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978-0-521-66072-3 - The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity

Simon Coleman

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

Hi! . . . Don't hesitate to contact me if you want to know more or if you want to have *intercession*. You can also find out where I'm preaching – just look at my *diary*. Come to our meetings, but I'm warning you! You might get blessed!

These words, and quite a few others, were recently addressed to me by a Swedish preacher called Stefan Salmonsson.<sup>1</sup> I first encountered Stefan in the mid-1980s, when he was working as a part-time bus driver while beginning his career as a youth evangelist. Over the years, I have sat in the congregation and listened to many of his sermons. This time, however, my appreciation of Stefan's words was a little different from usual. Instead of sitting in a church hall I was in my departmental office, in England, waiting for a tardy student to come and see me. I had switched on my computer and typed the name of the ministry Stefan works for into my Internet connection. Within a couple of minutes I found Stefan greeting me (and, of course, any number of other possible visitors) when I located his home page. The site was new to me, but I was impressed by what it was offering. By clicking on the highlighted words I could gain instant access to Stefan's movements over the next few months or ask him to pray over any personal 'need' I might have. Another part of the site informed me that I had the

<sup>1</sup> In this book, pseudonyms will be used for charismatics unless the identity of the person is so obvious that there would be little point in concealment. Stefan is a well-known preacher in Sweden and his real name is given here. He works for the *Livets Ord* ('Word of Life') foundation, the focus of much of my ethnographic analysis. The translation from the Swedish, as elsewhere in the book, is my own.

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opportunity to ‘Get to know Jesus’ by saying a simple prayer that was helpfully supplied. I could click on yet another button to read Stefan’s favourite spiritual quotations, or even send him a favourite phrase of my own. His pages also offered the possibility of going to other, similar sites, where I could explore a seemingly boundless world of virtual evangelical information and interaction. My favourite bit of the site, however, was the graphic Stefan placed on his first page: a globe was located close to his name, spinning round and round to complement the static words of the text.

‘Redneck religion’, as Harvey Cox (1984) terms the new mass-mediated forms of Protestant fundamentalism and evangelicalism, has in recent decades emerged from its separatist shell in the United States and elsewhere. ‘Rednecks’ have increasingly been forced into white collars as believers have become more economically powerful and socially ambitious.<sup>2</sup> Web sites represent merely one example of the methods currently used by conservative Christians to reach potential converts as well as fellow believers around the world, and this book will examine the ways in which Christians such as Stefan are displaying a potent combination of technological mastery and self-assuredness as they spread their message to new areas of missionary opportunity.

Among many contemporary religious conservatives, faith is far removed from the privatised life-world of Thomas Luckmann’s (1967) ‘invisible religion’. Their religion is nothing if not visible. It is also global in its outreach. Missionary fields that experienced Christianisation along with the colonising process have provided especially fertile ground for the revised faiths of a post-colonial age, but even apparently unpromising areas in Europe have not gone untouched. Conservative Protestants from the United States have sometimes prompted but often merely witnessed the emergence of new constituencies of believers in all corners of the earth.<sup>3</sup> Cox argues (1995:120) that Pentecostalism is the most rapidly expanding religion of our times. His view is reinforced by Peter Berger’s

<sup>2</sup> Marsden (1982); Poloma (1982:4); Ammerman (1991); Coleman (1996a); Miller (1997:5).

<sup>3</sup> For a recent article summarising the literature on Afro-American, Latin American and African Pentecostalism, see Corten (1997). For classic general accounts of Pentecostalism see Bloch-Hoell (1964) and Hollenweger (1972).

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claim (1990) that there are today two global religions of enormous vitality – conservative Islam and conservative Protestantism.<sup>4</sup>

The long-term implications of such developments have yet to be established. Earlier this century, it was perhaps tempting to see conservative Protestantism as an anti-modern and anachronistic revival of tradition. At least, that is how these believers were perceived by journalists and many scholars during the ‘Scopes Trial’ of 1925, when a court case investigating the teaching of evolution in a Tennessee school was turned into a nation-wide debate on the intellectual and cultural standing of conservative religious beliefs (Wills 1990:106). However, one of the aims of this study of Protestant charismatics is to show that many features of their ideology and practice are well adapted to modern and even post-modern cultural conditions. These conservatives belong to the present age – and almost certainly the future, as well.

