies which had been structured along Keynesian lines, with states playing an active role in fiscal mechanisms, were viewed as seriously flawed. The project was to update such economies with governments whose role was simply to guarantee the freedom of the market, which was the instrument of true democracy (Foucault, 2004, p. 145). Only the market could respond rapidly enough to the chaotic forces of supply and demand, and should be as free as possible to do so.

In the neoliberal imaginary, human beings are reconfigured as “human capital” – a term that reflects the neoliberal understanding of the “human as an ensemble of entrepreneurial and investment capital” whose goal, “whether studying, interning, working, planning retirement, or reinventing itself in a new life, is to entrepreneurialize its endeavours, appreciate its value, and increase its rating or ranking” (Brown, 2015, p. 36). Such a reimagining of the human follows from the view that the market responds to human wants instantaneously, as long as it has the freedom to do so. The marketized view of human flourishing requires that human wants and needs be measurable, or “the conversion of every human need or desire into a profitable enterprise” (Brown, 2015, p. 28), in order to facilitate the market’s ability to respond to these rapidly. Human capital must be available for deployment at all times, in order to serve the constantly
changing market. Human beings are reconfigured only and always as *homo oeconomicus* – the human being as economic machine (Brown, 2015, p. 33); (Foucault, 2004, pp. 147, 224).

*Homo oeconomicus* must continue to develop its human capital in order to best align itself with what will be required of it next. The model of the market is extended to spheres that have never before in human history been marketized, whether money is an issue or not (Brown, 2015, p. 31). This is a symptom of the requirement that everything be measurable, even phenomena that are not easily conceptualised or operationalised as measurable, so that their value can be calculated in fiscal terms (again, whether or not money is involved). Foucault outlined this, with a particularly striking example, worth quoting at length:

> [T]he generalization of the economic form of the market beyond monetary exchanges functions in American neo-liberalism as a principle of intelligibility and a principle of decipherment of social relationships and individual behavior. This means that analysis in terms of the market economy or, in other words, of supply and demand, can function as a schema which is applicable to non-economic domains … In their analysis of human capital, you recall, the neo-liberals tried to explain, for example, how the mother-child relationship, concretely characterized by the time spent by the mother with the child, the quality of the care she gives, the affection she shows, the vigilance with which she follows its development, its education, and not only its scholastic but also its physical progress … all constitute for the neo-liberals an investment which can be measured in time. … So, everything comprising what could be called, if you like, the formative or educational relationship, in the widest sense of the term, between mother and child, can be analyzed in terms of investment, capital costs, and profit – both economic and psychological profit – on the capital invested. (Foucault, 2004, pp. 243-244)

Thus, one of neoliberalism’s early champions, Gary S. Becker, could regard children as durable and consumable goods (Teixeira, 2014). Viewing everything through the lens of human capital, it becomes necessary for individuals to keep building their own human capital through personal entrepreneurship. In other words, neoliberalism universalises the phenomenon of entrepreneurship.

The initial idea of entrepreneurship in neoliberalism was based on the liberal economic model of exchange. The role of the entrepreneur was to see desires, needs, untapped markets, that either were not currently being serviced, or did not even exist. The entrepreneur took the initiative of stepping out of the security of paid employment, assuming the risk of investing their capital – human and material – in finding a way to satisfy that currently, or yet to be realised, demand. When this happened, the equilibrium of supply and demand were brought into balance once again, as demand was now perfectly matched by a ready supply. When supply and demand again slipped into disequilibrium, the role of the entrepreneur would be repeated. The successful entrepreneur would reap the rewards of their labours in profits. Failed entrepreneurs had no place in this imaginary, other than as cautionary tales or inspiring stories of repeated failure that led eventually to success.

This, broadly speaking, is the vision of entrepreneurship some of the earlier neoliberal theorists, such as Theodore W. Schultz, articulated (1980). In this paper, I argue, following Dardot and Laval, that such an articulation is inadequate for the universalization of risk which is evident in the more fully developed form of neoliberalism (Dardot & Laval, 2014). The following is an updated sketch of entrepreneurship in the present neoliberal imaginary, based not on exchange, but on competition, which presumes inequality as its baseline (Brown, 2015, pp. 36, 38).
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The neoliberal economy trains us to be always on the lookout for ways to improve our human capital, to advertise our increase in value (for example, through social media applications such as LinkedIn), and to be ready to slide seamlessly into roles that are created by an ever-changing market. In short, neoliberalism in its present form requires everyone to imagine themselves an entrepreneur, as Dardot and Laval indicate:

