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Asian Pentecostalism: A Journey of Lived Experience in Theology and Praxis

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Fax: +63 74 442 6378
email: info@apts.edu

P.O. Box 377, 2600 Baguio City, Philippines

IMPACTING THE FUTURE OF THE ASIA-PACIFIC CHURCH

[AJPS 29.1 (February 2029), pp. 1-4]

Asian Pentecostalism: A Journey of Lived Experience in Theology and Praxis

(Editorial)

At what Pentecostal theologian Russell Spittler described as the dawning of the global family of Pentecostal traditions, a group of Pentecostal scholars from around the world met in Costa Rica, Central America, in 1996 and produced a number of seminal papers that were later edited by Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen and published under the title, *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel,* in 1999.[1] Both the title and the scope of the book reflect the blend of global Pentecostalism as a blend of orthodoxy and orthopraxy on a global scale among both classical Pentecostals and the Charismatic Movements. Third Wave Pentecostalism, then in its infancy, was not yet a significant force in the broader movement. Also, the number of Majority World Pentecostal scholars, mostly from the Classical Pentecostal Tradition, was only beginning to burgeon.

Since that time, global Pentecostalism has continued to travel, grow, and diversify exponentially, in most cases maintaining its strong, balanced, emphasis on lived theology and praxis. This edition of the *AJPS*, along with our APTS Press publications (see www.aptspress.com), though not comprehensively, is part of our contribution to that journey in Asia.

Monte Lee Rice, a veteran missionary to Africa and Singapore, opens this edition by positing Pentecostal spiritual identity within the social-geographical situation here in Southeast Asia. He notes that social scientists have been recently focusing on this part of the world as a region rather than the individual nation-state paradigm. He then proceeds to explore implications of this for Pentecostal theology and

[1]Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen, eds., *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 1999), 1.

spirituality, both as a theoretical and lived experience, making it an excellent opening contribution to this edition.

Febriani writes concerning the Toraja people of South Sulawesi, Indonesia, that "although approximately 80 percent of the Torajan population now identifies as Christian, elements of their traditional animistic system remain influential, shaping family relationships and community rituals," reflecting the historical reality that traditional religious practices die slowly. She then talks about how Pentecostals, both in doctrine and praxis, can engage with the Toraja, bringing them into liberty in Christ, thus demonstrating the inherent flexibility in Pentecostal spirituality that focuses on a lived-out theology and practice in the daily lives of people.

Joan Milo deals with a similar situation among the Igorot tribes in the Cordilleran mountains in the northern Philippines. Like the Toraja in Febriani's article, both Christianity, including Catholicism, and traditional religious practices are strong among the Igorots. In this case, since Catholicism came with and was occasionally enforced by the colonial Spanish government (1565-1898), which Milo claims was focused on gold and taxes, Christianity made slow progress at first as the Igorots made no distinction between the Cross and the Crown. In the American colonial era (1898-1946), Christianity became a more attractive option to them because Americans demonstrated friendship and respect for the local culture and, reflected America's strong tradition of a separation between church and state. While Pentecostalism came before World War II, it received a significant boost with the arrival of American Assemblies of God missionary Elva Vanderbout, a middle-aged widow with no formal theological training. Vanderbout's focus on the ministry of the Word with signs and wonders following, as well as ministries of social concern, well demonstrated Pentecostalism's focus on a lived experience through doctrine and practice, which has continued to be a hallmark of Pentecostalism in the Cordilleras ever since. This blend has proven to be a strong response to the traditional religions that continue to be a challenge, while, at the same time, showing respect for the Igorot cultures. Among other things, she planted a church in Tuding, Benguet, on the outskirts of Baguio City and not far from where our campus is now located and earned the well-deserved reputation of being the mother church of the Assemblies of God in the Northern Philippines.

In a similar Northern Philippines context, in this case, Mankayan, Benquest, Ryan Hortizuela, deals with one specific Assemblies of God church, that has an unusual rehabilitation center for people who are coming out of demon-possessed lifestyles and are not yet ready to be integrated back into society. Located in a relatively small community,

the church is known throughout the Northern Philippines as the "Church of the Crazy People," given that so many of them were demon possessed, socially ostracized because of dysfunctional social behavior, just like the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1-20) and, in similar manner, have been delivered from demons, restored to their right minds, reconciled to God, and are in the process of being reconciled with their families and communities.

Khup Sian Sang then reflects on Pentecostals and other Christians engaging the Rohingya people, one of the marginalized tribes in his native Myanmar, many of whom also live as refugees across the border in Bangladesh due to persecution. While most of the people in Myanmar practice Buddhism or traditional religions, with most practicing a mixture of the two, the Rohingya are Sunni Muslims, who also mix Sufi mysticism and their traditional religions. For Khup, evangelism must involve faithfulness to the Scriptures and thorough knowledge of and sensitivity to the Rohingya culture. This calls for seeing issues like sin within an honor/shame paradigm, moving in signs and wonders, as well as the proclamation of the Word. In other words, he is calling for a sound combination of Pentecostal doctrine and praxis.

Filipino Pentecostal missionary Jay Angeles, a missionary to Indonesia, demonstrates Pentecostalism's focus on lived theology and praxis through Filipino Christians, working as Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) who may live in the restricted access countries in places like West Asia. Here, he contends that "despite constraints, Pentecostal practices among OFW Christians transcend geographical boundaries, serving as a vital component of their spiritual and cultural identity" and incorporate Pentecostalism's strong focus on cross-cultural missions along the way. He goes on to encapsulate well the theme of this edition:

> Pentecostalism offers a beacon of hope and resilience for many OFWs, providing them an emotional sustenance and a sense of community in a culturally different environment. The spiritual identity rooted in Pentecostal beliefs not only helps nurture their faith and allows them to live a victorious life but also empowers them to share the Gospel with both locals and fellow expatriates, particularly those from unreached people groups. Central to this identity is a distinct spirituality that emphasizes the figure of Christ as Savior, Baptizer of the Spirit, and Healer, which is expressed through their oral liturgy and communal practices.

Flint Hicks then gives us a Pentecostal perspective on the biblical

concept of blessing in his native Fiji. The Fijian concept was that blessing was originally developed long before missionaries came and was deeply embedded in their polytheism. Here, Hicks demonstrates that the context of blessing, which has a fairly wide semantic range, can include things such as *shalom,* the biblical concept of peace and the eschatological position that God will eventually restore things to a pristine state. Thus, the same term can be reinterpreted, this time applying to the God of the Bible, who alone is the source of all blessings.

Finally, our Pentecostal journey of a lived experience in theology and praxis broadens in what, for many of us, is a somewhat new part of the journey not yet fully accepted by many Pentecostals: dialogue with other Christian traditions. Here we present the press releases of four Pentecostal-Roman Catholic dialogues submitted by Cecil M. Robeck, one of the Pentecostal co-chairs of these dialogues. Robeck has been a leading voice in healing the divisions in the Body of Christ, especially among Catholics, the Reformed tradition, and the Lutherans worldwide for over forty years. We join him and others like him in a call to live out the desire of Christ expressed in John 17:21 that his body be one. In his lectures on our campus a number of years ago, he made the comment that no one had ever asked him to apologize for or in any way retract his Pentecostal spirituality. In my opinion, the eclectic nature of today's global Pentecostalism, including the Charismatic Movement that has impacted every other Christian tradition, more than justify this being included in our journey.

Meanwhile, the journey goes on as global Pentecostalism continues to grow, expand, and diversify, with all of its potential and challenges, in a lived experience of both theology and practice. But the journey is a whole lot more enriching and fun in the company of the international Pentecostal community. We'd love to have you join us. I, for one, am thoroughly enjoying this enriching and challenging journey.

Warmly,

Dave Johnson, D.Miss.
Managing Editor
www.aptspress.com

[AJPS 29.1 (February 2026), pp. 5-21

Renewing Asian Pentecostal Imagination Through a Regional Vision Approach[1]

Monte Lee Rice

Warrant for Regional-Looking Research Approach to Southeast Asian Pentecostalism

Research from within Pentecostal studies on Asian or Asian/Oceanic Pentecostalism have generally chronicled the history, development, and challenges of Southeast Asian (hereafter, SEAsian or SEAsia) Pentecostalism within contemporary nation-states, usually individually although sometimes combining two nations.[2] These studies have thus basically presumed the contemporary ASEAN formation for identifying SEAsian Pentecostalism.[3] Yet SEAsian studies are increasingly studying Southeast Asia from a regional perspective, recognizing that, although the term 'Southeast Asia' is a modern construct, significant physical/geographical and human civilizational commonalities indigenous to the region have for millennia distinguished it from the rest of Asia.[4] These

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[1]The original version of this essay ("Nanyang Pentecostalism: Retrieving Our Maritime Gifts for a Self-theologizing Southeast Asian Pentecostal Identity") was presented at the 2024 September 10-11 Asia Pacific Theological Association Theological Symposium, Thailand Pentecostal Seminary, Bangkok, Thailand. Special thanks to the peer-reviewers for their advice towards making this essay as widely culturally relevant as possible for the whole Southeast Asian Pentecostal readership.

[2]Denise A. Austin, Jacqueline Grey, and Paul W. Lewis, eds., *Asian Pacific Pentecostalism*, Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies vol. 31 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2019).

[3]Founded in 1967 ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) is the main Southeast Asian intergovernmental organisation, comprising the member states of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam.

[4]Anthony Reid, "A Saucer Model of Southeast Asian Identity," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 27, no. 1 (1999): 7-23 (8, 17-19); Andrew McGregor, Lisa Law,

studies do so for the sake of exploring pathways to the region's ongoing development while generally presuming that requisite to this is forging a regional SEAsian identity.[5] Hence, ASEAN-focused researchers and policymakers well recognize that ASEAN is a mid-20th century social construct that, although not synonymous with it, well intimates SEAsian identity predating ASEAN by countless centuries if not millennia.[6]

Moreover, archipelagic/nissological studies and archipelagic/nissological-rooted research disciplines are increasingly shaping SEAsian studies by exploring how the geography of the region's littoral/islandic/archipelagic terrains can evoke, for the flourishing development of SEAsia, conceptualized imaginaries and epistemologies indigenously derived from these physical geographies.[7] I thus propose that, given the imaginative potency resident within Pentecostal spirituality, SEAsian Pentecostal studies may find highly fruitful trajectories from these regional-looking research approaches towards SEAsia that are imaginatively taking their cue from the geographical and human-historiographical features that make this region a unique spatiality, presently called 'Southeast Asia.' Therefore, in this essay, I present a regional approach to SEAsian Pentecostalism which suggests a SEAsian Pentecostal identity and epistemic-imaginary derived through this region's very physical geography—meaning that the peninsular/archipelagic/nisso-terrains is structuring its correlating cultural/economic geographies. I aim to show how this approach suggests a stronger SEAsian Pentecostal-networked identity intrinsically purposed for the common good flourishing of SEAsia.

Tapping into the well-recognized value of sociologist Arjun Appadurai's globalizing 'imaginary scapes' or 'flows' concept,[8] I code

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and Fiona Miller, "Approaching Southeast Asian Development," in *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Development*, eds. Andrew McGregor, Lisa Law, and Fiona Miller (Abingdon, UK: Routledge: 2018), 4-7.

[5]Amitav Acharya, *The Making of Southeast Asia: International Relations of a Region* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2000; ISEAS Publishing, 2012), 25-38.

[6]Acharya, "The Evolution and Limitations of ASEAN Identity," in *Building ASEAN Community*, 25.

[7]Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel and Michelle Stephens, "Introduction: 'Isolated Above but Connected Below:' Toward New Global Archipelagic Linkages," in *Contemporary Archipelagic Thinking: Towards New Comparative Methodologies and Disciplinary Formations*, eds. Michelle Stephens and Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 3, 7–9, 16–17; Brian Bernards, *Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 15; Michael N. Pearson, "Littoral Society: The Concept and the Problems," *Journal of World History* 17, no. 4 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006): 353-373 (353).

[8]Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*,

these terrains through the phrase, *pen/arch/nisso-scapes*. I therefore suggest that SEAsian Pentecostal theology can retrieve from this geography a vital means towards my aim—namely, the epistemic reservoirs symbolically resident within its *pen/arch/nisso-scapes*. Moreover, I would venture that, contingent to the fullest potential the SEAsian Pentecostalism proffers towards the flourishing of Southeast Asia, is how deep it drills into the epistemic reservoirs resident within these *pen/arch/nisso-scapes*. I then proffer that SEAsian Pentecostalism has illustrated one particular epistemic good—that being its *pen/arch/nisso-scapes* all the more evoke through an archipelagic-tuned Pentecostal imagination—namely, the concept of network. This trajectory thus suggests that a regional approach to SEAsian Pentecostal studies prophetically summons SEAsian Pentecostalism to a stronger networked identity for both its own common good and the common good of SEAsia.

However, I must first acknowledge this caveat—that my locality within the multi-racial/religious island nation of Singapore intrinsically shapes my approach to SEAsian Pentecostal studies, for I naturally draw from ample Singapore-based research within SEAsian studies. Yet I believe this essay demonstrates fruitful trajectories for a regional approach to SEAsian Pentecostalism, serviceable to its many local expressions while foremost contributing to its regional identity and missional role towards the region's flourishing development.

Southeast Asia as Symbolic Space Evoking an Archipelagic Imagination

Geography of Southeast Asia

The term 'Southeast Asia' first emerged via the aftermath of World War II and was further solidified as a geopolitical construct through the formation of ASEAN in 1967.[9] SEAsian nations fall within two main physical geographies—the mainland zone comprised of Cambodia/Laos/Myanmar/Thailand/Vietnam and the insular zone comprised of Brunei/Indonesia/Malaysia/ Philippines/Singapore/Timor Leste. (Malaysia falls

Public Works vol. 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 33.

[9]Paul H. Kratoska, Remco Raben, and Henk Schulte Nordholt, "Locating Southeast Asia," in *Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space*, eds. Paul H. Kratoska, Remco Raben, and Henk S. Nordholt (Singapore: Singapore University Press Pte Ltd; Leiden, The Netherlands: KITLV Press, 2005), 1-2.

in both zones with its western part on the Malay Peninsula and its eastern part on the island of Borneo.)[10]

To utilize this description for framing this essay's core aims requires the following two further observations. *First*, describing Southeast Asia's physical geography by noting how it comprises a littoral-edged mainland zone, with the Thai-Malaysian peninsula linking the area to the Asian continent coupled with an insular/islandic area comprising the Malay-Indonesian and the Philippines archipelagos;[11] thus best appreciates Southeast Asia as altogether a distinctively maritime region. *Second*, the history of Southeast Asia demonstrates that its diverse cultures are consequential to its *pen/arch/nisso-scapes*, thus thoroughly maritime in its broadly enduring ways of life.[12]

Retrieving the Archipelagic Imagination from Nissological/Archipelagic/Littoral Studies

This survey demonstrates the relevancy of nissological/archipelagic/littoral studies ('nisso' meaning island or *islandic*; 'littoral' meaning coastland), which, in contrast to approaches/concerns derived from continental—or inland—characterized physical terrains/geographies, strive at exploring human social phenomena in ways directly derived from within nissological/archipelagic/littoral settings and geographies.[13] Moreover, post-/de-colonial sensitized nissological/archipelagic studies are steadily showing a relational turn comprising aesthetic/artistic disciplinary approaches.[14] As opposed to nisso-research from mainland vantage points, which have tended to correlate islands with insularity notions, this focus thus suggests liminal roles that islands play within the human imagination and experience towards fostering networked relationalities, particularly when they exist within archipelagic regions.[15]

Such studies, which posit that through imaginatively pondering the material dynamics of archipelagos (conversely extended to islands and littoral landscapes), allow conceptualizing a way of imagining

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[10]Robert L. Winzeler, *The Peoples of Southeast Asia Today: Ethnography, Ethnology, and the Change in a Complex Region* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2011), 6.

[11]Winzeler, *The Peoples of Southeast Asia*, 6.

[12]Jennifer L. Gaynor, "Maritime Southeast Asia: Not Just a Crossroads," *Education About Asia* 19, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 14-19 (14-15).

[13]Pearson, "Littoral Society," *Journal of World History*, 353.

[14]Sarah Nimführ and Laura Otto, "Doing Research On, With, and About the Island: Reflections On Islandscape," *Island Studies Journal* 15, no. 1 (2020): 185-204 (2-4); Miguel and Stephens, "Introduction," in *Contemporary Archipelagic Thinking*, 3-5, 7-9.

[15]Miguel and Stephens, "Introduction," in *Contemporary Archipelagic Thinking*, 7-9, 16-17.

possibilities in contrast to a continental imagination—namely, an 'archipelagic imagination.'[16] This generates indigenous ways of thinking and possibilities derivative from the very geography of littoral/nissological/archipelagic regions or, as in the case of SEAsia, from the networks of archipelagos that comprise this region. More particularly, archipelagic studies thus suggest an archipelagic-derived "episteme, an imaginary, a way of thinking, a poetic, a hermeneutic, a method of inquiry, a system of relations."[17]

Also pertinent is that some scholars within SEAsian studies and SEAsian-oriented nissological/archipelagic studies have explored how, through the region's ancient and ongoing inter-migratory movements within/beyond/coupled with its multi-cultural/ethnic/lingual diversity, the unique linguistic terms and concepts allow one to tease out imaginative possibilities and epistemic goods that this SE Asian archipelagic imaginary may generate.

For example, Chinese historian Brian Bernards has explored (particularly in Singapore and Malaysia) how the ancient yet enduring 'Nanyang' (meaning South Seas) idiom via SEAsian diasporic Chinese communities functions as a SEAsian imaginative and SEAsian identity-forming cultural trope. Yet it does so via implicit reference to the littoral/islandic/archipelagic SEAsian physical terrain.[18] Another Southeast Asian indigenous term that even more directly exemplifies the region's physical geography as a way of thinking is the Indonesian Javanese term, 'Wawasan Nusantara' (latter word meaning outer islands), signifying the archipelagic outlook. (Although as a caveat, we should note that the term was originally coined and popularized between 1967 and 1973 as a political ideology for promoting national unity.)[19] These are just two examples of how the physical terrain of SEAsia's *pen/arch/nisso-scapes* shapes SEAsian cultural imageries through which SEA archipelagic/nissological studies are conceptualizing epistemic goods.

This discussion therefore suggests that residing through the very physical terrain of SEAsian's *pen/arch/nisso-scapes* are flourishing, causing possibilities that this terrain metaphorically evokes through its physicality. One may thus approach SEAsia not as just a physical region but far more as a symbolic space of knowledge/cultural/religious/

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[16]Bernards, *Writing the South Seas*, 13.

[17]Miguel and Stephens, "Introduction," in *Contemporary Archipelagic Thinking*, 3.

[18]Bernards, *Writing the South Seas*, 8-10, 70-74, 81-85, 107-190, 195-199; Yvonne Low, "Remembering Nanyang Feng'ge," in *Modern Art Asia: Selected Papers Issues 1-8*, ed. Majella Munro (Cambridge, UK: The Enzo Press, 2012), 229-252.