Recent developments have done more than renew flagging faiths. The re-emergence of aggressive, often doctrinally uncompromising movements raises key questions concerning the delimitation of cultural, territorial and ideological boundaries in the modern world – between the sacred and the secular, the private and the public, the religious and the political.<sup>5</sup> Some scholars assert that the revival of proselytising faith provides a refutation of linear models of secularisation in the West.<sup>6</sup> Others say we should not be fooled so easily: conservative Protestants will probably have little lasting impact on industrial, democratic societies such as that of the US (Bruce 1990a). No doubt such debates will continue to rage. In this book, I propose that the revival of conservative Protestantism in many parts of the contemporary world can be viewed in the light

<sup>4</sup> Brouwer et al. estimate (1996:183) that possibly over 300 million Bible-believing evangelicals exist in the world today. Miller (1997:5), meanwhile, poses the following rhetorical question: ‘Who would have predicted that Pentecostalism would grow faster than, say, Islamic fundamentalism, with more than 400 million adherents world-wide, including expansion in Africa as well as South America.’

<sup>5</sup> To some degree, also, between electronically mediated and face-to-face perspectives on reality.

<sup>6</sup> Thus Peter Berger, in a rejoinder to Steve Bruce at a conference on Berger’s work (‘Peter Berger and the Study of Religion’, held at Lancaster University, 5–7 December 1997), argued that the presence of a large body of active evangelicals and fundamentalists in the United States contradicts the notion that all Western societies are secularising.

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of another body of social theory that is of vital importance but is still relatively little explored in relation to the spread of such faith: that of globalisation.

GLOBALISATION AS SOCIAL PROCESS AND  
EMBODIED PRACTICE

Providing an extended definition of globalisation will be a task for chapter 2. For the time being, I draw on some observations of Roland Robertson. He notes (1992:8) that ‘Globalization as a concept refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole’ and argues that there has also been an ‘acceleration in . . . concrete global interdependence’. Implicit within Robertson’s characterisations of a broad sociological process is reference to specific social activities and institutions – such as the movement of capital around the globe, the workings of world-wide media systems or the articulations of cultural identities in relation to humanity as a whole. In this book, my particular interest is in demonstrating how our understanding of the phrase ‘consciousness of the world’ can be extended and nuanced when analysed through the ethnographic lens of the activities, cultural assumptions and social institutions of conservative Protestants.

Of course, evangelicals and fundamentalists have a long history of travelling the world to spread the universally applicable Word. Their activities today, involving the promotion of transnational ‘flows’ (Appadurai 1996) of religious culture, personnel and objects across space and time, can be seen as contemporary manifestations of age-old proselytising practices.<sup>7</sup> Many aspects of globalisation can also be regarded as amplifications rather than fundamental transformations of previous forms of human activity. To give merely one example, pilgrimages within the world religions have long challenged the salience of national borders or ethnic boundaries as definitive markers of identity and practice (Coleman and Elsner 1995). However, to talk today of conservative Protestantism

<sup>7</sup> The word evangelical comes from the Greek ‘evangelistes’, meaning ‘bringer of good tidings’.

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as a world religion does not mean quite the same as it would have done a century, or even half a century, ago. These Christians are responding to wider social processes that are rendering former understandings of territory, society and cultural identity increasingly problematic. Rudolph (1997:1) comments that religious communities are among the oldest of the transnationals, but that, in the contemporary situation, 'religion has expanded explosively, stimulated as much by secular global processes – migration, multinational capital, the media revolution – as by proselytizing activity'. In a curious sense, then, apparently secular aspects of modernity have actually increased the scope of religion rather than rendering it irrelevant. Along with many social movements, evangelicals and fundamentalists are negotiating their own interpretations of and relationships to global and (post-)modern processes. It may be, as Rudolph argues (*ibid.*:1), that transnational activity creates a liminal space that cuts across conventional political and cultural divisions. Yet such a space is neither homogeneous nor neutral in its constitution. As a realm of possibilities, it juxtaposes fragmented, dynamic and often competing versions of global consciousness and practice.

I hope to show how the Christians I have studied construct a place of their own, a specific arena of action and meaning, within the shifting, liminal, chaotic space of the global. Most of these Christians do not, of course, use a social scientific vocabulary to describe what they are doing (even though sociology and anthropology are now taught in some evangelical universities). They have, however, developed ways of engaging in global activity that overlap with but are not the same as methods adopted by, say, secular businessmen or members of Greenpeace. Part of the task of the social scientist in such a context must therefore be to develop a double hermeneutic, an academic interpretation of charismatic understandings of their world that takes 'fully . . . into account the reflexivity of the other' (Csordas 1994:xi).