Market logic has long been associated with the dangers of slump, loss, and bankruptcy. The problematic of risk is inseparable from “market risks,” which have had to be protected against by resort to insurance techniques since the end of the Middle Ages. The novelty attaches to the universalization of a style of economic existence hitherto reserved for entrepreneurs. (2014)

Prior to neoliberalism’s hegemony in late-capitalist societies, the state ideally played a role in ‘socialising’ risk – that is, providing tax-funded services, such as public health care, or unemployment benefits, which form a safety net for individual risk. Neoliberalised states work to defund and deregulate such provisions, compelling individuals to shoulder the burden for all risks, making the risk formerly only assumed by entrepreneurs a universal phenomenon. Further, ‘public goods’ such as education – particularly university education – are heavily defunded by neoliberalised states, which no longer prioritise informed, critical thinking citizens of democracy. Education moves from being a public good to a means whereby “little capitals” (Brown, 2015, p. 36) improve their competitive value, enhancing their capacity to compete by means of strategic investment in ‘training’ and ‘networking’, developing key partnerships that will lead to further development and competitive advantage. The entrepreneurial individual simply cannot afford to invest in activities that does not enhance their human capital – failure to do so is “suicidal,” as it renders little capitals incapable of competing with other individuals who have prudently developed their own human capital (Brown, 2015, p. 41).

The “creative destruction” (Schumpeter, 1950, p. 83) of neoliberalism aims at stripping away from the reconfigured little capitals the formerly accepted position that risk was essentially social, engendering instead a view of risk that is essential to individual life – “to follow one’s desires is to run risks” (Dardot & Laval, 2014) – and that this risk is entirely the responsibility of the individual. The defunding of the welfare state and the stripping away of socialised mitigations of individual risk become a kind of common sense in the neoliberalised worldview. Indeed, as David Harvey points out, neoliberalism has become “hegemonic as a mode of discourse … to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way we interpret, live in and understand the world” (2006, p. 145).

While PCC showed a canny capacity to adapt to the latent forces of modernity, particularly globalisation, pluralism, and secularisation, the “hollowing out” which neoliberalised common sense imposes on social phenomena – reducing them to measurable forms, efficacious in so far as they assist little capitals in developing their own human capital – is another story altogether. In the next section, I will argue that one form of PCC – namely the “growth churches” – has chosen to embrace neoliberalism, rather than resist it.

PCC Adapts: Growth Churches and “Pastorprenuers”

In what has come to be regarded as a classic work in the sociology of religion, H. Richard Niebuhr’s The Social Sources of Denominationalism traced the social causes of the various denominations then beginning to emerge and flourish (Niebuhr, 1929). Niebuhr suggested that many of these churches were
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emerging in order to meet particular social needs, or to minister to various demographics. The single parish church in the centre of the village has been, in modernity, a rapidly fading ideal. Thus, PCC’s attempt to adapt to the changes in society being wrought by neoliberalism is not without precedent. However, what is different is neoliberalism itself, which unlike any of the forces Niebuhr was observing in the 1920s deliberately works to hollow out social and political institutions, remaking them in the image of the sovereign market. As this section and the conclusion will demonstrate, this has highly influential on the shape and development of the “growth churches” and “pastorpreneurs” attempting to accommodate it.

Megachurches, defined as churches with over 2000 regular attendees, (Thumma, 2001, p. 298) are not unique to PCC. However, as Scott Thumma points out, they have become a much more common phenomenon since the 1970s, and it is perhaps not coincidental that this was a period of rapid growth of PCC globally, with the burgeoning of Charismatic Christianity in established denominations (Carey, 1996, p. 189). Marion Maddox suggests that PCC megachurches, as well as congregations that aspire to be megachurches, should be understood in terms of a discrete category, which she nominates “growth churches”. Maddox chose this term because of these churches’ “unwaveringly forward-looking, growth-oriented vision, which must be already firmly in place while the church membership is still in miniscule, even double, figures” (Maddox, 2012, p. 148). This particular form also differs from traditional PCC in that, while the latter has historically negotiated a balance between globalisation’s twin forces of homogenization and indigenization, growth churches abandon indigenization, prioritizing homogenization, in an attempt to plant and nurture congregations of enormous size.2

In a thoroughly neoliberalised phenomenon, a set of practices that facilitate the development of human capital should be evident. This is a very important element in making participation attractive to little capitals, who as we have noted are increasingly encouraged to view themselves as always in competition and therefore in need of constant human capital acquisition. Apart from the unremitting emphasis on growth, several growth churches prioritise giving money to the church, which requires that the individual wealth of attendees must also increase (Maddox, 2012, pp. 149-150). According to Maddox, this is supported by an ethical dimension which engenders the idea that monetary blessing is a sign of God’s blessing, and consequently that those who are not wealthy “are failing to fulfil God’s promises” (2012, p. 151).3 This dimension is usually referred to in the literature as the “prosperity gospel.” Joalindo Burity makes clear the entrepreneurial nature of prosperity theology.