[19]Miguel and Stephens, "Introduction," in *Contemporary Archipelagic Thinking*, 11-12.

spiritual production filled with unique epistemic goods serviceable for the region's common good;[20] plus (one would argue) suggesting ways of life that these *pen/arch/nisso-scapes* signify. For as Bernards posits, the SEAsian *pen/arch/nisso-scapes* (alluding to these through the Nanyang idiom) map a historically enduring archipelagic network of "cultural, political, and economic exchange."[21] Therefore, through its diverse peninsulas, islands, and waterways, the region physically beckons cultural-flows, interchanges, and new interdependencies within and beyond itself while conversely causing new cultural hybridities that further color its heterogeneously multi-ethnic/lingual diversity.[22]

One would also argue that, through the SEAsian *pen/arch/nisso-scapes,* the seas themselves metaphorically summon peoples to these networked interchanges.[23] One would further deduce from Bernards' analysis that the SEAsian *pen/arch/nisso-scapes* evoke (notwithstanding his pinpointing this evocation to the Nanyang idiom as a cultural-forming trope) an 'archipelagic imagination' being derivative from its littoral-island-maritime geography, aesthetically envisioning interdependent networks of cultural exchange that causes an ever-evolving inter/multi-cultural cosmopolitism.[24]

There is theological warrant for Bernards' thesis through African-American theologian Willie James Jennings' theology of land that is responsive to an operating tendency within the world economy which was much derived from the previous centuries of Western colonist expansion and that depreciates the role of land as a good divinely entrusted to its indigenous people and integral to their identity formation.[25] Yet Jennings argues that, implicit within the biblical themes of creation, land/place/geography and peoples, is the recognition that the land one stands on always summons its different peoples towards fleshly embodied union with one another; thus causing a generatively potent flourishing towards ever new configurations of cosmopolitism flourishing; requisitely achieved through the intimate acts of joining flesh to the other(s) before us.[26] This seems relevant as we continue forming a Christian witness

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[20]Willem van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20 (2002): 647-668 (649-650).0

[21]Bernards, *Writing the South Seas*, x.

[22]Ibid., 19-20, 22-23.

[23]Ibid., 15, 196.

[24]Ibid., x, 9–20, 22, 28, 196, 198–199.

[25]Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 8, 58, 133-134, 289, 292-293.

[26]Ibid., 7-11, 165-168, esp. 248-250, 265-268, 286-294. For a Pentecostal theology of creation that deeply resonates with Jennings' theological vision, see Steven M.

within all the racial/ethnic complexities that challenge the flourishing of Southeast Asia.

Yet to contextualize this creation theology, one must grasp it not from a continental but from a *pen/arch/nisso* perspective—that this land may divinely summon people to a way of life through the epistemic gifts its geography signifies, comprising both land and sea formations.

Identity-Forming Aims of Religious Symbolism and Pentecost

To orientate this envisioning of SEAsia as a symbolic space back towards the suggested regional approach to SEAsian Pentecostal studies requires discussing the identity-forming aims of religious symbolism. In so doing, one factors in the symbolic potency that Pentecost plays (or should play) towards the identity of Pentecostalism and hence SEAsian Pentecostalism. Through this method, one pivots the narrative configuration of SEAsian Pentecostal identity from the colonist-era rooted Southeast Asia construct to the more indigenously-rooted iconic elements that the SEAsian archipelagic-tuned Pentecostal imagination would associate with the region's primeval-harkening *pen/arch/nisso-scapes*. Now one can aptly augment this regional research method's perception of the SEAsian *pen/arch/nisso-scapes* as a symbolic space of knowledge, cultural, religious, and spiritual production (and hence flourishing) by considering the identity-forming potency of religious symbols in general, thereby reconceiving 'SEAsian Pentecostalism' itself as a religious symbol—hence, an identity-signifying symbol rather than merely a geographically descriptive category.'

One begins by exploring how the symbolic potency of the SEAsian *pen/arch/nisso-scapes* aptly augments SEAsian Pentecostal identity and its imaginative capacities. To develop this argument, one will first explain its underlying Geertzian/Turnerian notions of religious symbolism. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) observed that, as condensations of a people's worldview, religious symbols powerfully capacitate them with dispositions impacting their behaviour and orientations towards the cosmic order that they signify.[27] Victor Turner (1920–1983) went one step further by stressing the efficacious power of religious symbols towards catalysing social action and norms.[28] Ample

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Studebaker, *The Spirit of Atonement: Pentecostal Contributions and Challenges to the Christian Traditions* (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 179-199.

[27]Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90-91, 95.

[28]Victor W. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndemhu Ritual* (London, UK: Cornell University Press, 1967), 20, 22, 80.

studies show how Turner's insight applies to all religious traditions, particularly through their worship/spirituality practices; including Christianity[29] and even more—Pentecostalism.[30]

The transforming potency of religious symbols operates through their engagement with the human imagination, specifically through what might be called our religious or spiritual imagination or what Yong has conceptualized as the "pneumatological imagination."[31] This resonance transpires to the degree that, through the grace of God, a symbol points us towards the saving presence of God active within creation;[32] including cultural artifacts such as the symbols we create to use within our religious traditions.[33] Therefore, the traditions we embrace help shape the pneumatological imagination within us, granting (for better or worse) a hermeneutic through which we read the world and imaginatively give it meaning. Thus, an identity formation is nearing through a symbolic approach, recognizing that the names people give themselves intrinsically function as symbols that point them to and form them into the realities that they signify.

To appropriate these premises to SEAsian Pentecostalism it helps to draw help from Pentecostal theologian Wolfgang Vondey's theology of Pentecost, which is grounded in a theology of symbols. He stresses that Pentecost functions as the core theological symbol identifying Pentecostalism, thus shaping its theology, practices, and telos.[34] Reflecting on biblical history (its roots as a harvest festival[35]), the Acts 2 narrative eschatologically pivots its significance to the prophetic promise that 'latter rains' cause overflowing harvest (Joel 2:18-32; esp. 2:23; Acts 2:16-21) and hence the flourishing fullness of God's purposes for all

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[29]Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life. A Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 8.

[30]Martin Lindhardt, "Introduction," in *Practicing the Faith: The Ritual Life of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians*, ed. Martin Lindhardt (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 29-30.

[31]Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions*, Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement 20 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 133.

[32]Ibid., 29, 99.

[33]Yong was building on Walter Hollenweger's stress on the Holy Spirit's role in the doctrine of previent grace; *Discerning the Spirit(s),* 10, 26, 123, 175-182 191-192, 219, 293, 296. See Walter J. Hollenweger, "Creator Spiritus: The Challenge of Pentecostal Experience to Pentecostal Theology," *Theology* 81, no. 679 (1978): 32-40; Ibid., *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 132-141, 266-267, 352-353, 383, 399.

[34]Wolfgang Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology: Living the Full Gospel* (London, UK: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 1, 11, 281.

[35]Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2012), 786-787.

creation.[36] Through its symbolic potency, Pentecost summons us towards the flourishing it signifies.[37]

In the identity-forming name of SEAsian Pentecostalism, the word 'SEAsian' thus signifies three concurrent themes—(1) the *pen/arch/nisso-scapes* of SEAsia; (2) through archipelagic-tuned Pentecostal imagination, the 'common good serviceable epistemic gifts' that these physical terrains may signify; and (3) all detrimental challenges posed from within and without towards the region's development. Therefore, by accentuating the iconic referencing of SEAsia to its *pen/arch/nisso-scapes* and situating this reference within the symbolic reservoir that the name 'SEAsian Pentecostalism' signifies, one opens an epistemic wellspring from which he or she discovers and retrieves indigenous knowledges/epistemologies, moral goods, and even spiritual gifts primevally resident within this region and serviceable towards its flourishing. It is thus now suggested contingent to the fullest potential that SEAsian Pentecostalism proffers towards the common good of SEAsia as a flourishing region is how deep it drills into the epistemic wellsprings that these *pen/arch/nisso-scapes* signify through a SEAsian *pen/arch/nisso-scapes*-tuned Pentecostal imagination.

Evocations of SEAsian *Pen/arch/nisso-scapes* to Networking Giftedness of SEAsian Pentecostalism

As one example of how the SEAsian *pen/arch/nisso-scapes*-tuned Pentecostal imagination might discern and retrieve epistemic goods evoked through the region's physical geography, consider an earlier-noted core epistemic good that is evident via its symbolic potency already operative within SEAsian Pentecostalism—namely, the concept of 'network' or 'networking dynamics.' This is highly significant given the vast research over these past decades and continues within the present day that demonstrates the rise and aptness of network imageries, concepts, and structures for developing the 21st century information age that enjoins an ongoing evolvement as global network societies.[38]

One can further offer a working definition that combines Manuel Castells' seminal 'network' definition with philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's 'rhizome' notion and Appadurai's 'flow' theory.

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[36]Studebaker, *From Pentecost to the Triune God: A Pentecostal Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 67-72, 88-90; Ibid., *The Spirit of Atonement*, 17-39, 94-96.

[37]Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology*, 1, 11, 281.

[38]Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed. with a New Preface (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1996; Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), xviii-xliv.

Castells defines 'network' as a set of interconnected nodes (the term 'nodes' signifying dense localities) operating as highly dynamic, expanding, open structures, and systems through which global/regional flows interact, causing eruptions of innovations within the network.[39] As a botanical imagery of a tangled root system generating growth in random new directions,[40] Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome notion helps to understand how the archipelagic imagination envisions the potentialities erupting throughout the networked localities of SEAsian Pentecostalism.

Now keep in mind that, within the past few decades to the present, ample research has shown an increasing operation of network dynamics that are driving newly rising Christian movements, particularly within Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity.[41] However, SEAsian Pentecostalism has conversely demonstrated a significant propensity to network forms of Christianity.[42] Yet from significant research within Pentecostal studies, it is argued that, since its early 20th century beginnings, world Pentecostalism emerged and continues as a globally-networked religious discourse movement[43] substantially growing through the grassroots discursive practices and experiences exemplifying and fuelling the historic revivalistic ethos of Pentecostal spirituality.[44] Pentecostalism worldwide thus numerically and phenomenologically comprises a rhizomatic global-networked diversity of transworld

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[39]Ibid., xxxii, 501-502.

[40]Gilles Deleuz and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 7.

[41]Brad Christerson and Richard Flory, *The Rise of Network Christianity: How Independent Leaders are Changing the Religious Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6-12, 45-47; Richard John Roberts, "Networked Church: Theological, Sociological and Historical Consideration," *Pneuma* 42 (2020): 68-89 (88-89).

[42]Terence Chong and Daniel P.S. Goh, "Asian Pentecostalism: Revivals, Mega-Churches, and Social Engagement," in *Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia*, eds. Bryan S. Turner and Oscar Salemink (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015), 411; Terence Chong, "Introduction," in *Pentecostal Megachurches in Southeast Asia: Negotiating Class, Consumption and the Nation*, ed. Terence Chong (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2018), 13.

[43]Michael Bergunder, "The Cultural Turn," in *Studying Global Pentecostalism: Theories and Methods*, eds. Allan H. Anderson, Michael Bergunder, André Droogers, and Cornelis van der Laan (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), 54-56; Ibid., "Constructing Pentecostalism: On Issues of Methodology and Representation," *The Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 27, no. 1 (2007): 52-71.

[44]Lindhardt, "Introduction," in *Practicing the Faith*, 1-6, 29-30; Joel Robbins, "The Obvious Aspects of Pentecostalism: Ritual and Pentecostal Globalization," in *Practicing the Faith*, 49-51, 65.

poly-nucleated/originating spiritualties, movements, and discourse traditions[45]—hence, 'Pentecostalism.'[46]

While SEAsian Pentecostalism exemplifies the effectiveness of world Pentecostalism at utilizing global market dynamics and transnational culture flows for its aims, this exemplification is largely consequential to the SEAsian *pen/arch/nisso-scapes* physically structuring its correlating cultural/economic geographies for the following two reasons. *First*, SEAsian development research shows that globalizing processes have been shaping SEAsia through 'networked connections' engaging its human diversities that are constantly changing, moving, and evolving through the regional and global flows energizing the whole SEAsian economy, regardless of those ASEAN nations at present economically impoverished, closed to regional/international trade, or politically restricted.[47] *Second*, regardless of these challenges, the SEAsian *pen/arch/nisso-scapes*, coupled with adequate levels of indigenization fostered through nearly a century of Pentecostal presence throughout SEAsia, have been fostering a regional SEAsian Pentecostal identity in ways that grant Pentecostal movements in the region's more impoverished nations a substantial share within the spiritual, social, and even financial goods/capital of SEAsian Pentecostalism.[48]

Three summary statements recap this conclusive implication. *First*, grounding SEAsian Pentecostal identity to the region's *pen/arch/nisso-scapes* suggests an archipelagic imagination that powerfully evokes the global shift towards contemporary network dynamics, generally proving helpful towards the ongoing development of information- and technology-rich societies. *Second,* and more vital for SEAsian Pentecostal identity, because within the archipelagic imagination the term 'SEAsian' signifies these *pen/arch/nisso-scapes*, the name 'SEAsian Pentecostalism' aptly symbolizes the essential network/networking phenomena that have historically structured and fostered the global expansion of Pentecostalism worldwide. *Third*, the upshot

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[45]Allan H. Anderson, "The Dynamics of Global Pentecostalism: Origins, Motivations and Future," in *Spirit of God: Christian Renewal in the Community of Faith*, eds. Jeffrey W. Barbeau and Beth Felker Jones (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 112-113.

[46]Anderson, "Pentecostal Theology as a Global Challenge: Contextual Theological Constructions," in *The Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology*, ed. Wolfgang Vondey (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2020), 18-19.

[47]McGregor, Law and Miller, "Approaching Southeast Asian Development," in *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Development*, 6-7.

[48]Jeremy James, "A Moral Economy in Motion: The Dynamics and Limitation of a Pentecostal Alternative Society in Cambodia," in *New Religiosities,* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 96-116.

of this proposed visioneering of SEAsian Pentecostal identity through this evoked archipelagic imaginary ecumenically proffers towards world Pentecostalism. In other words, insofar that SEAsian Pentecostalism retrieves the epistemic goods symbolically resident within the region's *pen/arch/nisso-scapes*, SEAsian Pentecostalism powerfully exemplifies how world Pentecostalism functions within world Christianity as a renewal movement comprising a global-network of discourse communities, finding their identity within the flourishing fullness that Pentecost signifies.

Conclusion

To recap this essay's core themes, I have proffered a regional approach to SEAsian Pentecostal studies that intrinsically functions through its SEAsian archipelagic-tuned imagination. Finding it helpful towards broadening the SEAsian Pentecostal imagination for the region's common good in ways congruent to its own giftedness as a highly effective networked/networking religious movement, I have drawn on aesthetical insights from contemporary archipelagic/nissological studies. This optic thus envisions the SEAsia geography as a symbolic space signifying epistemic gifts resident within the SEAsian *pen/arch/nisso-scapes* through the archipelagic-tuned Pentecostal imagination.

These *scapes* summon that we retrieve these goods for the ongoing identity formation of SEAsian Pentecostalism, which as an indigenous SEAsian religious movement may proffer towards the SEAsian region for its common good flourishing. To illustrate how the SEAsian *pen/arch/nisso-scapes*-tuned Pentecostal imagination might discern and retrieve epistemic goods evoked through the regions physical geography, I then suggest how these *pen/arch/nisso-scapes* summon SEAsian Pentecostalism to its own epistemic giftedness as a highly effective network/networking movement.

I now conclude with several implications that call for further exploration. *First*, we indeed let the SEAsian *pen/arch/nisso-scapes* function through their symbolic potency as an epistemic wellspring. With ears tuned to the Spirit of God, which for millennia has been preveniently gracing the *pen/arch/nisso-scapes* of SEAsia, we may well find from this wellspring many good gifts not actualized yet wholly serviceable for the region's common good. Thus we will expansively retrieve these gifts from the many islands, tongues, and peoples that together signify moral goods, such as epistemic diversity, symmetrically-networked relationality, ecological harmony, and rhizomatically linked eventful

spaces[49]—all of which generate newly imagined possibilities and energies[50] for fuelling the missional vitality of SEAsian Pentecostalism and hence the flourishing common good for SEAsia and beyond it to the ends of the earth.

Second, this regional research approach summons us to retrieve (far beyond that commonly practiced in SEAsian Pentecostalism, and its theological guild) epistemologies and knowledges deeply embedded within the region's greater religious/philosophical traditions. I believe this endeavour would foster the following long-term outcomes:

- Promoting SEAsian Pentecostalism's viability as an emically acknowledged, indigenous religious movement within the region's broader religious landscape.
- Aiding the ongoing construction of indigenous SEAsian Pentecostal theologies ecumenically serviceable to the world knowledge economy.
- Raising the functioning of SEAsian Pentecostal philosophy(ies) as epistemic reservoirs evidencing SEAsian Pentecostalism as a wisdom tradition filled with moral goods serviceable for the region's common good flourishing; even to the ends of the earth.

Third, we should keep raising the moral bar that the networked/networking giftedness of SEAsian Pentecostalism enjoins towards our interdependency. We are to remind ourselves that SEAsia comprises (for varied reasons) geographies restricted to the flourishing that marks other geographies where SEAsian Pentecostalism enjoys its densest socio-economic integration within the region's wealth. Now, if we realize the rightness of SEAsian studies regarding efforts towards solidifying a regional identity for fostering shared/equitable development, SEAsian Pentecostal studies must conversely (through the summoning spirit of its name) prophetically comprise within its research inquiries/agendas purposed towards exploring how communities within SEAsian Pentecostal networks, marked by enjoyed higher levels of socio-economic wealth in the face of ever-changing geopolitical challenges, can envision and missionally labour towards a constant equitable sharing

[49]Alain Badiou with Fabian Tarby, *Philosophy and the Event*, trans. Louise Burchill (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 9-10, 12, 35.

[50]Nimi Wariboko, *The Charismatic City and the Public Resurgence of Religion: A Pentecostal Social Ethics of Cosmopolitan Urban Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 184–187.

of resources for the ongoing regional development of both SEAsian Pentecostalism and SEAsia.

As we let the symbolic import of our SEAsian *pen/arch/nisso-scapes* renew our SEAsian Pentecostal identity and imagination, we receive from these seas, coastlines, and islands newly rising symmetrically-gifted networks with and through one another for the common good flourishing that Pentecost signifies. For to us does the Lord of the seas and lands of SEAsia[51] summon our will to its flourishing until all the world becomes the paradise of God and his glory fills the earth as the waters cover the seas.

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[51]I have here drawn inspiration from research on traditional literature and folklore throughout Southeast Asia as a "trans-local cultural motif" frequently refers to a nameless person "often called the Lord of the Land." In this folklore tradition, the identity of this person varies from that of a spirit, a community founder, a village head, a revered ancestor, or a royal king or queen who, through mediatorship with the spirit-world, has secured its blessing for the land's fertility on behalf of the people living on it as hence—its stewards; Robert Wessing, "The Lord of the Land Relationship in Southeast Asia," in *Spirits and Ships: Cultural Transfers in Early Monsoon Asia*, eds. Andrea Acri, Roger Blench, and Alexandra Landmann (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2017), 515-520, 522, 544-545.

