



Nearer, My God, to Thee

DAMASO REYES

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. —Acts 2:1-4

BARCELONA—Los Pentecostales de Barcelona is located on a nondescript street near the city's convention center. Twenty minutes before the evening service, the sounds of prayer and soft singing waft down from the second floor sanctuary. The lights have been dimmed, and some two dozen congregants are scattered throughout the large room, some on their hands and knees whispering prayers at their seats. Others hold hands in small groups and sing joyously.

The trait most associated with Pentecostalism and other charismatic forms of Christianity is *glossolalia*, or speaking in

tongues, but here in Barcelona, there is little of that. Many, if not most, Pentecostals never find themselves so moved by the Holy Spirit that they speak in a language unknown to them, but all of these worshipers seek a personal relationship with God. Pastors, researchers, and parishioners alike define the central characteristic of Pentecostalism as a close, direct connection with God. That's why the faithful are so often found on their knees.

"I preach a relationship with God and not a religion," says Pastor Nathan Harrod. "People in Spain are tired of religion, and I believe people worldwide are tired of religion. Being Pentecostal is not a religion. What we focus on is a relationship with God, and what people want to have nowadays is a relationship with God." Pentecostalism encourages believers not to blindly follow the church's hierarchy but to place responsibility for salvation squarely on the shoulders of the believer.

Every religion needs an inspiring creation story. In fact, Pentecostalism has two. The first can be found in the book of Acts in the New Testament when the Holy Spirit, in the form of flames, came down from heaven. At that point, the separation of language, which God had inflicted when men attempted to build a tower in the city of Babel that would touch the sky, was lifted. Jews, who had come from "every nation under heaven," could suddenly understand one another. The tongues of fire had touched them and given them a gift so special it would not be received again for another 2,000 years.

William Joseph Seymour, a self-trained preacher and the son of former slaves, led a small prayer group in Los Angeles and, in 1906, told of the coming of a second Pentecost, when the Holy Ghost would descend to earth. After weeks of prayer, the metaphorical tongues of fire came down, and soon, so many were arriving to experience this miracle that the group had to move to a former stable on Azusa Street to accommodate their numbers. In the months and years that followed, men and women, blacks and whites, were singing, dancing, weeping, and worshiping together. At its birth, Pentecostalism, with its radical equality, was perhaps the most progressive form of Christianity in America, and within a few years, it spread to Europe. Today, upward of 500 million people around the globe adhere to some offshoot of the movement that began on Azusa Street more than a century ago.

Outside the United States, Pentecostalism spread quickly in South America, Asia, and Africa, changing the center of gravity of the movement. But in the last 25 years, evangelists from Europe's former colonies have set their sights on bringing the gospel back to the continent and in so doing threaten to change a religious balance of power that has existed for centuries. From a population of just a few tens of thousands, Pentecostals now number between 15 and 20 million in Europe—from just 5,000 in tiny Luxembourg to 3 million in the United Kingdom. In most nations, their numbers are in the low single digits as a percentage

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of the total population of Christians. But Pentecostalism's growth is truly remarkable. Over the past two decades churches based in Africa and the United States have planted numerous churches on European soil, and they are flourishing. In Spain, one American-based Pentecostal group now has nearly 70 churches and 40,000 followers, rising from fewer than a handful 20 years ago. Pentecostals see this as just the start of their movement to re-evangelize the continent.

For more than a generation, weekly religious attendance along with religious affiliation has been dropping across Europe. Millions of Europeans are leaving the faith of their fathers and mothers and becoming more secular. Charismatic Christianity, with Pentecostalism at the forefront, is rushing in to fill that space. As Pentecostal congregations grow by double digits, it is clear that their struggle for souls is not just with the secular world but with the traditional torch bearers of Christianity and in some cases even the state itself.

In many parts of Europe, especially those with declining religious participation rates, faith is seen as a zero sum game. More established denominations see Pentecostalism as an existential threat to their own survival. For generations, one was born into the Catholic, Anglican, or Orthodox Church. Today, Pentecostalism is presenting Christians, especially young ones, with a choice. If established Christianity is an iPhone, offering one color and one screen size, then Pentecostalism is Android, offering every variation from the mega-church

experience to the small storefront church with five believers. As these churches have gained members, they have begun flexing their social and political power. In Britain, leaders of the largest Pentecostal organization have spoken out against gay marriage. Just like their American counterparts, European Pentecostals are fully engaged with the secular society. Far from waiting for a better world in the life to come, Pentecostals are interested in changing the world now to reflect their values.