A further dimension of my argument is that a global, charismatic 'consciousness' should not be understood as a purely cognitive cultural system. The orientations towards the world displayed by these Christians involve not merely a set of ideas, but also engagement in

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certain physical and material activities, including the development of a spiritually charged aesthetic that encompasses ritual movements, media consumption, linguistic forms and aspects of the external environment.<sup>8</sup> The global culture of the people discussed in this book is acted out and practised as much as it is discussed or even consciously reflected upon. I attempt to show how their religious ideology is manifested in the practical constitution of everyday life as well as in worship or explicit discourse (Comaroff 1985:5). Religious activities contribute to the creation of a form of charismatic 'habitus', a form of embodied disposition (discussed in chapter 5), that is geared towards the transcendence of the local and yet can be articulated in specific contexts of belief and practice. Understanding the constitution of this habitus requires an ethnographic appreciation of charismatic constructions of the person, of sociality, even of space and time.

My proposal is therefore that the global culture of these christians does not simply involve communicating across territorial boundaries. It also involves the creation of a multi-dimensional yet culturally specific sense of reaching out into an unbounded realm of action and identity. Seen in these terms, globalisation is not merely a broad sociological process; it is also a quality of action, a means of investing an event, object or person with a certain kind of translocal value. Berger and Luckmann (1966) have famously discussed the social construction of reality in terms which present such reality as resting on collectively maintained plausibility structures. The self is regarded as always engaged in a dialectical relationship with the socio-cultural world (Wuthnow et al. 1984:38). I am arguing that processes of globalisation do not simply happen to believers; they also create them in their own image. Engagement in such processes allows one plausibly to perceive oneself as part of (and contributing to) an ultimate reality where global and spiritual transcendence of the self become mutually reinforcing, even mutually constitutive, activities.

<sup>8</sup> Some work on evangelical aesthetics does exist, even if more is needed. Stromberg (1986:33), Forrest (1988), Peacock and Tyson (1989), Richardson (1990) and Lehmann (1996) integrate some consideration of Protestant architecture into wider arguments. McDannell (1995) presents a survey of material culture amongst a variety of Christian groups in North America.

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## CONTEXTS: PERSONAL, INTELLECTUAL, CULTURAL

It would be tempting for the sake of narrative coherence to claim that, some fifteen years ago when I began to carry out anthropological fieldwork on conservative Protestants, I had already decided to frame my research questions in relation to theories of globalisation. The realities of ethnographic investigation rarely achieve a seamless fit between intention and achievement, however. Thus my original plans bore a rather indirect relationship to the present work. My decision to work in Europe was fuelled – so it seems to me now – by various forms of intellectual perversity. Rather than journeying to remote climes, in common with most of my postgraduate colleagues, I had decided to apply anthropological ideas closer to home. With a family background that combined Eastern European Judaism, Scottish Presbyterianism and Anglo-Saxon atheism, and an education between the ages of seven and eighteen in a school founded on Benthamite principles of secular utilitarianism, I felt that charismatics were sufficiently remote from my everyday experience to warrant ethnographic investigation.

A search through various databases for references on conservative Protestantism resulted in a daunting printout containing thousands of references, produced by numerous social scientific studies. Most of the latter, I discovered, were carried out in the United States. My response was to try to locate some as yet unresearched groups in a Western context clearly different in significant ways from North America. Salvation, or at least some clues as to where to look, came in the form of David Martin's marvellously erudite *A General Theory of Secularization* (1978). The book's schematic characterisation of Protestant, liberal democracies (now, of course, some twenty years old) places the United States and the Scandinavian countries at opposite ends of a continuum of pluralism. The US is described as federalist in politics and religion. The notion of the dissenting denomination is said to have become widespread (see also Hunter 1987:7), along with a stress on feeling and spontaneity that suits denominational ideals of voluntarism and commitment; evangelical religion therefore has the potential to function as a dominant rather than counter motif within religious circles. According to Martin's framework, Scandinavian countries

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contrast sharply with the pluralism and heterogeneity of the United States. In Sweden, the Lutheran Church<sup>9</sup> has adapted itself to changes in the character of the state, which for much of the twentieth century has constituted a Social Democratic establishment. While the State Church has served as a repository of national and historic feeling, non-socialist politicians and religious peripheries have had little success in their attempts to resist the centre, and religion has not had a cultural or ethnic base from which to resist metropolitan influence.