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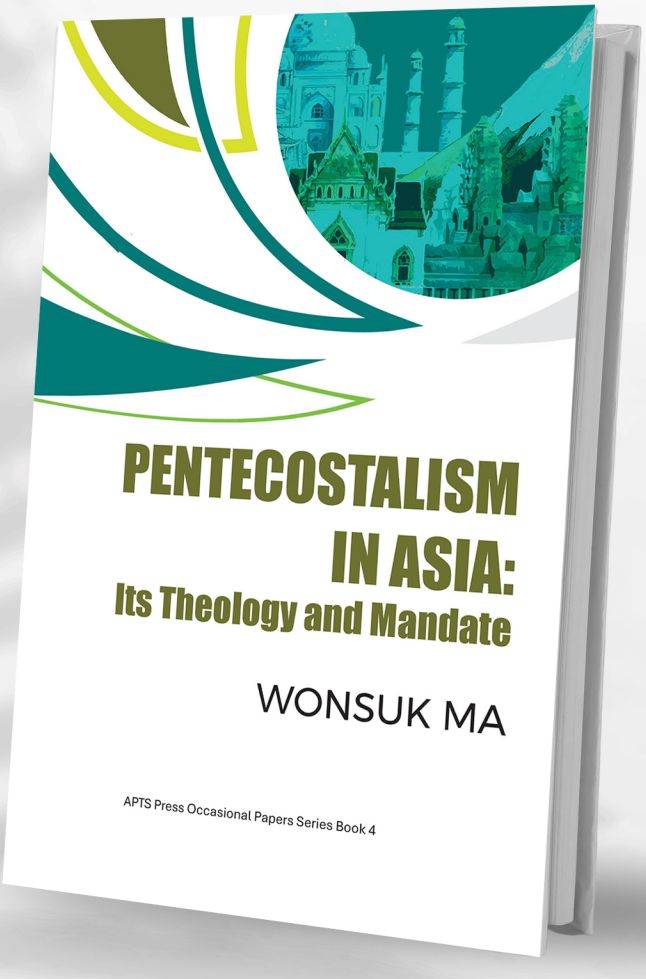

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A Pentecostal Response to Animistic Beliefs in Toraja, Indonesia

Febriani

Introduction

In culturally rich contexts such as that of the Toraja people in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, engaging with animistic beliefs requires respectful and sensitive Pentecostal ministry. Although approximately 80 percent of the Torajan population now identifies as Christian, elements of their traditional animistic culture remain influential, shaping family relationships and community rituals.

For Pentecostal workers, this cultural landscape presents opportunities to introduce the gospel in ways that respect local values while addressing the challenge of syncretism. Some scholars suggest that early missionaries may not have fully addressed these animistic elements, allowing traditional practices to blend with Christianity.[1] To create openness to the gospel while encouraging a clear, faithful approach to Christian teachings, building genuine relationships and understanding local customs are essential. This article explores how Pentecostal theology and practical ministry can engage with the animistic beliefs of the Toraja people, focusing on ways Pentecostal believers can respond to these traditions with cultural sensitivity while maintaining theological integrity and respectful ministry approaches.

Delimitations and Limitations

This study will focus specifically on animistic practices unique to the Toraja region, excluding broader animistic traditions found in other

[1]Zakaria and Muhammad Hasyim, "Conflict and Solution of Zending Evangelism on Aluk Todolo Belief Ideology in Toraja Society," *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics* 15, no. 3 (2022): 667-680.

parts of Indonesia or Southeast Asia. By concentrating on the cultural context of Toraja, this article aims to provide a detailed and relevant understanding of how these practices and traditions function within Torajan society. Limiting the scope in this way allows for a deeper analysis of how Pentecostal ministry can thoughtfully engage with a singular, culturally rich example of animism rather than attempting a generalized approach. The use of academic resources will help ensure that the discussion remains grounded in established research while practical theological insights will aim to bridge cultural understanding with real-life ministry application.

The scope of this article will be limited to Pentecostal perspectives and ministry responses, focusing on how practiced Pentecostal theology can engage animistic traditions. While other Christian denominations and religious groups are active in Toraja, this study will not examine the views or strategies of these groups. Additionally, the article will not cover the practices of the small percentage of the Torajan population that practices Islam, as the focus remains on animistic beliefs and their interaction with Pentecostal Christianity. By concentrating on a Pentecostal perspective, this study seeks to contribute specific recommendations for Pentecostal workers among the Torajans.

Purpose and Significance

In exploring the intersection of practiced Pentecostal theology and Torajan animism, this article aims to contribute to a growing body of research on how Christian ministers can effectively and respectfully interact with indigenous beliefs in Indonesia. The findings may provide valuable insights for Pentecostal ministries in similar cultural contexts, offering principles that combine theological faithfulness with cultural sensitivity. The aim is not only to understand the dynamics between Pentecostal beliefs and Torajan animistic practices but also to offer guidance on how to build meaningful and respectful relationships that honor the Torajan culture.

Overview of Animistic Beliefs in Toraja

The Toraja people of South Sulawesi have practiced animism for centuries, with a system of beliefs known as *aluk to dolo*, or "the way of the ancestors," shaping every aspect of their lives.[2] This spiritual framework connects the Torajans to their ancestors, the natural world,

[2]J. Tammu and H. Van der Veen, *Kamus Toraja-Indonesia* (Rantepao, 1972).

and the community, guiding not only their religious practices but also their social and cultural structures. Before the introduction of Christianity in the early 20th century, *aluk to dolo* was the primary lens through which Torajans understood their world, helping them interpret natural events, social roles, and even health and fortune.[3] Over time, as Christianity spread, the influence of *aluk to dolo* remained strong, blending with new religious elements without losing its presence in daily life.[4] Understanding the historical importance of *aluk to dolo* provides insight into why so many traditional practices have endured, as they continue to define Torajan identity and values, providing a foundation for community life and individual purpose.

At the heart of *aluk to dolo* is the belief that all elements of the world, both living and non-living, carry a spiritual essence that connects them to a larger network of relationships.[5] This worldview holds that animals, plants, rivers, mountains, and even crafted objects like tools and heirlooms may possess spirits, which the Torajans believe influence human lives.[6] These spirits are treated with respect, as they are thought to have the power to bring fortune or misfortune based on how they are regarded. For the Torajan people, the natural and spiritual worlds are closely linked, and they approach nature with caution and reverence, honoring spirits to maintain balance and harmony.[7] This perspective explains why certain natural sites and objects are regarded as sacred and why rituals to honor the spirits are so central to daily life. The presence of spirits in everything reinforces the interconnectedness that *aluk to dolo* teaches, reminding the Torajans that each action toward nature and others has meaning and consequence in the spiritual realm.[8]

Among the most significant expressions of *aluk to dolo* are the Torajan funeral rites known as *rambu solo*.[9] Considered the most important ceremony in Torajan culture, *rambu solo* reflects their view of death not as a sudden departure but as a gradual transition to the afterlife.

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[3]F. Bararuallo, *Kebudayaan Toraja* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Universitas Atma Jaya, 2010).

[4]John Liku Ada', *Aluk To Dolo Menantikan Tomanurun dan Eran Di Langi' Sejati: Ia datang agar Manusia Mempunyai Hidup dalam Segala Kelimpahan* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Gunung Sopai, 2014).

[5]Ibid.

[6]L. T. Tangdilintin, *Toraja dan Kebudayaannya* (Rantepao: Yayasan Lepongan Bulan, 1981).

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ada', *Aluk To Dolo Menantikan Tomanurun*.

[9]R. Ismail, "Ritual Kematian Dalam Agama Asli Toraja 'Aluk To Dolo' (Studi Atas Upacara Kematian Rambu Solok)," *Religi: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama* 15, no. 1 (2019): 87-106.

In Toraja, the deceased are kept in a transitional state until the family can hold the *rambu solo* ceremony, which may take months or years to prepare due to its elaborate and costly nature. During this ceremony, buffaloes and pigs are sacrificed to honor the deceased, with the belief that these animals assist in carrying the soul to the afterlife. The number of animals sacrificed reflects the family's respect for the deceased, as well as their social status within the community.[10] Community members gather to participate in feasting, traditional music, dances, and ritual acts that symbolize the soul's journey. *Rambu solo* does more than honor the deceased. It reinforces community bonds and strengthens social relationships, as family members and villagers come together to support one another in this shared responsibility. The rite ensures that the deceased will join the ancestors as a guardian spirit for the family, watching over the living and influencing their fortunes.[11]

Connected to the Torajan beliefs surrounding death is *ma'nene*, the ritual of cleaning the corpses.[12] Unlike *rambu solo*, which is performed only once to mark the deceased's passage, *ma'nene* is a regular ritual in which family members exhume the mummified bodies of their ancestors, clean them, and redress them in fresh clothing. Practiced every one to three years, *ma'nene* is a powerful expression of the Torajans' ongoing relationship with their ancestors, showing that even after death, the deceased remain an active part of the family. During this ritual, family members converse with the deceased, sharing news and asking for blessings, reinforcing the belief that the spirits of the ancestors continue to influence their lives. This unique custom reflects the Torajan understanding that the dead are not truly "gone" but exist as protectors and guides, deeply involved in the lives of their descendants. *Ma'nene* highlights the Torajans' commitment to honoring their heritage and ancestors, revealing how even the deceased are connected into the daily life of the community.[13]

Other life-cycle rituals are also a core part of *aluk to dolo*, marking important transitions in a Torajan's journey from birth to adulthood.[14] Each stage of life, from birth to marriage, is celebrated through specific rites, as these moments are seen as transitions that connect the individual to the spirits and ancestors. At birth, for example, rituals are performed to welcome the infant and invite health, protection, and blessings from the spiritual world. A naming ceremony often follows, during which elders

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[10]Ibid.
[11]Ibid.
[12]Tangdilintin, *Toraja dan Kebudayaannya*.
[13]Ibid.
[14]Ada', *Aluk To Dolo Menantikan Tomanurun*.

invoke ancestral guidance for the child, ensuring that the new family member is introduced to the community under spiritual protection. As children grow, circumcision ceremonies mark their passage into adulthood, preparing them to take on new responsibilities within the family and community. During this rite, prayers and offerings are made to spirits and ancestors to grant strength and guidance for the young person.[15]

Each of these life-stage rituals brings the community together, reinforcing the Torajans' belief in collective responsibility and the importance of spiritual connection throughout life.[16]

Marriage, too, is a significant rite within *aluk to dolo*, as it represents not only the union of two individuals but also the joining of two family lineages.[17] The wedding ceremony includes various rituals meant to honor both families' ancestors, asking for their blessings to ensure a harmonious and prosperous marriage. Gifts, such as cloth and food, are offered to the spirits to show respect and gratitude. This ceremony is a public commitment to family and community, reinforcing the collective values of the Torajan culture. By honoring both lineages, the marriage rites acknowledge the role of ancestors in family life, seeking their protection for the new couple as they begin their life together. Marriage in Torajan society is not only a private union but a communal event that upholds social bonds and strengthens relationships within the broader community.[18]

The Torajan reverence for ancestral spirits is not limited to funeral and life-cycle rites; it also extends to specific places and objects considered sacred.[19] The spirits of ancestors, or *to mamali*, are believed to reside in particular sites, such as family burial grounds or mountain areas, which are treated as sacred places.[20] Certain objects, known as *pusaka* or heirlooms, are thought to carry the spirit of ancestors, acting as symbols of protection and guidance for the family.[21] These power objects, which may include jewellery, weapons, or ceremonial tools, are passed down through generations and used in rituals to invoke ancestral presence.[22] Visiting sacred sites and making offerings at these locations are common practices, especially during significant events when

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[15]Ibid.
[16]Tangdilintin, *Toraja dan Kebudayaannya*.
[17]Ada', *Aluk To Dolo Menantikan Tomanurun*.
[18]Tangdilintin, *Toraja dan Kebudayaannya*.
[19]Ibid.
[20]Ibid.
[21]Ibid.
[22]Ibid.

blessings are needed.[23] These power places and objects reinforce the Torajans' connection to their heritage, as they believe that by honoring these sacred symbols, they maintain a strong bond with their ancestors and secure their blessings for the future.[24]

Food is a primary form of offering to the spirits and ancestors.[25] During major ceremonies, such as *rambu solo*, *ma'nene*, and marriage rites, food and animal sacrifices are presented to appease the spirits and to strengthen the bond between the human and spiritual worlds.[26] Buffaloes, a symbol of wealth and respect, are often sacrificed during funeral rites, symbolizing the deceased's journey to the afterlife.[27] Following these sacrifices, the community gathers to share in the feast, a tradition that reinforces social unity and collective reverence for the spiritual realm. These communal meals are both acts of gratitude and expressions of respect, as each offering and meal reinforces the connection between the Torajans and the spirits they honor.[28]

Torajan society is further governed by various social taboos, concepts of honor, and notions of shame, all of which are closely tied to *aluk to dolo*.[29] Certain actions, such as neglecting ancestral burial sites, disrespecting sacred rituals, or failing to perform ceremonies properly, are considered dishonorable and thought to invite negative consequences from the spirits. Honor in Toraja is not just about individual reputation but reflects the respect one shows toward traditions, family, and community. Failure to observe social and spiritual responsibilities is seen as bringing shame not only to oneself but to the entire family. These values are deeply embedded in Torajan society, shaping the way people view their roles and responsibilities to both the living and the spirits. By respecting these cultural norms, the Torajans demonstrate their commitment to *aluk to dolo* and their ongoing relationship with the spiritual forces that govern their lives.[30]

Despite the strong presence of Christianity in Toraja, *aluk to dolo* and animistic beliefs have remained resilient, adapting in ways that allow both traditions to coexist. Many Torajans incorporate Christian practices into their traditional rituals, creating a unique blend of beliefs that respects both Christian and animistic values. This blending reflects

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[23]Ibid.
[24]Ibid.
[25]Bararuallo, *Kebudayaan Toraja*.
[26]Ismail, "Ritual Kematian Dalam Agama Asli Toraja."
[27]Ibid.
[28]Ibid.
[29]Tangdilintin, *Toraja dan Kebudayaannya*.
[30]Ibid,

the fine line between contextualization, where the understanding Christian message is seen within the local culture, and syncretism, where religious practices mix in ways that may alter core beliefs. For some, this blending allows Christianity to feel more relevant within Torajan life; however, it also raises questions about whether early missionaries adequately addressed the influence of *aluk to dolo* in order to prevent such syncretism. This issue remains a delicate balance for Pentecostal ministry, as efforts to make Christianity accessible must also carefully preserve the distinctiveness of the gospel message without undermining the cultural identity of the Torajan people.

Pentecostal Theology and Practical Ministry in Response to Animistic Beliefs

In contexts where animistic beliefs are deeply embedded, Pentecostal ministry faces both challenges and opportunities for meaningful engagement.[31] In Torajan culture, like many animistic systems, the world is filled with spirits and supernatural forces that actively influence daily life. From natural features to ancestral spirits, these forces are central to the Torajan understanding of reality. For Pentecostals, whose theology emphasizes the Holy Spirit's active presence, this framework provides a unique opportunity to share a faith that connects with the existing worldview while introducing a transformative approach to spiritual power.[32] However, effective ministry requires a careful approach, one that respects local customs while sharing the distinct message of the gospel. Drawing from the insights of Paul Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou in their work on folk religion, a balanced response involves seeing the animistic worldview as meaningful and culturally significant, rather than as superstition.[33] This perspective allows Pentecostal ministries to build trust, avoid alienation, and present the gospel as something both familiar and intriguing.[34]

One core aspect of Pentecostal theology that aligns well with animistic beliefs is its emphasis on the Holy Spirit's active presence in the world. Pentecostal teachings present the Holy Spirit as an accessible, comforting presence that empowers believers and gives them spiritual

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[31]Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[32]Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).

[33]Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999).

[34]Ibid.

gifts. This connects with animistic perspectives, which view the world as populated with active spiritual forces that influence human lives.[35] Pentecostal theology offers the Holy Spirit as a direct, personal source of guidance and power, contrasting with animistic practices that rely on multiple spirits.[36] Ministers can present this aspect of their faith as meeting the desire for connection with the spiritual world while offering a more personal and accessible relationship with God.

An effective Pentecostal ministry in this context must also focus on relationship-building and cultural understanding.[37] Engaging with animistic beliefs requires sensitivity to the cultural significance of these practices. Instead of directly rejecting or condemning rituals, Pentecostal workers benefit from understanding what these practices mean to people. In line with insights from Charles Kraft, Pentecostal ministry in animistic contexts requires an approach that prioritizes encounters that empower individuals and communities spiritually while respecting their cultural framework.[38] This approach should address animistic perspectives on spiritual power by affirming that God's power is greater than any other spiritual force, which is essential in communicating a transformative yet respectful gospel message. Kraft's perspective on "power encounters" in ministry underscores the importance of demonstrating God's active role in overcoming spiritual forces, providing an alternative to reliance on spirits. This balanced engagement helps avoid syncretism while validating people's spiritual concerns in a way that is consistent with Christian teaching.[39] For instance, ancestor veneration in Toraja not only serves a spiritual purpose but also fulfills a social responsibility to strengthen family bonds and honor past generations.[40] When Pentecostal workers recognize this, they can approach such practices with greater respect, viewing them as expressions of cultural identity rather than as obstacles to overcome. This perspective aligns with Lamin Sanneh[41] and Kwame Bediako's[42] thoughts on the importance of recognizing African (or animistic) spirituality as a legitimate context for the gospel to take

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[35]Frank Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit: A Global Pentecostal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

[36]Ibid.

[37]Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou, *Folk Religion.*

[38]Charles H. Kraft, "What Kind of Encounters Do We Need in Our Christian Witness?" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (July 1991): 258-65.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Kobong, *Aluk, Adat dan Kebudayaan Toraja*.

[41]Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 45.

[42]Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 1992).

root, rather than as a system to be dismantled entirely. Peter Nyunt also advocates for understanding indigenous practices like ancestor veneration as culturally significant, thus allowing Christians to approach these customs without alienating the community.[43] Such sensitivity not only preserves the integrity of cultural identity but also presents the gospel as a message of hope and fulfillment.[44]

Another key approach is focusing on shared values within both animistic beliefs and Christian teachings. By emphasizing these shared values, Pentecostal workers present the gospel in a way that feels familiar and respectful to the community. Contextualizing the message in this way allows people to see Christianity not as a contradiction to their worldview but as a new perspective on values they already uphold. Pentecostal ministries can further reinforce these values through community activities, such as promoting family unity and environmental stewardship. This approach creates a bridge between the existing worldview and Pentecostal teachings, making the gospel message feel like a natural extension of their values.

At the same time, Pentecostal ministry in animistic contexts must address theological conflicts with respect and sensitivity. Animistic rituals often involve offerings or acts meant to appease spirits or protect against harm. Pentecostal theology teaches that God's power is greater than any other spiritual force, which changes the need for rituals aimed at spiritual protection. Instead of dismissing these practices outright, ministers can introduce the concept of God as the ultimate protector. This message is often conveyed effectively through personal testimonies, as believers share their experiences of God's strength and care.[45] Such an approach allows ministers to honor people's concerns without encouraging dependency on rituals, inviting them instead to place trust in a loving and powerful God.

Adapting worship practices to engage animistic communities in ways that feel inviting and relevant can also create meaningful connections. Rather than presenting worship as entirely different from traditional rituals, Pentecostal churches can focus on aspects that feel familiar to people accustomed to communal, expressive spiritual practices. Worship services that prioritize community, music, and prayer can create a spiritual environment that is both distinctive and welcoming. Emphasizing worship as a collective experience allows people to find a

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[43]Peter Nyunt, "Christian Response to Burmese Nat Worship in Myanmar," in Paul de Neui, ed., *Seeking the Unseen: Spiritual Realities in the Buddhist World* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2016), 255-75.