Making intensive use of the media, neo-Pentecostals clearly embody neoliberal ideas and values of entrepreneurialism, self-assertiveness and transactional spirituality. Calculating and bent on minimising ‘suffering’ at all costs, so that enjoyment of material blessings can face no constraints, neo-Pentecostal spirituality resembles speculative investment, aiming at the highest returns with the least effort: God owns all riches and the extension of his blessings is unlimited; therefore, every believer may lay claim to this superabundant wealth through giving and putting God to the test as a faithful and hyper-competent broker of each offering received. (Burity, 2013)

The Australian megachurch mentioned previously, Hillsong Church, is an example of a growth church.4 Hillsong Church was pioneered by Brian Houston in 1983, and has become a globally recognisable brand, mainly through its prolific production of PCC worship music (McIntyre, 2007). As Matthew Wade indicates, Hillsong employs “seeker-friendly” services, (2015, pp. 4-5) designed to draw people into the church by presenting the least controversial and most pleasant or utilitarian aspects of charismatic Christian faith. These include topical, inspirational preaching on themes that are related to everyday
issues for the target demographic – such as household finance, managing interfamilial conflict, how to relate to one’s boss – combined with upbeat worship music where PCC ecstasy is on offer. The goal is precisely not to challenge the different positions of the seeker, but to market the church as a highly desirable experience.

As indicated, Hillsong Church is a highly lucrative global brand, and has reproduced itself in the way that growth churches tend to, almost as a franchise would. Although nominally part of the “Australian Christian Churches” (the Australian name for the large Pentecostal denomination, the “Assemblies of God”), Hillsong has ‘planted’ churches all over the world, all with the name Hillsong, and offering the Hillsong ‘experience.’ As we have noted, this differs from the more contextualised and indigenized emphasis of earlier PCC mission.

The homogenization of growth churches should be understood as a form of ‘best practice,’ an ubiquitous phrase in neoliberal parlance. Best practice rhetoric obscures the ideological nature of implementation decisions (Brown, 2015, p. 138). For example, in the case of growth churches, it works to conceal the basically competitive and colonising nature of imposing homogenous church plants in communities that already have existing religious traditions. When Nate Lee, a San Franciscan blogger, learned that Hillsong was planning on planting a church in his city, he reacted negatively, claiming (among other things) that the church was overlooking the important work being carried out by religious and community organisations (Lee, 2016). Growth churches justify the implementation of best practice, strongly attractive seeker-friendly services that have been successful elsewhere, as necessary to allow the church to compete for the attention and patronage of consumers in an increasingly diverse leisure market. As one pastor put it “our competition, after all, is the video arcade, the movie house, and the casino” (cited in Comaroff, 2009, p. 21). However, as Lee’s post makes clear, they also compete with existing religious and community organisations. As Maddox indicates, “[t]he mission is expansion: personal, statistical, architectural, cultural, economic” (2012, p. 154).

It is perhaps not surprising, given this emphasis on competition, that growth churches are typically led by powerful entrepreneurial figures. “Pastorpreneur”, a portmanteau of ‘pastor’ and ‘entrepreneur,’ is a neologism coined by John Jackson. He defines it as “a pastoral innovator and creative dreamer who is willing to take great risks in ministry in the hope of great gain for Christ and his kingdom” (Jackson, 2003). Jackson theorises the pastorpreneur as one who takes personal financial risk – leaving a secure job and salary – in order to meet a need or desire – in this case, “to work with people who had given up on the traditional church but had not given up on God.” His story has a happy ending, as five years after planting his new church, over 1500 people were attending it – well on the way to becoming a megachurch. He now works as a church growth consultant.