Sweden, a supposed heartland of secularity, homogeneity and stability, seemed a perfect fieldwork site for an anthropologist seeking to study Protestant charismatics who were trying to flourish in a context remote from the dynamic pluralism of North America. My decision was also helped by the discovery of a feature of the country that is remarkable and yet rarely mentioned in works by social scientists who do not work in Scandinavia: relative to the size of the population and the supposed secularity of the culture, Sweden maintains a large Pentecostal Movement. Currently, around 90,000 people claim membership of the Movement in a national population of a little under nine million, and many adherents are highly active in their involvement. Throughout the past century, Swedish Pentecostals have created, among other things, a national daily newspaper, banking facilities and a television production company. Although many of these Christians retain a sense of spiritual and cultural peripherality in relation to national culture – and see such a stance as necessary to their revivalist principles – they have become an accepted part of the religious and cultural landscape of the country (Coleman 1989).

A preliminary visit to Sweden in 1985 helped me decide where I would conduct fieldwork. I had been recommended to talk to an academic based in Uppsala (a university town just north of Stockholm) who also happened to be a Pentecostalist. From him I learned not only about the local Pentecostal church that had been in the town for many decades, but also about a new charismatic group that had been set up in the early 1980s. My informant had not been to see the new group himself, but he said they were

<sup>9</sup> After many decades of debate, the Lutheran Church has, in fact, decided to become dis-established.



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becoming well known – indeed, highly controversial – in local Christian circles. I soon decided that my fieldwork would involve a comparison of these two churches: one old, one new; one established and respected, the other controversial. In particular, I wanted to examine relations between the two groups alongside a study of the different ways in which they negotiated relations with wider cultural, social and political contexts in the town.

The stage seemed set for research to commence. Indeed it was, but not quite as I had expected. The newer group that I had decided to study – called the Word of Life (*Livets Ord*)<sup>10</sup> – turned out to be rather more than a thorn in the side of local Christians: in fact, it was fast becoming a nationally known, even notorious, cultural phenomenon. I remember, for instance, an occasion in the late 1980s when I had returned to England after my first spell of fieldwork. I tuned my radio to a broadcast from Sweden. The programme was discussing themes that had preoccupied the country's media over the previous year. The speaker claimed (admittedly with some exaggeration) that Swedish journalists had discussed little over the past twelve months other than sex or the Word of Life. Such a juxtaposition of topics might have been viewed as unfortunate by members of the charismatic group, but few would have denied that they have become something of a national obsession during their short history. The Word of Life has acted as a catalyst for the kinds of moral panics that are more usually associated with New Religious Movements (Beckford 1985; Barker 1989). It has been described in public and private realms as a brainwashing, money-grabbing, heretical, dangerously right wing, Americanised and deeply un-Swedish institution (Coleman 1989).

I decided on a strategy of working in the Pentecostal congregation and the Word of Life at the same time to gain a sense of possible interactions between the two groups, and soon discovered that relations between the two were indeed strained. Many Pentecostals felt threatened both by the Word of Life's aggressive evangelism and by the fact that it appeared to be attracting members from more established congregations in the town, including their own. In the Pentecostal church itself, located in the centre

<sup>10</sup> The phrase appears in the New Testament. See for instance 1 John 1, where it refers to Jesus.

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of town and with around a thousand members, I found people to be readily accepting of my presence. Some simply assumed that I was a Pentecostalist myself, while others, who asked me about my own beliefs, took me for what I was, a sympathetic outsider. Indeed, I soon found that I had been assigned a specific identity. I was regularly greeted with the appellation 'our English brother' by the affable head pastor who perhaps did not always remember my name but knew where I fitted into the social scheme of the church. I joined the gospel choir, helped with producing educational cassettes for children, and regularly attended services and private study groups. I became part of a relatively stable religious community that was quite impressive in the degree to which members could subject each other to a kind of benign surveillance; it was also a community that seemed relatively sure of its place not only in the Swedish Pentecostal Movement, but also in the religious, social and cultural community of Uppsala.

Fieldwork at the Word of Life proved to be a very different experience. I located the group's premises in a rather desolate industrial zone to the east of the city centre. Rumours that researchers from Uppsala University's Theology Department had been subjected to policies of non-co-operation did not encourage me, but in the event a Pentecostalist missionary who frequently attended the Word of Life offered to help me find a way in. He selected the assistant pastor of the group as the person most likely to be sympathetic to my case. After a service, the pastor listened to my explanation that I wanted to write about churches in Uppsala for my doctoral dissertation and informed me that neither he nor anybody else at the ministry would have time to help my research – they had far too much to do. On the other hand, he would not stop me from attending Word of Life events and talking informally to its members. Relieved, I started to attend twice-weekly services at the group.

Unfortunately, I could not join the Word of Life's choir, as its professional aspirations far exceeded those of the gospel choir of the Pentecostal church: my enthusiastic but entirely tuneless singing would have appeared out of place in the seamless performances put on by members of the newer organisation. I also discovered that gaining a comprehensive overview of the activities of