[44]Ibid.

[45]Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*.

familiar sense of belonging within a Pentecostal context.[46] This approach invites Torajans to experience church gatherings as both spiritually uplifting and socially significant, encouraging them to view Pentecostal worship as a community celebration rather than as a foreign ritual.[47]

Emphasizing personal transformation and spiritual freedom can also be particularly meaningful in an animistic context. The Torajan animistic system often involves practices aimed at maintaining harmony with various spirits, which can sometimes feel burdensome due to the constant need for offerings and ritual acts. Pentecostal theology offers a message of liberation from these requirements, emphasizing that faith in Jesus provides peace and spiritual security without needing constant rituals. This concept of spiritual freedom speaks to those who may feel bound by the demands of ritual, as it presents Christianity as a path to peace and assurance. By presenting the gospel as a source of freedom from ritual obligations, Pentecostal ministries invite people to find spiritual fulfilment through a relationship with God rather than through acts of appeasement.

Finally, Pentecostal ministry in animistic contexts requires patience, cultural sensitivity, and ongoing dialogue. Spiritual conversion in such contexts is often gradual, as people take time to explore new beliefs and align them with their cultural framework. Alan Johnson notes that while miraculous signs can validate the Gospel's message, they are insufficient on their own to establish lasting faith. Effective ministry requires not only signs but also long-term relational engagement and ongoing discipleship that allows new believers to fully integrate faith into their cultural context. Johnson's insights support the idea that while immediate spiritual encounters are impactful, they must be followed by nurturing relationships to prevent shallow conversions or syncretism.[48] This patient approach prevents cultural misunderstandings and fosters trust, allowing people to view the gospel message as something inviting and accessible rather than disruptive. Through consistent behavior and long-term relationships, Pentecostal ministry becomes more than just

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[46]Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997).

[47]Iin, *Hospitalitas Kristen Dalam Perjumpaan Injil Dengan Aluk Todolo* (Toraja: Institut Agama Kristen Negeri Toraja).

[48]Alan Johnson, "Signs and Wonders: Necessary But Not Enough," in *Seeking the Unseen: Spiritual Realities in the Buddhist World*, ed. Paul de Neui (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2016), 201-15.

introducing new beliefs. It invites people into a journey of discovery that respects both their past and future.

Strategies for Pentecostal Engagement with the Torajans

In reaching communities with animistic beliefs, practical strategies for Pentecostal ministry require a sensitive and gradual approach that builds on interpersonal connections, addresses felt needs, and respects cultural values. Since animistic beliefs shape the Torajan worldview, approaches that focus on relationships, healing, and understanding are foundational. Torajan society places strong emphasis on community and kinship, making it important for Pentecostal workers to prioritize building trust and respect before introducing the gospel message. In fact, in animistic contexts where presenting the gospel directly might be met with suspicion or resistance, building relationships first is critical.[49]

By prioritizing friendships, Pentecostal workers communicate that people are valued not just as converts but as individuals. This relational approach creates an atmosphere of trust and respect, where people feel safe to explore new spiritual ideas without fear of judgment or pressure. As these friendships deepen, opportunities naturally arise for discussing faith, allowing the gospel to be shared in a context of mutual respect. The emphasis on relationship-building allows the message to be received openly, as it is framed within the context of genuine connection and trust rather than confrontation.

One of the most effective strategies in animistic contexts is house-to-house evangelism, which emphasizes relationship building through direct, personal contact with community members. This approach allows ministers to build connections gradually, developing trust through a friendly and consistent presence.[50] In Torajan culture, where people highly value social relationships, entering homes and engaging in personal conversations can reduce defensive reactions to new ideas and foster openness to spiritual discussions. This form of evangelism is not only about sharing the gospel directly but also about addressing everyday concerns and being present as a source of encouragement and support. House-to-house visits enable Pentecostal workers to show genuine interest in individuals and their families, meeting people where they are and demonstrating care that aligns with Torajan communal values.[51]

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[49]Ibid.

[50]Dave Johnson, *Theology in Context: A Case Study in the Philippines* (Baguio City, Philippines: APTS Press, 2013), 28.

[51]Ibid.

Prayer and healing visits serve as another culturally appropriate way to engage animistic communities.[52] For the Torajans, who often look to spiritual forces for physical well-being, a visit from a Pentecostal minister offering prayer for the sick aligns with their value placed on spiritual intervention in matters of health. By offering to pray for the sick in people's homes, Pentecostal workers can introduce Christian beliefs in a manner that respects the Torajan view of spiritual power.[53] This approach demonstrates the care and compassion of the Christian faith, while showing that Pentecostal ministry can meet physical and spiritual needs. This form of ministry aligns naturally with the animistic belief in the interconnectedness of physical health and spiritual well-being, providing a bridge to the gospel through a shared value.

Evangelistic crusades and Christian film showings are effective for reaching larger groups within the community.[54] Hosting events in open, familiar contexts such as village squares or outdoor spaces reduces the pressure associated with entering a church, making it more comfortable for those unfamiliar with Christianity. Films can visually communicate biblical stories, making them more accessible to people who may not read or have a background in Christian teachings. The public nature of these events also makes them feel like an inclusive and welcoming community gathering, reducing the barriers for those with animistic beliefs and creating an opportunity for shared spiritual experiences.[55]

Demonstrations of God's power through miracles and healing are important in animistic contexts, where supernatural experiences are often accepted as part of reality.[56] In many animistic cultures, miracles serve as evidence of divine power, validating the gospel message in a way that aligns with cultural expectations of spiritual encounters.[57] By praying for healing and deliverance, Pentecostal workers demonstrate that the God they preach is not only relational but also powerful. Such miracles build a bridge to faith for people accustomed to spiritual interactions, showing that Christianity offers more than ideas. It offers a God who actively intervenes in human lives. These experiences serve as tangible

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[52]Ibid.

[53]John Liku Ada', "Perjumpaan Religiositas Toraja Dengan Kristianitas," paper presented at the Semiloka "Toraja Ma'kombongan," 2012.

[54]Johnson, *Theology in Context*, 29.

[55]Y. A. Sarira, *Aluk Rambu Solo' dan Persepsi Orang Kristen tentang Rambu Solo'* (Toraja: PUSBANG Gereja Toraja, 1996).

[56]Johnson, *Theology in Context*, 25-40.

[57]Rendi Noval Burirang, *Filsafat Budaya mengenai Pemahaman Aluk Todolo Tentang Keselamatan Dan Presfektifnya Dalam Iman Kristen* (Toraja: Institut Agama Kristen Negeri Toraja).

demonstrations of the gospel's relevance, helping people transition from animistic practices toward a relationship with a personal, living God.

Follow-up and discipleship are important after initial encounters, as they provide guidance for those transitioning from animistic beliefs to Christianity.[58] Building on house visits and small gatherings, ministers can offer home Bible studies or cell groups, where new believers have a safe space to ask questions and grow in their faith. Regular follow-up ensures that people feel supported as they explore Christianity, helping them to understand the teachings of the Bible in a way that connects with their experiences. These small groups encourage community, providing spiritual guidance and fellowship that strengthen the commitment of new believers. By grounding discipleship in relational support, Pentecostal workers create a sense of continuity and belonging that mirrors the community structure valued in animistic cultures.

In addressing practices related to idolatry, a gradual approach is preferred, where pastors focus on overcoming idolatry over time rather than confronting it immediately.[59] In contexts where idols and spirit veneration are integral to cultural identity, a direct rejection of these practices might lead to defensiveness. By building relationships and teaching about God's love and power, pastors allow time for people to understand the limitations of animistic practices on their own, fostering a willingness to shift perspectives naturally.[60] This approach respects the individual's journey, allowing them to reconsider animistic practices as they grow in understanding, rather than feeling pressured to abandon deeply held beliefs.

Feeding programs and meeting social needs are another effective strategy, as they demonstrate the church's commitment to the community's well-being.[61] In contexts where physical needs are often unmet, providing meals or addressing health needs builds goodwill and shows that the church cares about more than just spiritual conversion. This visible act of service reflects the Christian value of compassion, often leading to deeper conversations about faith and creating a foundation of trust. By meeting these needs, the church establishes itself as a positive presence, which naturally opens doors to further spiritual conversations.

Prayer evangelism also addresses the animistic worldview, particularly in communities where belief in spirits or witchcraft

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[58]Johnson, *Theology in Context*, 26-37.

[59]Ibid., 35.

[60]S. Toraja, *Teologi Kontekstual dan Kearifan Lokal Toraja* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2020).

[61]Johnson, *Theology in Context*, 30.

is common.[62] Engaging in prayer for deliverance and protection demonstrates that God's power surpasses traditional spirits or forces believed to govern life. Prayer, especially in cases involving spiritual challenges, introduces people to a God who offers protection, strength, and peace. This approach respects the animistic perspective on spiritual power while revealing the greater power of God, thus positioning Christianity as a faith that can meet both physical and spiritual needs.[63]

An understanding of the local cosmology and beliefs about spiritual beings enables Pentecostal workers to present the gospel in a way that makes sense within an animistic worldview.[64] In contexts where spiritual beings are central to the community's understanding of life, ministers can explain biblical perspectives on God, angels, and spiritual authority in a way that acknowledges these beliefs. Teaching that God is omnipotent and accessible challenges the view that spiritual beings control one's destiny, presenting God as both powerful and personally interested in each individual. By aligning the gospel message with the cultural understanding of the spirit world, Pentecostals show that Christianity addresses people's real concerns without dismissing their existing beliefs.[65]

Conclusion

This article has shown that Pentecostal ministry can engage animistic beliefs like *aluk to dolo* in Toraja through respectful, thoughtful, and long-term ministry. Because animism is deeply connected to cultural identity, effective ministry must begin with understanding and relationship-building. Rather than rejecting traditional beliefs immediately, Pentecostal workers are encouraged to listen, build trust, and present the gospel in a way that connects with the community's spiritual concerns. Introducing the Holy Spirit as personal and powerful helps meet the desire for spiritual protection and presence, offering a new relationship with God that does not rely on fear or ritual. This approach allows for both spiritual transformation and the honoring of cultural background.

Beyond spiritual teaching, the church must show the gospel through action. House visits, healing, and community care demonstrate genuine compassion and help the message become real in people's lives. Over time, discipleship and ongoing support can lead to a gradual turning

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[62]Ibid.

[63]B. Tallulembang, *Reintepretasi dan Reaktualisasi Budaya Toraja, Refleksi Seabad Kekristenan Masuk Toraja* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Gunung Sopai, 2012).

[64]Johnson, *Theology in Context*, 46-47.

[65]Moris and Manda, "Dialektika Antara Iman Kristen."

away from old practices, not through pressure but through conviction and deeper understanding. A Pentecostal ministry rooted in patience, truth, and care can help people move toward Christ in a way that is lasting, respectful, and true to both faith and culture.

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Proposed Strategies for Authentic Gospel Contextualization and Confronting Syncretism Among the Igorots in the Philippines

Joan Carlos Milo

Introduction

The Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), home to the Igorots, an indigenous people with a long history of traditional religion, has undergone significant Christian influence. As of the 2020 Census, Roman Catholicism remains dominant with 1,106,409 adherents (61.77%), followed by the Episcopal Church (5.83%) and the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (2.66%).[1] Other notable groups include the Iglesia ni Cristo, the Assemblies of God, and various Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations. Provinces with higher indigenous populations, such as Ifugao and Mountain Province, show lower Catholic affiliation, possibly indicating ongoing adherence to traditional beliefs or a shift toward other Christian groups.[2]

While Christianity is widespread in the region, its expression varies significantly, particularly when viewed from the perspectives of Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism. This raises important questions about how different groups define and live out the Christian faith. The blending of indigenous traditions with Christian practices has yielded a

[1]Philippine Statistics Authority. *Religious Affiliation in the Cordillera Administrative Region (2020 Census of Housing and Population),* 2023, https://rssocar.psa.gov.ph/content/religious-affiliation-cordillera-administrative-region-2020-census-housing-and-population#:~:text=Roman%20Catholics%20account%20for%206,Catholic%20as%20their%20religious%20affiliation.

[2]Ibid.

unique religious landscape, showcasing cultural richness and significant challenges for ministry.

Delimitation and Limitation

This study focuses only on the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) and does not cover other indigenous groups in the Philippines. It examines the challenge of blending indigenous beliefs with Christianity, primarily from a Pentecostal and Evangelical perspective, without delving into Catholic or other Christian traditions. Instead of tracing the entire history of Christianity in the region, this study will focus on the current issues in ministry, especially how traditional beliefs and Christian practices have blended over time.

Also, this research will rely only on existing written materials about the Cordilleras. It will not include new interviews, field studies, or direct interactions with the people. All findings will be based on what has been documented, ensuring the study is grounded in reliable sources while providing practical insights for the ministry. Due to these limitations, this paper will not provide new statistics or a comprehensive historical account of Christianity in the Cordilleras. Instead, it will analyze the challenges in missions based on available research and suggest practical ways to address the blending of indigenous traditions with the Christian faith.

Understanding contextualization and syncretism is crucial. Gailyn Van Rheenen's analysis shows how different evangelical scholars define contextualization as expressing the biblical message effectively within a specific cultural context.[3] This involves using familiar symbols, language, and practices so people can engage with the gospel meaningfully. However, it must remain rooted in Scripture. Evangelicals stress that while culture is important, it should not override the Bible's authority. When cultural experience dominates over the Word of God, it drifts toward syncretism. Hence, authentic contextualization centers on Scripture while presenting its truth in ways that resonate with people's real lives.[4]

According to Van Rheenen, syncretism is the conscious or unconscious blending of Christian beliefs and practices with those of the dominant culture, to the point that Christianity loses its distinctiveness

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[3]Gailyn Van Rheenen, "Contextualization and Syncretism," in *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents*, ed. Gailyn Van Rheenen (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2006), 3-7.

[4]Ibid.

and begins to reflect the worldview of that culture.[5] It occurs when Christian leaders accommodate cultural patterns, allowing them to reshape the community's theology and practice. While driven by a sincere desire to make the gospel relevant, such accommodations can become embedded and indistinguishable from the church's core identity. He emphasizes that when major worldview shifts happen, the church may struggle to distinguish between the eternal and culturally influenced, leading to syncretism.[6] This process results in a form of Christianity that no longer speaks with the clarity and authority of Scripture, but instead echoes the dominant cultural voice. The Bible consistently warns against this danger, urging God's people to remain distinct and devoted to him alone as exemplified in Exod 20:1-7; Deut 6:4-5; 2 Kings 17:33.[7]

Overview of the Cordilleras

The Cordilleras, officially known as the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), is located in the north-central part of Luzon, Philippines. It comprises six provinces: Abra, Apayao, Benguet, Ifugao, Kalinga, and Mountain Province.[8] It is home to seven major ethnolinguistic groups: Tinggian, Isneg, Kalinga, Kankanaey, Ibaloy, Ifugao, and Bontok. It has the second-largest concentration of indigenous people, next to the island of Mindanao.[9]

The geographic condition of the region earned them the collective name Igorots, from the Spanish word *Igorrotes*, which means "of the hill or mountain." Partly due to its rugged terrain and mainly because of their resistance, the region's inhabitants were not quickly subdued by the Spanish conquistadores of the 16th century.[10]

Despite Spanish efforts to colonize the Philippines during their period of rule, the Igorots successfully resisted control, maintaining their independence and way of life.[11] The Spaniards, driven by the Igorots'

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[5]Ibid., 7.

[6]Ibid., 7-9.

[7]Ibid., 10-13.

[8]"Cordillera Administrative Region," https://www.philatlas.com/luzon/car.html.

[9]Fe Angela M. Villanueva, "Indigenous Knowledge and Libraries in the Philippines: The Ifugao Rice Terraces and the Mangyan Bamboo Tubes" (paper presented at the World Library and Information Congress: 75th IFLA General Conference and Assembly, Milan, Italy, August 23-27, 2009), https://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/58/1/095-villanueva-en.pdf.

[10]Ibid., 2.

[11]Archaeological Studies Program, University of the Philippines. *Book of Abstracts: UP-ASP 26th Anniversary Online Conference, 23-24 August 2021*, Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 2021, 6, https://upd.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ASP-26th-book_of_abstracts.pdf (accessed March 15, 2025).

gold trade with lowlanders, launched numerous expeditions into the Cordillera, but fierce resistance consistently thwarted the conquest.[12] The Igorots' refusal to submit to colonial rule and their cunning tactics outsmarted the Spaniards.[13]

The Igorots resisted Spanish colonization by obstructing vital routes, rescuing converted children to restore Indigenous beliefs, and killing intruders, including Spaniards and Filipino Christian converts. They firmly rejected conversion, relocation, sharing gold mines, and submission to colonial rule to protect their resources, traditions, and social order. As a result, they were viewed as enemies by the Spanish administration and Christianized lowland Filipinos. Some discontented converts, known as *tulisanes* and *remontados*, sought refuge in the Cordilleras.[14]

The arrival of Americans in the late 19th century had a significant impact on Igorot society. Unlike the Spaniards, who sought gold and imposed taxes, the Americans earned the natives' trust through friendship and documentation of their culture. Additionally, Belgian missionaries such as Francis Lambrecht, Maurice Vanoverbergh, and Francisco Billiet introduced Catholicism while studying and documenting the Igorots' indigenous culture.[15] Western education and religion became the primary influences that gradually altered Igorot society and culture.[16]

Traditional Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Cordillerans

During the pre-Hispanic period, Cordillerans held religious beliefs and engaged in practices centered around the *anitos,*[17] a collective term for spirits believed to dwell in the underworld. The *anito* consists of groups of spirits. Each group has a collective name. An example is the *tomongao*, a collective name for mountain spirits, and *pinten* for water spirits. The other groups of spirits are *pinad-ing, lebek, tonoton/debek, ampasit, tayab-ban, botatew, mandoweng, nante-es bilig, liblibayan, amlag,* and *pamakan*. These spirits are so numerous that the native priest identifies them in groups according to their dwelling places, and they could be found everywhere. These underworld spirits reside in big rocks,

[12]The Cordillera Experience, https://asiasociety.org/cordillera-experience.