Jackson conceptualises pastorpreneurship as laden with risk – directed by an intangible “call of God,” with no promise of a secure salary, relying on one’s own capacity to build a successful ministry (with the implied proviso that God is the one who has initiated the ministry, and so will ensure its success). They eschew the comfort of a more established pastorate, preferring the “bold new direction” offered by “God’s promise” (Jackson, 2003). What Jackson appears to overlook is that the role of the entrepreneur in neoliberalised societies is not a specific call for only “some of us” – as we have outlined, the universalization of risk means that we are all entrepreneurs, whether we like it or not. Indeed, as Margaret Klaver points out, the kinds of churches that pastorpreneurs plant are often independent, and do not take on the characteristics of a denomination. Rather, as they depend heavily on the leadership of the pastorpreneur, the church is “personalised and embodied” – they become shaped in the image of their leaders (Klaver,
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2015, p. 149). Hence, the pastorpreneur, ready to risk all for the nebulous call of God, both models for their congregation the risky neoliberal individual, and implicitly valorises risk itself.

Several crucial elements of growth church forms of PCC, including the ‘best practice’ of the seeker-friendly service which facilitates competition, the emphasis on development of human capital through growing personal wealth and prosperity, and the modelling of entrepreneurship, are so clearly amenable to neoliberalism that it is probable, as Barker suggests, that a symbiotic relationship between the two exists (2007, p. 409). In the final section of this chapter, I outline why I think this is problematic, and offer some observations about the potential PCC still has for offering a prophetic critique of neoliberalism.

Changing the Heart and Soul: Neoliberalism’s Effect on Religion

Margaret Thatcher, expressing her irritation at what she called twenty years of the politics of “collectivist society” at the expense of the individual, infamously stated “Economics are the method: the object is to change the heart and soul” (Butt, 1981). Over thirty years of relentless neoliberal rhetoric and policy has effected this change, rendering many of the central tenets of neoliberalism as simply common sense. As can easily be imagined, challenging a discourse that has become so ubiquitous and hegemonic as to be regarded as common sense is not easy.

Does PCC in fact need to challenge it? Some scholars, such as David Maxwell, suggest that PCC renders adherents uniquely capable of competing in neoliberalised societies. Maxwell, speaking of Pentecostalism in Africa, is worth quoting at length in this regard.

By the 1980s, movements such as ZAOGA [Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa] were particularly well equipped to respond to modernity’s latest neoliberal incarnation. With its capacity for individuation through enabling believers to rewrite their own personal narratives and break with the past, symbolized through violent exorcism, Pentecostalism has proved immensely significant. Although essentially a religious movement offering a path to salvation through healing and personal transformation, it creates a modern individual subject well suited to the demands of the post-industrial, post-Fordist economic culture. It engenders the flexibility, trust, and self-motivation required by the lightly supervised sectors of the service economy. And Pentecostal virtue is both personally and socially beneficial, building up levels of trust that facilitate market-based economics. (Maxwell, 2013, p. 107)

One can easily imagine such rhetoric as part of a marketing strategy to promote PCC religiosity as a means of spiritually augmenting one’s human capital. While Maxwell goes on to speculate that Pentecostalism “creates new solidarities that mitigate neoliberalism’s worst effects” (2013, p. 108), such descriptions display a concerning naiveté around the devastating effects of neoliberalism on collective phenomena, such as religious faith, as well as its active discrimination against the very populations most often adopting PCC – namely, the poor (Spickard, 2013). Further, as we have seen, they facilitate the continuation of a view in which human beings reconfigure themselves as little capitals, this time as those with a competitive advantage because of their religious faith.⁵

Neoliberalism has no place for the social, because it reduces human existence to the responsibilized, entrepreneurial individual, who engages with other little capitals on the basis of competition. Neoliberalism’s creed, drawing on Thatcher again, is that “there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families” (Keay, 1987). Religions, even highly neoliberalised religious forms like PCC growth churches, are essentially social phenomena. Neoliberalism, as it does with other
social institutions (such as government, or universities), maintains the shell but hollows out the content, replacing it with ideology which works to its ends of reducing humans to capital, monetizing everything, and ensuring the sovereignty of the market at all costs. Growth churches and pastorprenuers may be under the impression that they can make use of the processes, language, and tools of neoliberalism, but will eventually find that they have been co-opted into validating it. Maddox makes this point.

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Growth churches give their blessing to consumerist culture. They sacralise malls, ex-urban sprawl, cardependency, single-mindedness, incessant marketing, branding. Their profane is the world of the non-successful, judged according to the marketing ideals of happy, suburban families and all-conquering entrepreneurs (2012, p. 153).

If Robert Putnam’s assertion that “nearly half of all associational memberships in America are church related, half of all personal philanthropy is religious in character, and half of all volunteering occurs in a religious context” (Putnam, 2000, p. 66) is still correct, then the marketization of this social institution has and will have profound effects on the rest of society.