In eight of 10 countries surveyed by the Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, a majority of Pentecostals said religious groups should try to influence policy. While Pew did not survey Pentecostals in any European country, in every country it did survey, Pentecostals were more socially conservative

than other mainstream Christian groups. As the number of Pentecostal congregations grow in Europe, their political activism will increase, and they will push their conservative social values and fight for the rights of their followers, who are disproportionately poor and lacking in political influence.

A MULTINATIONAL RELIGION

In Spain, the number of people who attend church has been eroding steadily. A government survey shows that while three-quarters call themselves Catholic, only 13 percent attend mass regularly—down from nearly 20 percent a decade ago. By European standards that still makes Spain quite a religious country. Still, in 2010, when Pope Benedict XVI visited in an effort to

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boost morale, he warned of the “strong and aggressive secularism” gripping the nation. Upward of 90 percent attend church at least once a year but normally just for a wedding, funeral, or special religious day like Christmas or Easter. While the cultural ties that bind Europeans to their traditional churches remain, religious bonds have been fraying for decades.

This has not gone unnoticed by Pentecostals. Harrod’s ministry in Barcelona is a part of the United Pentecostal Church International, one of the America’s largest denominations. After reaching a critical mass in the United States, along with many other churches, it made a conscious choice to grow its missionary arm abroad. “Pentecostalism is the religious version of the multinational,” says Craig Ott of Trinity International University, describing the way Pentecostal churches have spread around the globe.

For many, the idea that “Christian” Europe needs saving is received somewhere between shock and insult. But Pentecostals and other charismatics have found a way to fill the pews where old-line churches have not. The fact that many of these missionaries are minorities of color or come from former colonies hasn’t helped their efforts to win acceptance among traditional Christians in Europe. For much of its history, Christian missionary work was seen as the “white man’s burden.” Now, a generation of Christians outside Europe sees this continent as the new battleground.

While many American missionaries went to the developing world, others like United Pentecostal’s Europe and Middle East Regional Director Michael Tuttle were dispatched to Europe. Since 1984, Tuttle has been preaching the gospel from his base in the Netherlands. “The state church here, which is the Dutch Reformed

Church, was very anti-anything that was not from a Calvinistic viewpoint,” he says, describing the religious landscape of the mid 1980s. “They were very much against Pentecostalism and most Evangelicals to the point that when we wanted to have a major meeting and we wanted to rent a church building, they said no we couldn’t, because they considered us non-Christian.” Twenty years later, the Dutch church is closing houses of worship, and the Pentecostals are purchasing them.

In Spain, under the Franco dictatorship, Catholicism was the state religion and the only recognized church. Over decades, these restrictions were slowly relaxed, and Protestantism gained a tenuous foothold, becoming secure after Franco’s death in 1975 and the official separation of church and state in 1978. Spain’s United Pentecostal has increased from a handful of churches 20 years ago to 65 today. Harrod came to Barcelona in 2004 after his American father-in-law started Los Pentecostales three years earlier by renting space in a hotel meeting room. Today, his congregation comprises several hundred parishioners from more than 16 nations. Most are either immigrants or the children of immigrants from the Caribbean and Central and South America. “Once they get inside the doors they feel something different,” he says of new members, many of whom come from a Catholic background.

“Here in the house of the Lord, we don’t have nationalities,” Rafael Pujols, a 43-year-old who came to Spain from the Dominican Republic in 2009, says after a service.

Still, expanding beyond immigrants is one of the biggest challenges Pentecostalism faces in Spain. Culturally, most Spaniards are Catholic, even if most haven’t stepped inside a church for years.

While immigrants to Europe make up large percentages of Pentecostal congregations, they are also making inroads among native Europeans like Sonja Steinheiser, born in Mannheim, Germany.

“In those churches, I feel cold and dead,” she responds when asked why she doesn’t attend a traditional cathedral. “When I went to a Pentecostal church for the first time, I felt good. You can move. You’re not just sitting there wondering when it will end,” she says.