[13]Archaeological Studies Program, *Book of Abstracts*, 6.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Villanueva, "Reflections," 2.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Tereso C. Casiño, "*The Relevance of the Christian Concept of God to the Cordilleran's Search for Identity as a People,*" (St.D. diss., Philippine Branch of the Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary, Baguio City, Philippines, January 1992), 78-79.

cliffs, ravines, caves, abandoned tunnels, abandoned buildings, bushy trees, bushes, waterfalls, creeks, springs, lakes, rivers, oceans, and in the ground. Some of these spirits, like the *pinten, kakkading/kedaring, and pinad-ing*, may be found around liquor stores, trading places, around groups of people drinking wine, and during feasts as an unseen guest. As a tradition, a few drops of wine are poured and offered to the spirits before drinking. These spirits, when trespassed upon, overlooked in wine offerings, disturbed, and brushed aside in their places, are easily offended and angered, causing illness, death, and misfortune.[18]

These *anitos* were classified into *Maeya* (benevolent) and *Makedsel* (malevolent). The indigenous people were highly conscious of the *anitos*. The *anitos* were considered guardians of the people's isolated existence and potential disturbers during the pre-literate period. To appease or manipulate these sacred forces, ritual performances were commonly practiced.[19]

According to Igorot belief, the released soul of the dead becomes an *anito*. This being appears in human or animal form and possesses all the capabilities attributed to a disembodied spirit. While most *anitos* were regarded as harmless, the *anitos* of deceased elders were feared and considered highly irritable and vindictive beings who would afflict the living family members for neglecting their duties toward them and their fellow *anitos*. Illnesses among people and animals were often attributed to the anger of the *anitos*. When someone got sick, the question asked was, "In what manner was the anito provoked to anger?"[20]

To appease an enraged *anito*, sacrifices were made. A stone hung from a thread was used to determine the desire of the *anito*, with questions being asked about whether the *anito* desired a chicken, pig, or carabao. The stone's movement determined which animal would be sacrificed. Pieces of the slaughtered animal's heart and lungs were placed on wooden splints and hung on a pole in front of the house while the family consumed the rest of the animal's meat in honor of the *anito*. If the sickness worsened, a priest called a *mambunung* would smear the blood of the sacrificed animal on the foreheads and cheeks of family members, which would not be washed off until the patient recovered or died.[21]

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[18]Wasing D. Sacla, *The Treasury of Beliefs and Home Rituals of Benguet* (Baguio City, Philippines: BCF Printing Press, 1987), 18-19.

[19]Casiño, "*The Relevance of the Christian Concept of God," 78-79.*

[20]L. P. Verora, *Unreached Peoples '82: Reaching the Igorots* (Makati, Philippines: Progressive Printing Palace, 1982), 80-81.

[21]Ibid., 81.

To keep the *anito* in a good mood, the Igorots of northern Benguet and Mount Data placed tiny gifts of rice or corn in bamboo baskets on poles outside their huts daily. Near the pole was usually a small bench where the *anito* could relax while eating.[22] The Igorots believed that *anitos* were most active during the night between sundown and sunrise, and they would avoid leaving the rancheria during this time unless necessary. If an Igorot had to sleep outside, they would surround their sleeping area with various talismans, including splinters with food, to ward off the *anitos*.[23]

Beyond their belief in *anitos*, the Igorots' concept of higher beings was unclear and varied across rancherias. One god, *Cabuniang*, was known to most of them and was believed to dwell in the sun, moon, and stars. He was considered the creator of the earth and communicated with people through the *anitos*. Thunderstorms were seen as an expression of his wrath. *Cabuniang* had two sons who were believed to bear goodwill to men. No real cult of *Cabuniang* was encountered, except for customary worship, where passersby deposited some food near certain trees or stones.[24] A similar term, *Kabunian*, is considered a pre-Cordilleran term for the highest deity of the wider Cordillera region. Unlike *Cabuniang*, *Kabunian* is a plural concept referring to a pantheon composed of twelve gods and twelve goddesses, along with a broader community of numerous deities. This reflects the diverse and layered spiritual worldview held by various Cordilleran groups.[25]

The Igorots had an order of priests consisting of men called *mambunungs* and old women called *asiteras*. Their knowledge of oaths and conjurations was passed down to their firstborn children, making the priestly order hereditary. The *mambunungs'* primary role was consecrating swine, dogs, and chickens, which could not be slaughtered without their assistance. The rituals performed by the *asiteras* were considered essential for events such as illnesses, burials, weddings, house construction, preparation for war, and other significant occasions.[26]

The Igorots held various superstitions that regulated their actions and conduct, particularly those involving animals believed to be embodied *anitos*. For example, if a snake, frog, or rat crossed the area while digging holes for house foundation posts, the place would be abandoned, and the house would be built elsewhere. Sneezing during house construction required waiting one or two hours until a priestess blessed the place. If

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[22]Ibid.
[23]Ibid., 81-82.
[24]Ibid., 82.
[25]Casiño, "*The Relevance of the Christian Concept of God*," 4.
[26]Verora, *Unreached Peoples '82*, 82.

someone died during construction, the house would be rebuilt with new materials in a different location. Seeing a little red-breasted bird called "*rides*" or "*tiktik*" flying across a traveler's path was considered a bad omen, but hearing the bird sing near the path was a good sign. A serpent crossing an Igorot's path would cause them to turn around immediately. If a rat was seen in the field during the rice harvest, work would stop until a priestess blessed the harvest. When the god *Cabuniang* threatened punishment, such as through lightning strikes, a pig would be sacrificed with the help of a priest, and the animal's head would be placed on a pole at the site where the lightning struck to appease the angry god.[27]

Entry of Christianity in the Cordilleras

Roman Catholic missionaries attempted to initiate Christian mission work in the Cordilleras shortly after Spanish colonization began in 1565. The Augustinians led the initial effort, followed by the Franciscans, Jesuits, Dominicans, and Recollects. In 1595, the Dominicans began mission work in Cagayan and Benguet, and by 1610, Diego Carlos, a priest, initiated ministry in Apayao. However, these early efforts were met with fierce resistance from the indigenous people, and some missionaries suffered martyrdom. Despite this, missionaries continued returning throughout the 17th to 19th centuries, rebuilding churches in places like Futtul, Capinatan, Ifugao, and Kiangan. Their efforts were often short-lived due to persistent opposition, but notable figures such as Villaverde and Alarcon, who were priests, managed to expand the work through the establishment of schools and chapels. In the early 1900s, Belgian missionaries helped revive declining stations and established new ones in remote areas such as Bontoc and Bayyo. While these ongoing missions laid the foundation for the Catholic presence in the Cordilleras today,[28] it is important to clarify that these efforts did not result in the full colonization of the region. The Cordilleran peoples, particularly the Igorots, remained largely autonomous and resistant throughout Spanish rule. Moreover, while the missions achieved a visible Catholic presence, the indirect and often culturally disconnected approach taken in sharing the faith led to significant challenges in spiritual formation.

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[27]Ibid., 81-83.
[28]Ma, *When the Spirit Meets the Spirits*, 45.

Different Christian Contextualization Methodology

Various non-Pentecostal groups have employed different approaches to contextualize the gospel among the Igorot people of the Cordillera. Catholic missionaries primarily focused on social work, the Episcopal Church attempted to integrate indigenous music into worship, and the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) emphasized cultural adaptation by incorporating native musical instruments and vernacular language into worship to encourage participation, while instructing members to avoid unbiblical elements of indigenous rituals such as the *canao*. The Baptists sought to respect cultural practices while maintaining biblical fidelity.[29] This section further presents these groups' documented efforts to contextualize their work.

The Catholic missionaries initially aimed to understand and respect the indigenous people's culture, adopting a more indirect approach to preaching the gospel. However, they did not develop a specific method for contextualizing the Word of God. Instead, their primary means of outreach was through social work. One avenue for this outreach was the teaching of religion in schools established by the mission, where religious subjects were integrated into the curriculum.[30]

What results might this form of contextualization have yielded? One could speculate that conveying the gospel through social ministry would require significant time, as social work typically lacks an overtly Christian message. This method of contextualization may have led to converts participating in, or even reverting to, pagan practices, as clear boundaries regarding the gospel's tenets were not distinctly established. Some missionaries themselves participated in pagan practices, viewing it as a gesture of respect, involvement, and preservation of native culture. Other missionaries opposed this and tried to persuade their colleagues to abstain, but their efforts were often in vain unless their convictions were clear, intense, and persistent.[31]

The Episcopal Church in the Cordillera does not typically employ liturgical forms and rituals, as these are often misleadingly associated with pagan deities. In the past, when liturgy was applied, the tribal people reacted sensitively. For example, the use of the gong is linked to the pagan spirit *Anito*.[32] Music among tribal people is mainly associated with paganism, which has hindered efforts to incorporate Christian forms into indigenous music. As a result, integrating native music into worship has

[29]Ibid., 48, 56, 66, 71.
[30]Ibid., 48.
[31]Ibid.
[32]Ibid., 56.

become a complex and sensitive issue. A project within the Episcopal Church across Asia is underway to collect traditional music.[33]

Recognizing the universal power of music, the Episcopal Church believes that native music can be incorporated into worship. However, it has yet to determine how to do so in a sensible, doxological, and orthodox manner that effectively contextualizes it for Christian worship. The central challenge in contextualizing native music is that the Episcopal Church is very traditional. Episcopalians share the gospel message only occasionally within the church, and few services provide opportunities to sing gospel songs. The church needs to actively engage with the issue of contextualizing Christian music to minister to native populations better. This may involve translating gospel songs and pairing them with native tunes, which could be an appealing way to draw people to Christ.[34]

Since its early years, the UCCP (United Church of Christ in the Philippines) has shown sensitivity to the cultural values of tribal communities. To help make the gospel more accessible, the church has utilized Ilocano, a widely spoken dialect among the tribes, alongside native languages. Simple gospel songs have been translated into Ilocano, and some have even been composed locally by tribal believers. Additionally, traditional instruments such as bamboo drums have been incorporated into worship to encourage fuller participation among the villagers.[35]

The UCCP encourages members to avoid participating in *cañao* involving unbiblical or pagan religious elements. The Church teaches that certain traditional ritual practices are incompatible with Christian faith and should not be observed. However, it makes room for contextualized expressions by affirming culturally appropriate, non-religious adaptations of *cañao*. These adapted forms may include community gatherings that express joy, thanksgiving, healing, or hope for a good harvest, provided they do not contradict Christian teachings.[36]

Nevertheless, it remains challenging to transform deeply rooted beliefs tied to customary rituals in tribal culture. These practices have been passed down through generations, embedding their significance in people's minds. Furthermore, unclear interpretations of such adaptations may send mixed messages and hinder the intended goal of contextualization.[37]

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[33]Ibid., 56.
[34]Ibid., 56-57.
[35]Ibid., 66.
[36]Ibid., 66.
[37]Ibid.

The Southern Baptists are known for adhering strictly to biblical standards and lifestyles. However, they also strive to be culturally sensitive when introducing people to the teachings of Christ found in the Scriptures. For instance, they evaluate the ritual practices of mountain-dwelling communities on a case-by-case basis.[38]

In matters concerning funerals, Baptists do not impose restrictions on traditional practices, such as burying the deceased at night, allowing families to build their coffins, or delivering eulogies. Instead of attempting to modify these practices, they offer alternative options, such as Christian gatherings or camps, which can fulfill the community's deep social needs for fellowship.[39]

The Baptists' overarching approach can be summarized as teaching their members to make informed decisions regarding their participation in cultural traditions. Rather than enforcing sweeping reforms, they focus on promoting biblical discernment while respecting the cultural values of the communities they serve.[40]

Various denominations' attempts at Christian contextualization highlight potential syncretism. For example, Catholic missionaries have utilized social work to spread the gospel, sometimes without clearly distinguishing Christian teachings from traditional practices. This can lead to syncretistic behaviors, as converts might continue to participate in pagan rituals. The Episcopal Church's effort to incorporate indigenous music into worship faces challenges, particularly with instruments like the gong, which are traditionally linked to pagan rituals involving ancestral spirits (*anitos*).

Similarly, the UCCP modifies traditional rituals, such as the *cañao*, and provides alternative explanations while allowing some of these practices to continue. This demonstrates another aspect of syncretism, as the church attempts to Christianize these rituals without completely divorcing them from their original meanings, which can lead to confusion between cultural expression and religious worship. The Southern Baptist approach is more case-by-case in evaluating cultural practices. They generally refrain from interfering with traditional rituals, such as funerals and the *cañao*, viewing them as social rather than spiritual events. However, this tendency not to firmly guide believers away from such rituals may allow syncretism to persist.

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[38]Ibid., 67, 71.
[39]Ibid., 71.
[40]Ibid.

Foundations for Contextualization

Addressing concerns about syncretism and contextualization, many valuable insights can be gleaned from the writings of those who have experienced missions. This is to learn and apply the best practices tested over time. There can be different scenarios from place to place and culture to culture, but there are principles to follow. As Davidson put it, what bore fruit in one location may not be repeatable in another, even amongst people of the same background.[41]

Christian contextualization efforts primarily focus on effectively communicating the gospel message of Jesus Christ. Davidson emphasizes that for the gospel to be relevant and receivable, it must account for the cultural context and specific circumstances of the people being reached. She asserts that effectively conveying biblical truth requires an awareness of local beliefs and practices while being mindful of the potential for syncretism.[42]

Scholars have extensively examined Christian contextualization, especially in animistic settings. Notable contributions include works by Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*, and David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models*. These authors provide valuable frameworks for understanding and applying contextualization principles.[43]

Gailyn Van Rheenen presents a foundational approach to contextualizing the gospel in animistic communities by emphasizing the need to engage with their worldview. He highlights the significance of a theological framework that recognizes the existence of spiritual beings and the cosmic struggle between God's kingdom and the forces of Satan, both of which are essential for effectively communicating the gospel. Van Rheenen critiques Western theology for its strong focus on personal salvation, arguing that it frequently does not resonate within animistic communities. He clarifies that these communities generally prioritize interconnectedness over individualism. He advocates for a cosmic perspective rooted in Kingdom theology, emphasizing God's sovereignty and victory over all spiritual forces through Christ's life, death, and

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[41]Vee J. Davidson, *Transforming Communication* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022), 194.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 128-130; David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989).

resurrection. This framework presents the gospel as a message of divine authority and deliverance, directly addressing concerns about spiritual forces common in animistic worldviews.[44]

He further explains that the Kingdom of God encompasses God's authority and sovereignty over all creation. This must be communicated to animistic audiences to express God's supremacy over all spiritual realms and powers.[45] This approach offers a comprehensive framework for missionaries to effectively share the gospel with animistic peoples.

Van Rheenen emphasizes that adequate contextualization among animistic societies begins with understanding their worldview, which revolves around spiritual beings, ancestors, power encounters, and the belief that unseen powers control human affairs.[46] He argues that Christianity must address animists' concerns about fear, power, and spiritual realities rather than merely presenting abstract theological doctrines that may not resonate with their lived experiences.[47] Animists often seek to manipulate spiritual forces and beings to gain health, security, and prosperity, driven by a deep-seated fear of offending these powers and suffering negative consequences.[48] Van Rheenen's approach underscores the importance of framing the gospel message within a *Kingdom theology* that acknowledges God's sovereignty over all powers, demonstrating his supremacy and authority in a manner that directly speaks to the concerns and beliefs of animistic peoples.[49]

Van Rheenen emphasizes that contextualization must be grounded in Scripture and culturally relevant. The gospel should not merely replace cultural values but instead confront, transform, and fulfill them in a way that remains faithful to the biblical message and teachings.[50] In animistic contexts, conversion often involves power encounters where the gospel showcases Christ's supremacy over spirits and curses through miracles and testimonies of exorcisms.[51] This approach emphasizes the significance of presenting a gospel that acknowledges and challenges the animistic understanding of power and spiritual beings, showcasing Christ's authority over all spiritual forces.

He warns that blending Christian teachings with animistic beliefs leads to a distorted faith instead of a true expression of the gospel. In

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[44]Ibid., 131-132.
[45]Ibid., 132-133.
[46]Ibid., 15-17.
[47]Ibid., 17-19.
[48]Ibid., 20-23.
[49]Ibid., 23-25.
[50]Ibid., 113-115.
[51]Ibid., 114-120.

animistic societies, power is often viewed as something to be manipulated, which can be misapplied to Christianity if not communicated properly. He emphasizes that true conversion requires more than pursuing power; it demands genuine submission to God and alignment of one's worldview with biblical truth.

Furthermore, Van Rheenen explains that continual power encounters, where God's power is demonstrated over animistic forces, are essential for affirming God's sovereignty and leading people to genuine faith. However, these power encounters must be coupled with teaching that establishes a biblical worldview rather than allowing new converts to blend their previous beliefs with Christianity. This requires the effective communication of Christian paradigms of thought that contrast biblical faith with animistic understandings of power.[52]

David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen affirm that contextualization is grounded in Scripture, with examples found throughout both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, while there are few direct accounts of cross-cultural evangelism, Israel's covenant relationship with God and its treatment of foreigners reflect a missionary intent. This is seen in laws and worship practices intended to lead "aliens" toward recognizing God's greatness (Exod 12:19; Deut 31:12). Although many elements of traditional indigenous beliefs align more closely with Old Testament themes, such as sacrifice, ritual, and reverence for the sacred, this study focuses on New Testament models of contextualization due to space limitations. The New Testament provides clearer examples, especially after the finished work of Christ, where the apostles intentionally brought the gospel across cultures. Paul's address in Lystra (Acts 14:8-20), which responds to polytheistic assumptions, and his message in Athens (Acts 17:16-31), which engages Greek philosophy, both reflect careful efforts to present the gospel in ways the audience could understand.[53] These instances demonstrate how early Christian witnesses thoughtfully adapted their communication to cultural contexts, providing a strong biblical foundation for contextualization today.

Proposed Strategies for Authentic Gospel Contextualization Among the Igorots

According to Gailyn Van Rheenen, adequate contextualization in Cordilleran missions requires a balanced approach that navigates the

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[52]Ibid., 88-98.

[53]David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 33-60.

extremes of cultural preservation and innovation. Those who focus on preserving traditional faith, referred to as "preservers," and those seeking new methods for sharing the gospel, referred to as "innovators," risk promoting syncretism. To achieve authentic contextualization, it is crucial to maintain a balance that neither relies too heavily on the cultural constructs of the sender's culture nor excessively indulges in the customs and practices of the receptor culture.[54]

A key principle of adequate contextualization is adherence to biblical doctrine. Contextualizers must base their approach on the teachings of Jesus, the apostolic doctrine, and the "faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Matt 28:18-20; Acts 2:42; Jude 3, ESV). This involves evaluating all cultural expressions of faith in light of Scripture to ensure doctrinal purity and integrity. Upholding scriptural authority is essential, prompting missionaries and local believers to study the biblical text carefully, accurately discern the intended meaning of its authors, and communicate that meaning using language and thought forms familiar to the receptor culture. The goal is to make the gospel "impactful" and "meaningful," ensuring its authenticity and clarity.[55]

Moreover, adequate contextualization necessitates a thorough evaluation of cultural practices. This involves examining local customs without immediate rejection or uncritical acceptance, determining whether they align with biblical truth. Contextualizers must recognize that some cultural practices may need transformation, while others can be retained or adapted to align with Christian beliefs. Dialogue and mutual learning are critical components of contextualization; missionaries and local believers should collaborate, listening to and learning from one another to discern the most effective ways to communicate the gospel in culturally relevant terms without compromising its truth.[56]

Additionally, contextualizers should be mindful of over-contextualization, where the gospel becomes subordinate to local cultural practices instead of transforming them. The objective is not to make Christianity "less costly," but to present the gospel faithfully while acknowledging cultural contexts. By applying these principles, missionaries and local church leaders can effectively address syncretism and promote a genuine, culturally relevant faith.[57]

While contextualization is another recommendation for overcoming syncretism in Cordillera missions, the recommendations from Ma

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[54]Gailyn Van Rheenen, ed., *Contextualization & Syncretism* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2006), 84-86.

[55]Ibid.

[56]Ibid., 85.