The question then becomes – can PCC offer any resistance to the corrosive forces of neoliberalism? Burity is cautiously optimistic, noting that the neo-Pentecostals he researched in Latin America are politically and socially active, and broadly supportive of progressive social welfare policies (Burity, 2013). Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori indicate that a group they nominate the “Progressive Pentecostals” are already working on issues of structural injustice and inequity in the societies in which they find themselves.

An emergent group of Pentecostals is pursuing the integral, or holistic, gospel in response to what it sees as the example of Jesus, who both ministered to people’s physical needs and preached about the coming kingdom of God. In part, we suspect that this change is driven by upward social mobility among Pentecostals who see a reason to make this a better world in which to live. Members with increasing educational levels are applying more sophisticated understandings to social issues, some of which involve structural and systemic interpretations drawn from the world of public health. (Miller & Yamamori, 2007, pp. 21-22)

It is worth noting that Miller and Yamamori are not making this observation in regard to growth churches, but PCC in general. Miller and Yamamori also criticise PCC for its failure to adequately critique the inequity of capitalist systems which entrench poverty in many of the Majority World contexts in which PCC has flourished, pointing out that what has often been left behind is the Judeo-Christian tradition’s emphasis on social justice (2007, p. 183).

**CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, we have investigated the phenomenon of PCC, demonstrating the ways in which its early development helped the movement adapt well to the forces of secularization, pluralism, and globalization latent in modernity. Toward the end of the twentieth century, and in the beginning of the twenty-first, modern societies have encountered neoliberalism, and many social phenomena, such as religion, have struggled to navigate this new challenge. In the chapter, the argument has been made that a new form
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of PCC, namely “growth churches”, has found ways to accommodate neoliberalism. This has come at a significant cost, because neoliberalism as a hegemonic ideology works to hollow out social institutions, universalize entrepreneurial risk, transform economies formerly based on equal exchange to unequal competition and valorise only those endeavours which develop human capital in measurable ways. The question then becomes whether or not religious phenomena such as growth churches should exercise a resistant or even prophetic role in relation to neoliberalism.

To criticize tenets of Thatcherism just one more time, the project of neoliberal ideology is to convince us that “There is no Alternative”. However, religious phenomena such as PCC, rooted as they are in the long history of the Christian texts and traditions, have a built-in capacity to resist this absolute narrative, because they link adherents across time to nations, societies, and individuals whose worldviews were so different from the modern imaginary that they seem like other worlds entirely. One of the important tasks of biblical theology, then, is to resit reader-response hermeneutic tendencies to flatten out and simplify their horizons, recreating the ancient societies therein as if they were ‘just like us.’ The resistant efficacy of this tradition is to allow us to see that human beings and human societies have existed in other alternatives – they allow us to imagine another world.

The impassioned message recorded in the book of Amos that it is the will of God that justice “roll down like waters” (Amos 5:24) indicate that in a previous epoch, divine favour was not linked to individual happiness and success, but to the social distribution of justice and righteousness over a collective group of people. Similarly, many of Jesus’ parables sketch a world that is barely imaginable anymore, in which preachers encouraged their followers to live as servants to others and to establish a kingdom of God that was not of this world, but reflected the equality and harmony which was believed to exist in paradise. The hope of PCC, and of all of us living in the world of no alternative, is that through connecting to such traditions we can imagine another alternative, and begin the long journey toward it.

REFERENCES


Keay, D. (1987, 31 October). Interview with Margaret Thatcher - no such thing as society.


ENDNOTES

1 For a detailed discussion of the origins of Pentecostalism, please see Case (2006); Creech (1996); and Hollenweger (1997).

2 I have chosen Maddox’ term in this paper, but the phenomenon described by Burity as “Neo-Pentecostalism” is the same (2013).

3 This represents a fascinating shift from the assurance of God’s blessing being the baptism in the Holy Spirit, demonstrated by glossolalia, to faith evidenced by fiscal prosperity – the prosperity gospel’s “radical claim to transform invisible faith into financial reward” (Bowler, 2013, p. 77).

4 Indeed, Maddox uses Hillsong and another Australian megachurch, Christian City Church in Oxford Falls, as her paradigmatic examples of growth churches (2012, p. 148).

5 This appears to be the contention of the authors of a recent article on “Workplace-Building Religious Capital”, or “WBRC” (Park, Rogers, Neubert, & Dougherty, 2014).

6 However, they do refer positively to Neo-Pentecostal churches run by entrepreneurs as “the cutting edge of the Pentecostal movement” (Miller & Yamamori, 2007, p. 27).