It’s 10 p.m. on the last Friday of the month at Los Pentecostales. The monthly all-night service has begun with just a handful of people clapping and praying. After a long week of work, for those fortunate enough to have jobs in a Spain in the midst of an economic crisis, it is hardly surprising there are few in attendance. But as the faithful take turns sharing their testimony and leading the group in song, their ranks begin to swell. In a few hours, dozens of Pentecostals are singing, letting Barcelona know they’re as popular as any nightclub and have a party that lasts past dawn.

IN THE MIDST OF LONDON

Each Sunday, London’s Hillsong mega-church holds four sessions at the Dominion Theatre, home to the Queen tribute show “We Will Rock You” the rest of the week. All the smoke machines, lighting, and sound equipment remain in place on Sundays. The vast theater is not the first place a Pentecostal church would usually consider making its home, but it is one of the few venues in London that can seat several thousand, and every Hillsong service is packed.

Pentecostalism has deep roots in Britain, arriving shortly after the Azuza Street revival. It mostly took hold among the nation’s working class in industrial cities like Birmingham and Manchester, but by the late 1990s, the Pentecostal revival swept Britain. Churches like Hillsong proliferated, in part by appealing to young people.

Alongside the growth of churches like Hillsong, another movement was building in Britain’s West African communities. In 1988, the Redeemed Christian Church of God opened its first church in London. Founded in the middle of the 20th century in Nigeria, the church has had explosive growth around the world. Today

in the United Kingdom, it claims more than 400 churches. Its goal is to have a church within a 10-minute drive or walk of every person on the planet. And its members take that goal very seriously. One reason Redeemed Christian has been so successful in expanding is that the church asks a great deal of involvement by its members. Few members are of the stop-by-once-a-month variety. The congregations may be small, but they are tightly knit.

A hallmark of Pentecostalism is a lack of liturgy. The repetition and call and response that a devout Catholic finds comforting is all but banished in a Pentecostal service. Instead, pastors tend to use a particular passage or story from the Bible as a starting point to explain the gospel’s real life implications. “When you visit a Redeemed Christian Church, you are exposed to the knowledge of who God is,” Pastor Ernest Ogbe tells a visitor at Christ

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the Redeemer College where he serves as an instructor. Pentecostals feel that to have that personal relationship with God, a worshiper needs to understand the Bible in a practical way. During their midweek Bible classes, Redeemed Christian pastors seek to apply the Bible to the everyday lives of their congregation, explaining how the Bible is the lens through which they should filter their actions.

Redeemed Christian Church leaders tend to be well-educated and financially successful—an essential since the church doesn't pay salaries. With the recent refusal of the Church of England to allow women into the highest reaches of its leadership, many Brits are wondering if there is a role for a state church in 21st century Britain. Pentecostals have thus far stayed out of the political fray, but as the nation takes up the issue of gay marriage, there is every indication the Redeemed Christian Church, among others, will use its large membership to push back against what it sees as the spread of secular values.

"The Redeemed Christian Church is probably one of the fastest growing Pentecostal churches in Britain," says Richard Burgess of the University of Birmingham and a researcher of the African Pentecostal movement in England. "They see themselves as bringing the gospel back to Britain." While some in the Pentecostal movement shy away from the term reverse missionary, Redeemed Christian members seem to embrace the idea that they are taking back Europe for Christ. "They may not come as

missionaries," Burgess says of African immigrants to Britain, "but when they are here they're surprised that Britain, which they thought was a Christian country, no longer seems Christian."

The immigrant communities who've gravitated toward Redeemed Christianity over the past 20 years have matured. At the same time, new immigration laws make it increasingly difficult for non-Europeans to enter Britain. So to maintain the church's exponential growth, it has been converting white English

believers. This trend is fully on display during Pentecost 2012, an annual festival held by three of London's largest Pentecostal churches including Jesus House, London's largest Redeemed Christian parish church. The two-week celebration culminates at the Earl's Court Exhibition Center in mid-May. Hillsong Church is another one of the three sponsors and the finger-

prints of their showmanship are all over the event, from the light show to the up tempo music. Thousands of Redeemed Christian members from around Britain are in attendance praying side-by-side and listening to the same pastors. Apart from a football match or a pop concert, not many other institutions can bring such a diverse and passionate group of people together in one place. The message from the stage is one of unity and conveys a confident, assertive faith. Jesus House Pastor Agu Irukwu tells the audience, "No one leaves here the same. Everyone leaves here knowing that they are part of this great army."