[57]Ibid., 84.

are valuable to consider when ministering among the Igorots of the Cordillera. One important recommendation is the power ministry. Assemblies of God ministers should continue emphasizing the demonstration of the Holy Spirit's power, as evident in the early years of ministry when fervent prayers often resulted in miraculous healings. Although later generations focused more on Bible study, maintaining a balance between power encounter and truth encounter is crucial for effective ministry. Additionally, training programs within the mountain region are essential for addressing cultural differences and reinforcing the emphasis on God's power.[58]

Another recommendation is mobilizing the laity. Laypeople played a critical role in the early growth of the church despite most of them lacking formal training. Their zeal for evangelism and church planting was remarkable, and their commitment often surpassed that of formally trained workers. Practical training for lay workers remains necessary, mainly through initiatives like the Cordillera Ministry Training Center, which offers short-term training and encouragement to Sunday school teachers, deacons, and young people, empowering them to continue God's work.[59]

Women's involvement is also emphasized. Despite the male-dominated Kankanaey culture, many dedicated female pastors and workers have made significant contributions to the ministry, inspired in part by the example of missionary Elva Vanderbout. She was among the first of the Assemblies of God missionaries in the Philippines after World War II, and planted churches in the Cordilleras.[60] Her prayerful life, obedience to God's will, and empowerment by the Holy Spirit made her ministry effective and widely accepted, even in a traditionally male-dominated society. Female pastors and church members should be encouraged to contribute actively to God's kingdom, demonstrating that their contributions are as valuable as those of male leaders.[61]

Finally, a commendable model of contextualization for the Igorot ministry is that of the Assemblies of God, which emphasizes the power of God through Spirit-empowered ministry. This approach effectively counters syncretism by addressing the animistic worldview common among Igorot communities, offering a biblical alternative to traditional spiritual practices. However, it has been less effective in presenting the gospel in culturally relevant forms, leading to perceptions of Christianity

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[58]Ma, *When the Spirit Meets the Spirits*, 236-237.

[59]Ibid., 238.

[60]Dave Johnson, *Led by the Spirit: The History of the American Assemblies of God Missionaries in the Philippines* (Manila, Philippines: ICI Ministries, 2009), 47, 51, 52.

[61]Ma, *When the Spirit Meets the Spirits*, 239.

as foreign. Developing an "Igorot Pentecostal theology" by re-reading Scripture, especially the Old Testament, through the lens of native experiences can help bridge this gap and present the gospel in ways that are both faithful and meaningful across various Igorot tribes, thereby fostering deeper ownership of the Christian faith within Igorot cultural identity.[62]

Implications

While there is still much to learn and discover, the current understanding is sufficient to be applied meaningfully. Firstly, understanding the existing syncretistic challenges within the Cordillera Administrative Region sheds light on how indigenous beliefs have intertwined with Christianity. By examining these challenges from Pentecostal and Evangelical perspectives, this study offers targeted strategies to address these cultural blends that can be implemented in ministry efforts. Secondly, the practical insights presented in this study aim to enhance the effectiveness of ministry work in the Cordillera Administrative Region. The recommendations are designed to help missionaries and church leaders develop culturally sensitive approaches that respect indigenous traditions while promoting a biblically sound faith. Lastly, this study underscores the importance of ongoing research and contextualization efforts. While the findings rely on existing literature, the proposed strategies can serve as a foundation for future research and ministry practices addressing syncretism more effectively.

Appeal to the Cordillera Missions

Many valuable lessons can be learned from the experiences and expertise of those who have come before us. Although these experiences may vary significantly, there are principles that all individuals involved in missions, whether working within their community, with a different community, or overseas can apply. Therefore, for Christian work among the Igorots to be effective, it is essential to adopt a learning attitude.

It is crucial for church leaders and Christian workers, particularly those engaged in missions, to specialize in anthropology, immerse themselves in Igorot culture, and actively study and document Christian missions specifically tailored to the region. Church leaders are encouraged to pursue ongoing learning to serve effectively. By learning from best practices, they can strive to reach the people of the Cordilleras more effectively.

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[62]Ibid.

In particular, best practices for operating in the power of God must be upheld. As seen in the early ministry of the Assemblies of God among the Kankanaey, fervent prayer, dependence on the Holy Spirit, and openness to power encounters, such as healing and deliverance, created a strong foundation that resisted syncretism. However, power encounters must be accompanied by truth encounters. Sound teaching, discipleship, and biblical literacy are essential for forming a lasting Christian worldview. It is crucial to train local believers to discern spiritual realities biblically, to develop theology that resonates with Igorot experiences, and to create spaces that nurture both miraculous events and grounded teaching. These practices ensure that the demonstration of God's power remains rooted in Scripture and fosters spiritual maturity within the Igorot context.

Conclusion

Christianity among the Igorots of the Cordilleras faces significant challenges in depth and authenticity due to syncretism. This study examines the intersection of indigenous beliefs with Christian doctrines, particularly within Pentecostal and Evangelical movements. The findings underscore the necessity of culturally sensitive ministry approaches that address these syncretistic challenges while promoting a biblically sound faith. Effective strategies include using local languages in worship, adapting biblical narratives to align with indigenous storytelling, and engaging the community in ways that respect Igorot's cultural heritage. Although this research is based primarily on existing written materials, it is a foundational guide for future efforts to navigate the complexities of syncretism and deepen the Christian faith among the Igorots. The goal is to create a more authentic expression of faith that honors Christian teachings and indigenous traditions.

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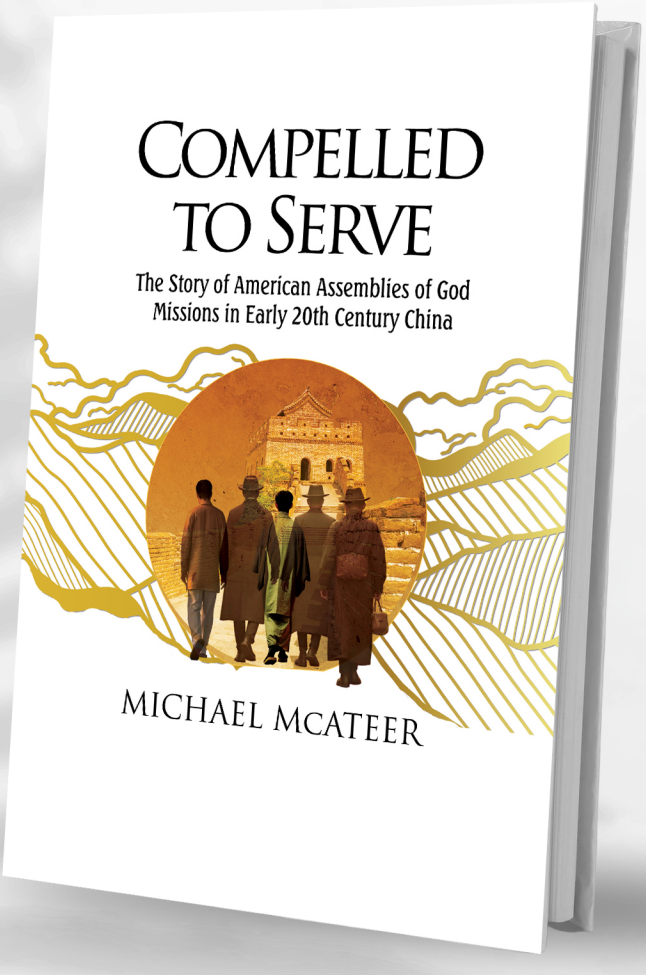

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Examining the Pentecostal Transformative Approach of Antonio Caput Sr. and the Cordillera Rehabilitation Center in the Animistic Highlands of Cordillera

Ryan Hortizuela

Introduction

The Cordillera region, home to the Igorot community, presents a complex socio-spiritual landscape shaped by centuries of tradition. In recent decades, it has become a focal point of Western missionary activity introducing Christianity and promoting cultural change. Yet traditional religious practices remain entrenched to Igorot identity, shaping daily life. Within this backdrop, the ministries of Antonio Caput Sr. and the Cordillera Rehabilitation Center exemplify a biblically grounded, contextually sensitive approach that engages local traditions while offering valuable insights for ministry in similar contexts.

Scope and Limitations

This article focuses exclusively on the integration of power encounter, contextual evangelism, and discipleship-based rehabilitation as the Pentecostal Transformative Approach employed by Antonio Caput Sr. and the Cordillera Rehabilitation Center (CRC) in dealing with cases of healing and deliverance linked to perceived demonic affliction, such as mental and severe physical disorders that require in-house rehabilitation. Substance abuse-related cases and outpatients, which are also catered to by the CRC, are beyond the scope of this paper.

Background

The Cordillera region in the Philippines is a vast mountainous terrain comprising the six provinces of Abra, Apayao, Benguet, Ifugao, Kalinga, and Mountain Province, along with the chartered city of Baguio

City.[1] Its inhabitants represent diverse ethnolinguistic groups, including the Ifugao, Bontoc, Kankanaey, Kalinga, Ibaloi, Tinguian, and Isneg.[2] Collectively, they are known as Igorot, a term originally used by the lowlanders to describe the highland communities. The Spaniards later adapted this into *Ygorrote,* which evolved into Igorot, signifying "people of the mountains."[3]

Beyond extending colonial control from the Ilocos coast, the Spaniards were also drawn to the Cordillera by its rich gold deposits.[4] As Tereso Casiño notes: "Intrusion in highlands Cordillera was politically motivated in search and conquest of the Cordillera Gold . . . the Igorot gold was more important than the people's conversion."[5] Yet, the Igorot resisted political domination and religious proselytization, preserving their indigenous practices.[6]

Long before the Spanish conquistadores arrived in the Philippine archipelago, traditional religious beliefs were already woven into Igorot life. Veneration of ancestral spirits inhabiting nature shaped their cosmology and guided social, spiritual, and cultural expressions. Albert Ernest Jenks observes that Igorot religion rests on a strong conviction in the spirit world. The *a-ni'-to* or the spirit of the dead is regarded as ever-present, influencing human affairs, such as health, fortune, and survival. Within this spiritual realm, rituals were offered to secure favor and avert harm.[7] Moreover, the land is viewed as a sacred inheritance from the Supreme Creator, to be protected and revered, since neglect or disrespect is believed to provoke misfortune from the spirit world.[8]

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[1]PhilAtlas, *Cordillera Administrative Region* (accessed August 22, 2025).

[2]Norbert Kohnen and Petra Kohnen, *Igorot: Traditional Ways of Life and Healing among Philippine Mountain Tribe*, trans. Louise Nieroba and Dagmar Winkler, 2nd ed. (Koeln: SDK Systemdruck Köln GmbH, 2022), 20.

[3]Nestor Castro, *A Peek into Cordilleran History, Culture, and Society: In Search of Self-determination* (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 2000), commentary in author's footnote 4 under "The Peoples of the Cordillera." *Igorot* is an exonym originally derived from the Tagalog word *gulod,* meaning "mountain ridge."

[4]William Henry Scott, *The Discovery of the Igorots: Spanish Contacts with the Pagans of Northern Luzon*, rev. ed. (Quezon City, Philippines: New Day Publishers, 1977), 23-24. Chap. 1, "The Search for Gold" provides an exhaustive account of Spanish efforts to exploit the gold resources of the Cordillera region.

[5]Tereso C. Casiño, *The Relevance of the Christian Concept of God to the Cordilleran's Search for Identity as a People* (Ph.D. diss., Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary, Philippine Branch, 1992), 84.

[6]Ibid., 84.

[7]Albert Ernest Jenks, *The Bontoc Igorot*, Department of Ethnological Survey Publications, vol. 1 (Manila: Bureau of Public Printing, 1905), 196.

[8]Joefrey M. Almazan and Kurt Wanas Klyde Peningeo, "'Daga mi kataguan mi:' Discoursing *Laudato Si'* Toward a More Meaningful Indigenous Theology of Land in the Cordilleras," *Religion and Social Communication* 23, no. 1 (2025): 91-92.

Francisco Antolín made a significant observation about the Igorot's belief in ancestral spirits:

> They are most superstitious. They venerate the sun as the first cause, but their major care is given their deceased, and to them they attribute all good and evil, making frequent sacrifices by means of some old men and women who pretend the deceased are within them."[9] For the Igorot, these ancestral spirits are the most feared, vengeful, and malevolent, who inflict harm upon the living whenever offended or neglected.[10]

The topographic contour of the Cordillera region provides an optimal setting for weather disturbances such as typhoons and heavy monsoon rains during the wet season.[11] Its elevated terrain results in the country's heaviest rainfall and coldest climate, with occasional frost in high-altitude areas.[12] Hence, indigenous agricultural rituals and sacrifices are performed to invoke nature spirits to safeguard crops from natural calamities.[13]

Within this worldview, Igorot traditional religion interprets sickness, misfortune, and fear as the work of unseen forces disrupting daily life. Rituals and sacrifices are therefore performed to restore harmony with the spirit world.[14] Casiño observes that these rituals, essential to maintaining cosmic order, are innumerable and continually evolve to meet the needs of both the ritual practitioner and the wider community."[15] This socio-religious context provides a strategic framework for Antonio Caput Sr.

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[9]Francisco Antolín, *Notices of the Pagan Igorots in the Interior of the Island of Manila*, trans. William Henry Scott (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Press, 1988), 39. Father Francisco Antolín, O.P. (1745-1796) was a Spanish Dominican friar and missionary who served in the Philippines during the Spanish colonial period.

[10]L. P. Verora, *Unreached Peoples '82: Reaching the Igorots* (Makati, Philippines: World Vision Philippines, 1982), 81.

[11]Kohnen and Kohnen, *Igorot: Traditional Ways of Life and Healing*, 19.

[12]Angelo J. Delos Reyes and Aloma M. Delos Reyes, eds., *Igorot: A People Who Daily Touch the Earth and the Sky*, CSG Series Volume 3: Contemporary Life and Issues (Baguio City, Philippines: Cordillera Schools Group, 1987), 3.

[13]Ibid., 73.

[14]Lolito Igualdo, "The Social World of the Kankana-eys" (Ed.D. diss., Baguio Central University, 1989), 176, 240. In his engagement with the Kankana-ey community, Igualdo documented numerous indigenous rituals associated with thanksgiving, weddings, childbirth, illness, death, calamities, blessings, and curses. These ceremonies often require animal sacrifices—including pigs, carabaos, horses, cows, and chickens—which place a significant financial burden on families. According to Tito, many of the families who sought help from the CRC had been plunged into a severe financial crisis due to the demands of these ritual obligations. For some, CRC became the last resort for healing and deliverance amid the spiritual bondage and financial hardship.

[15]Casiño, *The Relevance of the Christian Concept of God*, 108.

and the CRC to present the gospel through a Pentecostal, transformative approach to the Igorot worldview in the Central Cordillera.

The Emergence of a Pentecostal Transformative Ministry[16]

The Personal and Spiritual Journey of Antonio "Tito" Caput Sr.

Antonio Caput Sr., popularly known as "Tito," was born on August 31, 1942, into a family of gold miners in Itogon, Benguet. He grew up in Tuding, a community marked both by traditional religious practices and criminal activity.[17] His first encounter with Christianity came through American missionary Elva Vanderbout, who opened her home as a makeshift primary school. Though Tito admitted he did not fully grasp the lessons, curiosity drew him to the gatherings, becoming the channel through which the Holy Spirit initiated faith in his heart.

Not long after, Tito's faith was shaken by the sudden death of his mother and the undisclosed donation of her body for medical study. This loss left him devastated and led to a period of spiritual rebellion, during which he stopped attending church. He was later diagnosed with an illness that left him paralyzed for several months. Although non-Christian relatives sought help from a *mambunong* (native priest), the attempt proved unsuccessful. In his suffering, a cousin who was a church deacon prayed for his healing. Tito experienced a miraculous recovery, after which he fully embraced Christ.

At twenty-three, he enrolled in Luzon Bible Institute to pursue his call to ministry. Driven by a vision of demonstrating God's power through healing and deliverance, he devoted himself to prayer and fasting in pursuit of spiritual gifts and the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Even as a student, these gifts became evident in his ministry, laying the foundation for his later work and shaping the CRC's distinctive

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[16]Antonio Caput Sr., lead pastor, Mankayan Assembly of God and founder, Cordillera Rehabilitation Center, interview by author, August 9, 2025. Information supporting this study was primarily drawn from a personal interview with Tito Caput, the researcher's own knowledge, and firsthand observations gathered during multiple visits to the center.

[17]Julie C. Ma, *When the Spirit Meets the Spirits: Pentecostal Ministry among the Kankana-ey Tribe in the Philippines* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000), 76.

Pentecostal transformative approach among the Igorot communities of the Central Cordillera.

The Birth and Missions of the CRC

Following ministry assignments in Assemblies of God churches in Northern Luzon, Caput's journey led him into the Central Cordillera. Prompted by the Holy Spirit, he pioneered a church in Mankayan, Benguet, a town where traditional religion was deeply rooted. The first service in 1979 was attended by only six people: Caput, his wife, their three children, and a deaf elderly woman. Despite this humble beginning, it marked the beginning of a Spirit-empowered ministry in the region.

Building on these early efforts, in the early 1980s, the CRC was established to provide a holistic Pentecostal ministry among the Igorot, becoming a sanctuary of healing and deliverance for those afflicted by demonic oppression and possession. Over time, CRC's ministry expanded beyond healing and deliverance to encompass evangelism and discipleship. Patients who embraced the faith were nurtured toward spiritual maturity and empowered as witnesses within their communities.[18]

Despite strong opposition from Igorot traditional religion during its formative years, CRC persevered and flourished. Accounts of miraculous healings, deliverance from demonic affliction, and freedom from substance abuse became powerful testimonies that drew many to faith in the living God.

The Pentecostal Transformative Approach of CRC: A Contextualized Holistic Methodology[19]

Through the CRC, Caput developed a ministry paradigm that reimagined healing and deliverance in light of the lived realities of the Igorot socio-religious environment. At its core lies a Pentecostal transformative approach integrating Power Encounter, Contextual Evangelism, and In-house Discipleship. Together, these elements embodied Caput's theological conviction that the Gospel must be both

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[18]Since its establishment, the CRC has led families to abandon their former traditional religious practices and embrace a newfound faith in Christ. Former animist patients were discipled into active church members, leaders, and, in some pastors.

[19]Harold Cole also conducted a well-researched study on Caput and the CRC's contextualized ministry in the Cordilleras. See Harold R. Cole, "A Model of Contextualized Deliverance Ministry: A Case Study: The Cordillera Rehabilitation Center," *Journal of Asian Mission* 5, no. 2 (2003): 259-73.

proclaimed and demonstrated in power and love,[20] addressing not only "matters of ultimate concern" but also the worldviews that shape people's daily lives.[21]

Power Encounter as the Heart of Pentecostal Ministry in Igorot Animistic Context

"Animism is a religion of power; a religion with no power holds little interest to an animist!"[22] Within this framework, Pentecostalism offers a compelling response. Igorot cosmology posits the existence of unseen spirits, a belief that aligns with Pentecostal emphasis on spiritual realities. Traditional Igorot religion locates these spirits in the skyworld (*daya*) and the underworld (*kalutaan*).[23] Similarly, Pentecostals affirm the existence of spirits in both the heavenly realms and the abyss, or bottomless pit. Ephesians 6:12 describes these spiritual forces of darkness as "principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."[24] The Bible also references the abyss, or bottomless pit, as a spiritual realm of confinement for demonic entities, described as being "under the earth" or in the "deep."[25]

Secondly, both traditional Igorot religion and Pentecostalism maintain that spiritual beings dwell among the living and influence human affairs. In the Igorot power encounter practices, prayer, rituals, and sacrifices are employed to engage cosmic spirits in pursuit of healing and blessing.[26] By contrast, Pentecostals emphasize power encounter as a means of deliverance from spiritual bondage. Julie Ma's study among the *Kankana-ey* notes that this shared worldview of spirit beings makes traditional Igorot communities particularly receptive to Pentecostal expressions of power encounter, rendering such ministry approaches highly relevant within the indigenous religious context.[27] She affirms:

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[20]Tito lives by the ministry principle drawn from Rom 15:19 and Jas 1:27—that theory must always go with the active demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit, embodied in the love of God.

[21]Rodney L. Henry, *Filipino Spirit World: A Total Challenge to the Church* (Manila: OMF Literature, 2001), 41.

[22]Dave Johnson, "Pentecostal Ministry in Animistic Context" (lecture, Asia Pacific Theological Seminary, Baguio City, August 12, 2025).

[23]Igualdo, "*The Social World of the Kankana-eys,"* 325.

[24]Eph 6:12 (New King James Version).

[25]In Luke 8:31 demons plead with Jesus not to send them into the abyss, a domain of ultimate and eternal destination and judgment for malevolent spiritual beings.

[26]Igualdo, "*The Social World of the Kankana-eys*," 326.

[27]Ma, *When the Spirit Meets the Spirits,* 221-224. Ma observed that both the *Kankana-eys* and Pentecostals recognize supernatural power as central to the healing

"The successful penetration of the Assemblies of God into the animistic mountain region, thus, is largely attributable to the active manifestation of the power, frequently of healing, of the Holy Spirit."[28]

In this light, the Pentecostal message, demonstrated through the power of the Holy Spirit, proves vital in engaging traditional religious worldviews. It embodies the essence of the Power Encounter, where the gospel is not merely proclaimed but becomes a lived experience of God's reality through the Spirit's work. In regions where belief in spiritual beings is deeply rooted, such as the Cordillera, Pentecostal expressions of power encounter reveal that the gospel speaks directly to people's worldview, offering a genuine divine encounter that affirms God's presence and power in ways resonant with local spiritual frameworks.

Contextualized Transformative Approach: CRC as a Community-Based Power Encounter Center

C. Peter Wagner defines Power Encounter as "a visible practical demonstration that Jesus Christ is more powerful than the spirits, powers or false gods worshipped or feared by the members of a given people group."[29] Charles Kraft echoes the same argument: ". . . power encounters are often the clearest way to demonstrate the superiority of God over the spirits and gods."[30]

Power Encounter, therefore, must not remain merely doctrinal but must also be experiential and practical. Philip Steyne emphasizes: "To the animist, anything less than a power encounter in which one not only assents volitional to cognitive input, but also feels the encounter experientially, is indeed a poor exchange."[31] For Pentecostal theology to be truly practical in traditional religious settings, it must detach from conventional Western dualism that compartmentalizes the supernatural and material, physical and spiritual, religious and secular. Allan Anderson observes that Pentecostalism's success in traditional religious Africa stems from its active engagement with the spiritual realm, an area

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of diseases with spirit causality. However, the Pentecostals' more powerful spiritual alternative, which resonates with traditional religious and animistic beliefs, has contributed to the success of Pentecostal ministry in the highland Cordillera.

[28]Ibid., 224.

[29]C. Peter Wagner, *Confronting the Powers: How the New Testament Church Experienced the Power of Strategic-Level Spiritual Warfare* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1996), 102.

[30]Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996; 8th printing, December 2003), 452.

[31]Philip M. Steyne, *Gods of Power: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Animists* (Columbia, SC: Impact International Foundation, 1999), 210.

which Western rationalistic theology has often neglected, and which locals perceive as disconnected from the dynamic realities of their lived experience.[32] Anderson notes:

> . . . Pentecostal and Spirit churches were motivated by a desire to meet the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of Africa, offering solutions to life's problems and ways to cope in a threatening and hostile world. Their pastors, prophets, bishops, and evangelists proclaimed that the God who saves the 'soul' also heals the body and is a 'good God' interested in providing answers to human fears and insecurities, accepting people as having genuine problems and trying conscientiously to find solutions to them. They proclaimed that a God who forgives sin is also concerned about poverty, sickness, barrenness, oppression by evil spirits, and liberation from all forms of human affliction and bondage. This message made Pentecostalism attractive to people in these contexts.[33]

Through the CRC, Caput introduced a form of "Pentecostal attractiveness" that engaged both the spiritual realities and practical concerns of the Igorot. He established a community-based center that became a venue for power encounters through healing and deliverance. This model aligns with the traditional religious context of the Cordillera, mirroring the folk healer's home where individuals seek consultation and undergo appropriate healing rituals or remedies. In a traditional religious Igorot community, the location of healing is never ambiguous. People instinctively know where to go and which healing practitioner to consult should illness strike. Harold Cole notes that individuals who were severely demon-possessed, uncontrollable, and dangerous were taken to reside with the witchdoctor for a time, where deliverance was sought through prayer to the spirits and ritual performances.[34] In this way, the CRC assumed a parallel role, serving as a familiar sacred space where the sick and spiritually afflicted sought healing and restoration.

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[32]Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 191.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Cole, "A Model of Contextualized Deliverance Ministry," 264.

Biblical and Theological Foundation: A Christological Reality—The Supremacy of Christ over Cosmic Powers

In the Gospels, Jesus' ministry is marked by power encounters affirming his authority over sickness and demonic powers. Matthew 4:23 summarizes his earthly ministry: "And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people."[35] Healing was integral to Jesus' ministry, serving as a visible manifestation of the kingdom of God breaking into human history.[36] In Pauline Christology, Jesus is presented not only as Savior but as the supreme and exalted Lord over all creation and cosmic powers. Graham Cole highlights this cosmic supremacy of Christ in Col 2:14-15.

> The death of Jesus on the cross had more than one divine purpose. Christ's cross not only saves us but also disarms those forces arrayed against us . . . . Paradoxically, in dying, Christ deprives the principalities and powers of their sway over humankind, now that "the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us" is cancelled, taken away, nailed to the cross (Col. 2:14 NIV 1984). These forces no longer have any grounds to accuse the Colossians, and us who believe (cf. Col. 2:15). In such accusation lay their power. Christ dying in our place robs them of their power. Indeed, they were disarmed (Col. 2:15).[37]

Further, Clinton Arnold claims that the Paul, the apostle, in his letter to the Ephesians, deliberately addresses the recipients' fear over hostile spiritual forces by affirming the supremacy of Christ above all spiritual entities. Paul assures believers of the divine authority and protection they possess in Jesus Christ.[38] Arnold explains:

> While all of these evil forces still retain a large measure of their power, their authority and sway has been effectively broken by the resurrection and exaltation of Christ. Therefore, all who are

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[35]Matt 4:23 (English Standard Version).

[36]Ma, *When the Spirit Meets the Spirits,* 223.

[37]Graham A. Cole, *Against the Darkness: The Doctrine of Angels, Satan, and Demons* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 153.

[38]Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1989), 126. Arnold asserts that animistic and magical practices were prevalent in first-century Ephesus and that both Christians and non-Christians alike resorted to such practices in response to the pervasive fear of the spirits.

> "in Christ" need not succumb to the authority of the "powers.'' At the consummation, these ''powers'' will be completely subjected by Christ and brought totally under his headship.[39]

For the Igorot traditional religious worldview, where spiritual power is vital for protection, blessings, and survival, the theology of Christ's supremacy connects deeply, affirming his authority over the cosmic powers once feared and the deception that held them captive. With this new orientation of power encounter, spirit appeasement and ritual sacrifices are rendered moot and academic in light of Jesus' redemptive work. Arnold further affirms:

> Believers are depicted as having been transplanted from one sphere of power (kingdom, or dominion) and placed in another. This transfer forms the basis for their access to the power of God. There is therefore no need for believers to seek for another protection from the "powers" by any means. This would include the devising of ways to manipulate demons or the invoking of angelic assistance.[40]

Contextualized Household Evangelism Toward Communal Transformation

Close family ties are among the most enduring and foundational values in Filipino culture. As the smallest unit of society, the family serves as the primary locus of identity, security, and moral compass, shaping social, cultural, behavioral, and spiritual life. The Filipino concept of family is reciprocal: children are nurtured and cared for at home, while parents and elders are honored and respected in return.[41] While some scholars contend that the Philippines tends toward a matriarchal social structure, Ruby Suazo argues otherwise: "In the Philippines, as a patriarchal society, decision making as well as discipline is centered on the father."[42] Belen Medina et al., likewise assert: "It is generally known, despite the so-called egalitarianism of the Filipino family in decision making (Porio et al. 1978, Mendez and Jocano 1974) and the increased labor force participation and bread-winning function of wives (Castillo

[39]Ibid., 170.

[40]Ibid., 169.

[41]Ruby Suazo, "Re-inventing the Filipino Value of the Family: Revisiting the Significance of Knowing the Filipino Identity" (unpublished manuscript, 2008).

[42]Ruby S. Suazo, "Reinventing the Filipino's Orientation towards the Family: A Prospect for Genuine National Development," *USC Graduate Journal* 26, no. 2 (2010): 229.

1993; Miralao 1992), that the husband is still considered officially as the head of the family."[43]

The Igorot people share this value. The family generally respects the authority of the father as the household leader. Thus, any attempt to evangelize the traditional religious Igorot must engage both familial values and communal spirituality. By recognizing the father's role as household head and considering the sacred experience of the family as a unit, evangelism can move beyond individual conversion toward conversion of entire families.

Contextualized Transformative Approach: Family as Vital to Collective Worldview Reorientation

One distinctive feature of the CRC model is the intentional inclusion of the family, with the father, whenever possible, as a vital participant in the healing and deliverance process. Initially, family involvement is essential for gathering information on the physical, emotional, and cultural dimensions of illness and its perceived spiritual causality.[44] Beyond diagnosis, the family functions as an integral part of the rehabilitation team, providing a consistent support system throughout the healing journey of those facing physical, mental, or spiritual challenges.[45]

This emphasis reflects the Cordilleran traditional religious worldview, where sickness is regarded not as an isolated condition but as a disruption of balance affecting the entire household. In such cases, the family consults the *mambunong* (native priest) and collectively participates in the rituals deemed necessary for the healing of the afflicted member.[46] Casiño emphasizes:

> In the religious ritual, the Cordillerans are allowed to experience collective sentiments as well as community solidarity . . . . In this respect, the individual Cordilleran ("I") identifies

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[43]Belen T. G. Medina, Eliseo A. de Guzman, Aurorita A. Roldan, and Rosa Maria Juan Bautista, *The Filipino Family: Emerging Structures and Arrangements* (Quezon City: Office of Research Coordination, University of the Philippines, 1996), 40

[44]For Caput, spiritual discernment is critical to see underlying issues that may not be immediately visible.

[45]Patrick W. Corrigan, Kim T. Mueser, Gary R. Bond, Robert E. Drake, and Phyllis Solomon, *Principles and Practice of Psychiatric Rehabilitation: An Empirical Approach*, 3rd ed. (New York: The Guilford Press, 2016), 230.

[46]Angelita O. Angel, *Folk Medicine Craft of the Kankana-eys* (Ed.D. diss., Baguio Central University, 1989), 40-96. This cultural pattern explains why afflicted individuals frequently arrive at the center with their entire family when seeking help. During the researcher's recent visit and interview with Caput, an elderly mute woman, believed to be oppressed by spirits, was brought by her whole family to seek spiritual intervention.

> with the group ("We") and becomes a corporate personality, simultaneously experiencing the presence of the sacred with others. This explains identity formation as well as collective consciousness and sentiments taking place within a family, clan, tribe, and region. As such, the individual is *absorbed* into the collective identity, and sentiments and consciousness of the whole community.[47]

In Cordillera traditional religious contexts faith is seldom private. Spiritual decisions and practices are shaped within the family, guided by the father or community elders who serve as spiritual authorities. Accordingly, Igorot children are generally taught to respect their elders[48] and obey their parents,[49] particularly the father as the head of the family. The elderly are esteemed for wisdom in all aspects of life, including matters of faith. As Lolito Igualdo observes: "Old age is said to be a symbol of wit and wisdom as well as power and authority."[50] Such paternal and elder authority is vital for sustaining social relationships and ensuring cultural and religious continuity.

CRC reframes Igorot family values and communal religiosity as strategic avenues for household evangelism, aiming at collective renunciation of traditional worldviews and communal allegiance to God. The family is regarded not only as participants in the healing journey of an afflicted member but also as recipients of God's saving grace. Cole notes: "Tito's approach to take advantage of the opportunity and make salvation for the family a part of the whole process for deliverance is extremely effective culturally and is a tremendous model for other ministries."[51] Tito asserts that deliverance is found solely in Jesus, with the initial step requiring a personal turning to him. His consistent success has convinced families to embrace this path, confident that true change and deliverance come through Christ.[52]

Biblical and Theological Foundation: The Households of Cornelius and the Philippian Jailer in the Book of Acts

The integration of the family in evangelism, with the father as both biological and spiritual head, reflects a biblical pattern seen in the

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[47]Casiño, *The Relevance of the Christian*, 114.

[48]Igualdo, "*The Social World of the Kankana-eys,"* 267.

[49]One of the fundamental values shared by Igorot and other Filipinos is respect for elders, which is expressed not so much in words but in obedience to parents and elders.

[50]Igualdo, "*The Social World of the Kankana-eys,"* 305.

[51]Cole, "A Model of Contextualized Deliverance Ministry," 273.

[52]Ibid., 272.

conversions of Cornelius and his household (Acts 10) and the Philippian jailer and his family (Acts 16). Historian Richard Saller notes that Roman society was deeply father-centered. The Roman father *(paterfamilias)* possessed legal authority *(patria potestas)*, symbolizing male power and social control. Guided by the core value of *pietas* (duty and respect), every member of the Roman household was expected to honor and obey the father's authority.[53]

Within this patriarchal framework, it is plausible that the father determined matters of faith and spirituality for the family. This cultural norm helps explain why the conversions of Cornelius (Acts 10) and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16) extended to their households, as it was customary to follow the authority of the head. In light of this, CRC's evangelistic engagement with families, particularly the inclusion of the father as the household leader, is both biblically grounded and culturally sensitive. In contexts where spiritual authority is patriarchal, the conversion of the father often leads to the conversion of the entire household.

Through this critical-contextual approach, CRC moves beyond conventional gospel presentations centered on individual conversion, adopting a holistic model of evangelism that recognizes the interconnectedness of family relationships and household structures in shaping spiritual decisions.

Renouncing Traditional Religious Practices, An Indicator of Genuine Allegiance

A significant aspect of the CRC's power encounter is the surrender and desecration of traditional religious paraphernalia, such as amulets, ritual or healing articles, carved idols, or ancestral charms.[54] Within traditional religion, these sacred items are not merely symbolic but believed to carry spiritual significance. Consequently, Kraft contends: "As a rule, occult paraphernalia should be destroyed, since its only purpose is to carry satanic power."[55]

The removal of sacred articles tied to past spiritual bondage is more than a public renunciation of allegiance to spiritual entities. It

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[53]Richard P. Saller, *Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 105.

[54]During the researcher's interview, Caput asserted that it is a strict requirement for those who come to the center to surrender any magical or animistic-related objects in order to ensure long-term healing and recovery.

[55]Charles H. Kraft, *Defeating Dark Angels: Breaking Demonic Oppression in the Believer's Life* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1992), 232.

substantiates a decisive break from former dependencies and affirms a shift in allegiance to God, serving as initial evidence of authentic transformation. Conversely, refusal to surrender such items may perpetuate residual strongholds or allow the former worldview to persist, hindering true deliverance. As Alan Tippett underscores: "The symbolic rejection of the old way not only involves a religious encounter, but thereafter it serves as a continual reminder of the act of rejection that alone can save the convert from syncretism or polytheism."[56]

Contextualized Approach: Surrendering and Desecrating Sacred Articles as Rites of Separation

While relinquishing sacred items is essential outward evidence of authentic transformation, for newly converted Igorot believers, this proves more difficult than it appears. Fears of spiritual retribution and social backlash from relatives and friends within traditional religious society frequently hinder voluntary surrender. However, when approached with cultural sensitivity and interpreted through the lens of Scripture, the act becomes a concrete and powerful expression of a reoriented worldview.

Paul Hiebert, in discussing the critical task of contextualization, underscores the need for pastors and missionaries to develop a "metacultural framework"—the capacity to interpret Scripture and communicate its truths in ways that resonate with people's worldview, thereby preventing the gospel from being misrepresented or misunderstood.[57] In so doing, new believers are empowered "to critically evaluate their own past customs in the light of their new biblical understandings and to make decisions regarding their response to their new-found truths."[58] Such engagement fosters authentic conversion and equips converts to embody the gospel in ways that remain both biblically faithful and culturally meaningful.

Biblical and Theological Foundation: The Ephesian Believers in Acts 19 as a Radical Paradigm

In Acts 19, Luke narrates a remarkable transformation in Ephesus, a city steeped in magic and idolatry.[59] Upon coming to Christ, the new

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[56]Alan Tippett, *Introduction to Missiology* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1987), 329.

[57]Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 89.

[58]Ibid.

[59]Arnold, *Power and Magic*, 165. Arnold, in an excellent and exhaustive study of

believers voluntarily surrendered and burned sacred paraphernalia and magical items (v. 19). This radical decision was neither imposed by the early Christian leaders nor merely an impulsive reaction; rather, it was rooted in two complementary Pentecostal dynamics: the sustained teaching of divine truths (v. 8), and the demonstrative manifestations of divine power (vv. 11–12).

CRC's ministry in the Igorot traditional religious context embodies this paradigm. The voluntary act of patients and families relinquishing ritual objects arises from the interplay of God's active power (Power Encounter) and the faithful preaching of biblical truth (Truth Encounter). The transactional power once attributed to sacred items is replaced by the redemptive power of Christ through the Cross. In this sacred exchange, surrender is not loss but gain, bringing liberation from fear and bondage while opening access to God's power through faith.

This transformative approach demonstrates that Pentecostal ministry in traditional religious settings to be truly scriptural and contextual must engage both underlying belief systems and the tangible symbols that express them through faithful teaching of God's truth and evident demonstration of God's power. These encounters of Truth and Power serve as catalysts, leading converts to transformation through the surrender and desecration of ritual objects.

In-house Discipleship: An Immersive Approach to Holistic Rehabilitation

For CRC, a power encounter without subsequent discipleship remains incomplete. As Kraft observes,

> The most important aspect of deliverance ministry is never the casting out of the demons. The aim is healing. But the healing is not complete until the deep level hurts that disrupt a person's relationship with God, self, and others are worked through under the power of the Holy Spirit.[60]

CRC thus functions as a rehabilitation facility offering an immersive discipleship model that addresses not only physical restoration but also holistic spiritual well-being.

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the animistic and polytheistic background of Ephesus, argues that the religious climate of Ephesus deeply shaped the worldview and daily life of both Christians and non-Christians. This background helps illuminate why Paul's emphasis on spiritual power in Ephesians was not just theological, but also pastoral and missional, addressing real fears and cultural realities faced by the early churches in the Western Asia Minor region.

[60]Kraft, *Defeating Dark Angels,* 140.