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Pastor Vladimir Muntyan casts out demons in Kiev.

That army is continuing its march throughout Britain where it has given an often marginalized group of immigrants a network to pressure the establishment. The Anglican Church continues to lose members and relevancy, and Pentecostals are moving into that social, and increasingly political, vacuum. The Pentecostal and charismatic movement provides a unique mix of conservatism and dynamism that appeals to previously disenfranchised minorities in Europe. As the numbers and diversity of Pentecostals grow, their ability to influence the national agenda grows with it.

BACK IN THE USSR

Pentecostalism also found early roots in Ukraine, arriving just after the Communist revolution. In the nine years between its introduction in 1921 and the start of Stalin's purges, there were 150 Pentecostal churches in what is today Ukraine. In western Ukraine, then part of Poland, the churches survived until 1939. At that point, any church that wanted to survive went underground. Near the end of World War II, Stalin allowed a very limited and heavily monitored Pentecostal church to emerge. Speaking in tongues and other manifestations of faith were banned; children were

not allowed to attend; public proselytizing was forbidden, and congregants knew that at every service there were informants. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, there was a mass wave of emigration by Pentecostals from Ukraine to the United States. Today, most experts place the number of Pentecostals at just 2 or 3 percent, compared to an estimated 30 percent of the population that identify as Protestant.

Ironically, the seeds for what is today one of Kiev's largest churches were sown during the end of the Soviet era. Sunday Adelaja, a young Nigerian student, had the choice of a scholarship to Columbia University or a college in Minsk. For reasons unknown even to himself, he chose the latter. "When I came, I got the shock of my life. Everything was gray," Adelaja recalls in his office at God's Embassy. As a stranger in a strange land, there were no churches for him to attend, so he gathered some of the foreign students in an informal worship group. The school's administration, perhaps tipped off by the portrait of Jesus he hung in his dorm room, told him to stop his religious activities. Still he persisted, feeling that God had a plan for him in that country.

After the end of communism, there was an awakening of spiritual life in Ukraine. "We began to discover there were Pentecostals. They were coming out of the underground," Adelaja says. He had a dream where he saw himself preaching, a vision that repeated itself night after night. "I saw myself ministering to all these white people." For all the talk of fraternal Socialism, the Soviet Union was still a deeply racist society. "I knew there was a lot of racism. I experienced it every day. When the Lord told me to open a church here, I said wait a minute."

For the first few years, it was difficult for him to get a white Ukrainian to

come to his church. Born out of that frustration, Adelaja began ministering to what he calls the down and outs—drug addicts, alcoholics, and the homeless. "It was a different form of ministry. In the next year, I had over 1,000 of them." Today, former addicts make up an important core of God's Embassy's adherents, and Adelaja claims to have freed more than 10,000 from drug abuse through some 1,000 churches around the world, including 300 in Ukraine and 100 in Russia, and a network of church-run rehabilitation centers.

Following 80 years of enforced atheism, the ground was fertile for a rebirth of religious expression. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church, along with the Greek Orthodox and Catholic Churches were quick to fill the vacuum that the Soviet State had left. Many Ukrainians still felt a cultural, if not religious connection to the church, and it began to dominate religious life. Ukraine, perhaps uniquely among the former Soviet states, allowed a great deal of religious freedom in the era immediately following independence. There was also a huge influx of missionaries and money to support the creation of churches after independence. Many gravitated to the new Pentecostal churches, seen as threatening to leaders of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

In many post-Soviet states, the government quickly co-opted religion and used it as a prop, but until recently, state and religion remained relatively separate in Ukraine. Over the past few years, however, there has been an erosion of religious tolerance, and the Orthodox Church and Ukraine's political leaders have seen the advantages of supporting one another. In a move being watched closely by faith communities in Ukraine, the minister of

culture, Mykhaylo Kulynyak, has called for changes in the law that would make it more difficult for churches to register with the government, potentially forcing many churches back underground. In recent years, there has also been a spate of investigative articles and television documentaries aimed at exposing evangelical, and especially Pentecostal, churches as cults where members are brainwashed. Since Ukraine's last remaining independent television station was recently raided by tax authorities, the objectivity of these journalistic investigations is in doubt. What is clear is that the Orthodox Church and its proxies are increasingly viewing Pentecostalism as a threat to their primacy.

"There was quite a negative campaign from the Orthodox Church, especially from the Moscow Orthodox Church, about all the Protestant denominations," Ukrainian sociologist Olena Bogdanova says. "In Ukraine, we saw how something we really believed in turned out to be fake," she continues, reflecting on Ukraine's reaction to the fall of the Soviet Union. Anti-Pentecostal propaganda is playing on those fears.

"They were not prepared to compete with foreign missionaries," says Victor Yelensky, a senior researcher at the Philosophy Institute of the Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences, explaining the response of the Orthodox Church. The Church responded to this influx by "appeal[ing] to government to restrict the activities of so called new religious movements." While most of these appeals have failed, the government is proposing

changes to the laws that would allow more state interference.

Adelaja and his church have felt the effects of this push back from the state and more established churches. For the past three years, he has been facing criminal charges related to the collapse of a business owned by members of his church but with which he says he had no relationship. Many in Ukraine see the accusations as a transparent ploy by the government to diminish his growing stature and influence. "Ukraine is not yet a law and order society," Adelaja says when asked about the charges he faces. "Here you don't need to break a law, they just don't have to like you. ... It's not just the political establishment we offend but the religious establishments as well. ...

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Anybody that is leaving the Orthodox faith is regarded as a betrayer."

While God's Embassy has incurred wrath from more established institutions, a casual observer needs look no further than the Palace of Sports last July to see just what the Ukrainian traditionalists fear. Vladimir Muntyan and his Spiritual Center Regeneration were holding their first revival in Kiev, bringing out thousands of Ukrainians on a Saturday night. The night's revival was a statement that he is a player on the religious stage, so much so that the evening was cut short by a bomb threat that forced an evacuation. But before that, Muntyan, dressed head to toe in white, cast out demons, healed the sick, and prowled the stage. A half hour before the start of his sermon, a dozen women were already in various states of convulsion after receiving his touch.

From mass revival meetings to small urban churches, Pentecostal leaders are making a bold claim on the souls of Ukrainians.

One of the challenges observers face when exploring Pentecostalism is that there is no central authority to address, no divine leader to quote. Pentecostals are as varied as the cultures where they work and live, but they share a passion to spread their faith. It's a passion that can strengthen immigrant communities and challenge authority. From its birth in an old livery stable, Pentecostalism has always been a radical religion.

With a leadership that sees their mission as re-Christianizing Europe, Pentecostals present a direct challenge to Europe's first two estates—the church and the government. The real question is how much the entrenched denominations in grand buildings and soaring cathedrals will change their masses, their songs, and even their theologies to compete with this challenge. The Catholic Church is convinced it must become more traditional, reinstating the Latin Mass in some cases. But at a time when young and old alike are yearning for a religious experience that speaks to them and their world, this return to orthodoxy is unlikely to inspire many of its already lukewarm adherents.

European governments, more concerned with headscarves and radical Islam, have largely ignored the growth of charismatic Christianity. But as European states continue

to push a progressive agenda, they are finding these believers are pushing back. When hundreds of thousands of people marched in Paris on a cold January day against the government's plan to allow same sex marriages, there weren't just Catholics in the crowd. Evangelical Christians played a large role. Far from being marginalized, the political right is taking a page from the hymnbook of its American cousins and mobilizing Christian conservatives.

If established Christian churches have not aided in Europe's secularization over the past half century, in many respects they have made their peace with it. Pentecostals, flush with victories in the Americas and the global South, have not agreed to any such cease-fire. The challenge now is for the rest of the world to deal with this new force sweeping through Europe.

Secular and religious leaders must accept Pentecostals as a constituency, not a threat. By attacking and marginalizing these groups, elites from Russia to Spain simply reinforce a narrative that allows Pentecostals to feel righteously persecuted. While many Pentecostals hope to transform the world around them to match their Christian ethics, most also understand the need for negotiation and compromise. But if they are refused a seat at the table, there is little reason for them to do anything but continue to challenge the orthodoxy. ●