Contextualized Transformative Approach: In-House Discipleship as Gateway to Truth and Love Encounter

Central to CRC's contextualized and transformative approach is inhouse discipleship, wherein participants reside at the center for a designated period, enabling uninterrupted spiritual formation through prayer, worship, and Scripture. During recovery, patients attend all church meetings and Bible studies at MAGC. They are encouraged to read the Bible, and for nonliterate participants, Elizabeth, Caput's wife, or women from the church read Scripture to them.[61]

In this phase, patients begin to integrate the Power, Truth, and Love Encounters. Daily prayer, worship, and Bible study enable participants to reconcile their personal experiences of power encounters with the truth of God's Word, including doctrines such as Christ's supremacy, God's immanence, and their new identity as children of God. Caput and his wife, by cooking, dining, and interacting with recovering patients, embody a love that dismantles barriers of superiority and indifference.[62] At the CRC, patients experienced being seen, heard, and valued, not as projects but as people. In this way, the center evolves beyond a rehabilitation shelter into a consecrated community of care and growth.

Biblical and Theological Foundation: Jesus' "Come Be with Me" Discipleship Approach

The principle of in-house discipleship finds biblical grounding in Mark 3:13-14. Jesus did not disciple from a distance; he invited disciples into his life, not merely to follow him, but to dwell with him and become like him. Greg Ogden contends:

> The scriptural context for growing disciples is through relationships. Jesus called the Twelve to be with him, for through personal association their lives would be transformed. Proximity produces disciples."[63] While programs and curricula remain valuable pragmatic tools, authentic discipleship, as modeled by Jesus, is ultimately a life investment. It is an invitation to a lifelong relationship of "mutual love,

[61]Cole, "A Model of Contextualized Deliverance Ministry," 267. MAGC stands for Mankayan Assembly of God Church.

[62]The pastoral care consistently shown at the CRC was personally witnessed by the researcher during his occasional visits to the center, affirming the depth of commitment and compassion invested in this kind of ministry.

[63]Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 42.

> transparency, and accountability."[64] Within this reciprocal dynamic, the "approach to disciple making is nonhierarchical. The intent is to create a mutual, egalitarian interchange, where life rubs up against life.[65]

While Jesus' calling of the Twelve served a distinct purpose, CRC's objectives nonetheless reflect his model of transformation through shared life. Caput's practice of dwelling with patients and offering hands-on care is truly incarnational, echoing Christ who lived among his disciples, washed their feet, and broke bread with them. Kraft, in his book *Communicate with Power,* states:

> If we are properly to follow Jesus, then our lives must demonstrate Him . . . . We are to relate to the Father as He related to the Father, to carry across the bridge the same relational message He carried, to love as He loved, to accept as He accepted, to heal as He healed, to free people from demons and types of captivity as He freed, to speak as He spoke. As the Father sent Him, so He sends us (John 20:21) to do what He did to demonstrate who God is and what He desires for humankind. If our lives contradict that message, the information we seek to get across is worthless.[66]

CRC's in-house discipleship has proven convincingly effective, as its daily practices visibly reflect the Christ it proclaims. The alignment of conviction and conduct—of theology with practice—not only strengthens the center's credibility but also amplifies the impact of its transformative ministry.

Other Essential Elements of CRC's Pentecostal Transformative Approach

Domestic Duties and Skill Development Toward Rediscovering Self-Value

At CRC, rehabilitation integrates routine responsibilities with skill development, addressing both the personal and social dimensions of life. In-house patients engage in gardening, cleaning, and food service,

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[64]Ibid., 124.

[65]Ibid., 130.

[66]Charles Kraft, *Communicate with Power: Jesus the Model for Contemporary Communication* (Manila: OMF Literature, 2001), 52.

while also learning practical skills like carpentry, masonry, welding, and driving. These ordinary tasks function as deliberate therapeutic tools, enabling reintegration into normal life after prolonged isolation and indignity. Yet CRC's vision extends beyond restoring normalcy. More than redeeming value, rebuilding confidence, and reacquiring life skills, it seeks to guide patients in rediscovering their true identity in Christ.

The Role of the Church Beyond In-House Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation at CRC extends beyond the center. Upon discharge, patients are reconnected with their families and referred to local churches or a pastor for follow-up discipleship. CRC stresses that while deliverance may break spiritual bondage, without ongoing guidance, individuals remain vulnerable. Scripture warns that the enemy often returns to a house swept clean but left empty (Luke 11:24-26). Thus, the churches' role is indispensable, not as passive observers but as active participants in sustaining transformation.

In addressing the needs expressed in traditional religions, the church must embody God's love to the fallen, sick, oppressed, and dying. As Dave Johnson affirms:

> When the body of Christ is walking in love according to what God intended, the church itself becomes God's compassionate good news, providing a powerfully intangible experience of love to non-believers. The world has no equal to the church when it is functioning as it should.[67]

Prayer and Fasting, Purity and Piety: The Minister's Spiritual Disciplines

Caput sustained his ministry for four decades through consistent spiritual disciplines that ensured both longevity and impact. A man of prayer, he cultivated a daily early morning habit of communing with God and immersing himself in the Spirit. His unparalleled commitment to prayer and fasting fueled his ministry.[68]

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[67]Dave Johnson, *Theology in Context: A Case Study in the Philippines* (Baguio City: APTS Press, 2013), 176.

[68]Cole, "A Model of Contextualized Deliverance Ministry," 266. Cole notes that healing and deliverance at the center were not immediate but required careful preparation. Each session involved three days of prayer and fasting, two days of rest, prior to Caput's direct confrontation with demons. The process continued until the patient entered the recovery stage.

Moreover, Caput treated God's anointing with reverent care, recognizing purity and holiness as indispensable for sustaining the ministry. He was convinced that outward power is upheld by inward purity. For Caput, "purity gives him the ability to stand against evil spirits in the name of Jesus."[69] To him, purity and power were inseparable, for without holiness, spiritual authority is compromised. As Paul exhorts Timothy, "Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work."[70]

Ministers and missionaries engaged in this kind of ministry must therefore commit themselves to a high-maintenance spirituality.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the Pentecostal transformative model exhibited by Caput and the CRC in engaging Igorot traditional religious worldviews in the Central Cordillera. Four essentials emerge:

First, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, particularly healing and deliverance, can be deliberately sought for effective power-encounter ministry. Second, CRC's contextualization approaches—family-oriented evangelism, surrender of ritual articles, proximity discipleship patterned after Jesus, and skills development for self-rediscovery and reintegration, illustrate how biblically sound and culturally sensitive strategies foster holistic transformation. Third, endorsement of discharged patients to pastors or local churches for post-rehabilitation discipleship is vital for sustained healing and growth. Fourth, moral integrity, purity, and consistent spiritual disciplines are indispensable for maintaining God's anointing and spiritual authority essential to power encounter ministry.

Ultimately, the Pentecostal transformative approach embodied by Caput and CRC offers a unique and powerful response to the socio-spiritual realities of the Igorot. Though demanding for pastors, missionaries, and churches serving in similar contexts, through the agency of the Holy Spirit and the dedication exemplified by Caput, his family, and ministry partners, replication of this model remains both plausible and promising.

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[69]Ibid.

[70]2 Tim 2:21 (English Standard Version).

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True Blessing in Christ: A Theological and Missiological Engagement with Folk Islam Among the Rohingya of Myanmar

Khup Sian Sang

The Rohingya people are a marginalized Muslim population in Myanmar, enduring systemic discrimination, statelessness, and forced displacement. Though they have resided in Myanmar's Rakhine State for over a century, they are denied citizenship and often confined to refugee camps due to violent military crackdowns. Their religious life incorporates *Sunni* and *Sufi* Islam alongside local spirit rituals and healing practices, reflecting both spiritual longing and cultural syncretism.

Effective Christian mission must be both biblically grounded and culturally contextual. Engaging the Rohingya requires a comprehensive understanding of their communal values, spiritual concerns, and social structure. This paper argues that true blessing (*Baraka*) is not found in religious practices but in a transformative relationship with Jesus Christ who alone offers spiritual restoration, authority over evil, and eternal hope. By addressing their fears, experiences of displacement, and honor-shame dynamics, Christian witness can demonstrate the fullness of life found in Christ.

Understanding the Rohingya: Worldview, Beliefs, and Culture

The Rohingya and related Folk Muslims are a sizable spiritually vibrant, yet outwardly disturbed, segment of Myanmar's Muslim community. The Rohingya have resided in Myanmar's Rakhine State for over a hundred years. Yet they still lack citizenship since the government does not recognize them as an ethnic minority. In 2012 and 2017, many individuals were compelled to migrate to refugee camps in Bangladesh

due to recurring prejudice, acts of violence, and significant military operations.[1]

Rohingya communities practice a form of Folk Islam characterized by a syncretistic blend of *Sunni* orthodoxy, *Sufi* spirituality, and indigenous animistic customs. Their religious worldview incorporates beliefs in spirits, the use of protective amulets, and veneration of saints, demonstrating a fusion of Islamic and local spiritual traditions.[2] As Rick Love notes, such Folk Muslim practices are often aimed at securing spiritual protection, healing, and divine favor commonly referred to as *Baraka*.[3]

Honor-shame is a key aspect of how Rohingya and others in their communities are raised. Loyalty within the family and a strong community reputation hold society together. A person's identity is inextricably linked to collective honor.[4] In this context, being outwardly condemned does harm beyond merely feeling guilty inwardly; therefore, joining a new faith can be difficult and delicate.

Dreams play an important part in spiritual affairs. Tom Doyle and Greg Webster say that Christ has frequently touched many Muslims in confined situations with compelling dreams, leading them to accept the gospel with little influence from others.[5]

Muslims in Myanmar are in tremendous need of spiritual support. They convey their misery and agony in hopes of finding peace, relief from curses, recovery from disease, and confirmation of God's love. A culturally relevant Christian testimony has to reveal Jesus' capacity to save, heal, and restore our lives. According to Don McCurry, Folk Muslims are particularly drawn to Jesus when he is represented as alive,

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[1]Azeem Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide* (London: Hurst & Company, 2016), 34-40.

[2]Anthony Ware and Costas Laoutides, *Myanmar's 'Rohingya' Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 117-119.

[3]Rick Love, *Muslims, Magic, and the Kingdom of God: Church Planting Among Folk Muslims* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), 42-45.

[4]Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 27-30.

[5]Tom Doyle and Greg Webster, *Dreams and Visions: Is Jesus Awakening the Muslim World?* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 15-18.

in control of spiritual creatures, and capable of changing people's lives in tangible ways.[6]

Evangelism Strategies

Everything begins with the restoration of honor through evangelism. In honor-shame communities, the good news should emphasize Jesus' ability to restore to the outcast what others have taken away. Rather than simply stating that sin causes guilt and punishment, histories[7] may highlight how Jesus removes shame and restores respect to those rejected by society. This is especially important for populations experiencing persecution and relocation, such as the Rohingya. According to Jayson Georges and Mark Baker, biblical analogies such as the Prodigal Son or the bleeding woman can assist in illustrating how Christ offers respect.[8]

It is also vital to demonstrate that Jesus has authority over issues caused by demonic spirits and disease. Folk Muslims respond to evidence of God's might as well as to theological arguments. Jesus' abilities of healing, driving out demons, and offering peace serve as powerful examples in a world where many people are plagued by *Jinn*, curses, and dread. Don McCurry notes that asking for health, deliverance, and blessings can lead to more fruitful spiritual talks.[9]

In addition, when the Bible and missionaries are not available, God utilizes dreams and visions to reveal himself. Tom Doyle and Greg Webster recall instances in which Muslims had dreams about Jesus. They embraced Jesus as their Savior after the meaning of their visions were revealed to them by sincere Christians.[10] Such meetings[11] provide an invaluable starting point for ministering to the Rohingya.

Furthermore, community-based ministry is more effective than focusing only on individuals. Because of the historic concentration on families or clans, ministering to groups respects the social fabric and is less likely to result in someone being expelled from the group. Reliable individuals or believers from the same cultural background should be recruited to join the ministry team of believers from the same cultural

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[6]Don McCurry, *Jesus' Love for Folk Muslims: Sharing the Gospel with Practical Wisdom* (Colorado Springs, CO: Ministries to Muslims, 2011), 22-29.

[7]Histories refers to biblical stories and culturally relevant testimonies that show how Jesus restores honor and dignity to those rejected by society.

[8]Georges and Baker, *Ministering*, 103-107.

[9]McCurry, *Jesus' Love for Folk Muslims*, 45-46.

[10]Doyle and Webster, *Ministering*, 91-97.

[11]The "meetings" occur between Jesus and the Rohingya through dreams or visions, while sincere Christians help interpret and explain their meaning.

background working together in holistic ministry among the Rohingya. Holistic ministry should come first.

Another approach to offering Christ's love is to focus on people's physical needs, particularly in the areas of health, education, trauma, and employment. In instances when families are relocated, such generosity fosters rapport and confidence which naturally leads to religious discussions. According to Rick Love, when missions serve the body and spirit in the same way that Jesus did, missions or mission workers meet people where they are.[12]

Myanmar Folk Muslims and *Baraka*

In Myanmar, Folk Muslims like the Rohingya place great significance on acquiring *Baraka*, or forms of divine blessing, as part of their faith. As Muslims often find themselves on the perimeter of society, their religion helps form their identity and also guides them in times of anxiety, illness, and oppression. Many of these Muslims wear *Taweez*, visit *Pirs'* or *Awliya's* graves, or utter Qur'anic verses and other incantations to protect themselves and ask for divine help. They are often taught by word of mouth, bringing together Islamic, ancestral, and previous traditions found in the area.[13]

A *Taweez* contains Qur'anic texts, prayers, or numerals and letters to protect them from *Jinn*, the evil eye, and disaster. Many Muslims in rural Myanmar, particularly in the Rakhine and Ayeyarwady regions, believe these things will protect them from illness, personal issues, and business failure.[14]

Going to the graves of notable professors and local mystics is also said to bring *Baraka*. Devotees visit graves to offer prayers or minor offerings in the hopes of healing, having children, or resolving their issues. Bill Musk refers to "the religion of the majority" that indicates Islam is influenced by ordinary life experiences which are comprised of silly worries and optimistic hopes.[15]

People in the region do these rituals because they are terrified of *Jinn*, entities mentioned in the Qur'an but mostly created in mythology. Many who believe in *Jinn* believe they inhabit the forests, abandoned homes, or the graves. Many people believe that these are responsible for infertility, abrupt accidents, and mental health issues. When anything bad happens

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[12]Love, *Muslims*, *Magic*, 65-68.

[13]Bill Musk, *Folk Islam: The Religion of the Majority* (Bromley, UK: MARC, 1989), 25-35.

[14]McCurry, *Jesus' Love for Folk Muslims*, 47.

[15]Musk, *Folk Islam,* 42.

many families seek assistance from a nearby *Hujur* (religious healer or teacher), who may provide Qur'anic readings, instructions, or protective amulets. The behaviors described in these writings demonstrate that the unseen world is not remote but nearby and may be actively hazardous. Tambiah observes that in some places, individuals experience magic and religion in tandem with their desire for power and protection.[16]

Muslims in Myanmar face severe persecution. Forced to flee their homes, they remain stateless. Their yearning for *Baraka* (blessing) is a genuine hope for security, stability, and respect. Indeed, Rohingya who have migrated to Bangladeshi camps, as well as other displaced people in Myanmar, rely on traditional rites to help them feel stronger during tough times. Even though these acts are generally seen as "unorthodox," they demonstrate a strong desire for healing, God's justice, and peace.[17] As Don McCurry points out, Folk Muslims in Myanmar value the gospel for its ability to reach mind, body, and soul as Christians offer Jesus' healing and forgiving love.[18]

True Blessing in the Bible: A Theological Reflection with Application to Myanmar

In Myanmar and many other cultures, blessing (*Baraka*) is commonly perceived as a tangible or mystical benefit that flows from sacred places, rituals, or religious objects. Folk Buddhist and animist traditions in Myanmar reinforce this worldview by promoting practices such as merit-making, lighting candles at pagodas, reciting mantras, or engaging in offerings to spirit-beings. In Burmese Buddhism, merit (*kutho*) is accumulated through almsgiving, pagoda construction, and devotional rituals with the hope of improving one's karma and securing future prosperity.

Within animist communities, particularly among ethnic groups like the Chin, Naga, and Kayin, people routinely perform rituals to appease territorial spirits (*nats*) believed to dwell in trees, mountains, rivers, or homes.[19] These acts often include animal sacrifices, spirit offerings, and seasonal ceremonies intended to ward off misfortune and attract divine favor.[20] Such practices reflect a transactional understanding of blessing,

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[16]Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 61.

[17]Love, *Muslims*, *Magic,* 110-115.

[18]McCurry, *Jesus' Love for Folk Muslims*, 52.

[19]Vungh Sian Lian, telephone conversation with Khup Sian Sang, June 14, 2023.

[20]Bill Musk, *Folk Islam: The Religion of the Majority* (Bromley, UK: MARC, 1989), 33-34.

one that is earned through ritual performance or mystical appeasement, rather than received through personal relationship. In contrast, the Bible presents blessing not as a reward for religious observance, but as a covenantal gift rooted in communion with the living God. True *Baraka*, in biblical theology, is inseparable from God's presence and his redemptive purpose through Christ. This section explores key scriptural perspectives on blessing and applies them to Myanmar's context, where distorted views of spiritual favor prevail.

God's Presence, Not Objects, Is the Source of Blessing

In the Bible, good fortune has nothing to do with what one owns, where one lives, or how frequently one prays. This matters because God is a real person. J. I. Packer explains that building a relationship with God is more essential than merely receiving what he offers.[21] It contradicts the Burmese notion that spiritual worth, known as *Hpoun*, may linger in some persons and locations. The Ark of the Covenant and the Temple lost their significance when they no longer felt God's presence (Ezek 10). These objects brought blessings only because God gave life.

Many individuals in Myanmar express their religion by making contributions to monks, visiting holy sites, or participating in a number of festivals. Although people may begin to trust religion more as a consequence of these actions, the outcome cannot be trusted in terms of spiritual transformations, or embracing, or pleasing God. Listening to Bible texts demonstrates that no formal worship is meaningful unless God is present. God desires that individuals enjoy a meaningful and permanent connection in which actual benefit is available.

Blessed to Be a Blessing

According to Gen 12:1-3, God's plan to preserve humanity begins with the calling of Abraham. God promises Abraham, "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing."[22] The objective of national blessing is not for its own sake, but to allow other countries, including Myanmar, to benefit from God's generosity. Christopher J. H. Wright demonstrates in

[21]J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 31-36.
[22]All scripture quotations are from NIV 2011.

his work that elections are more about our purpose than about privilege. God decides that Abraham's acts would benefit the entire world.[23]

This section raises critical considerations for approaching mission. Since the Christian community in Myanmar is so small, the Church should see itself enriching society rather than merely receiving God's favor. In many respects, Christians have to replicate the blessings God bestowed upon them by pointing others to Christ. Because of the Abrahamic covenant, the Church is called to embrace individuals from all walks of life with a message that brings about genuine change.

The Blessed Person Delights in God's Word

Psalm 1 identifies the loved one as someone who is constantly interested in and considers God's rules. The internal direction differs from the more outward religious formality. According to Kidner, genuine benefit comes from obeying God's instructions rather than following society's shifting standards.[24] In Rohingya culture, it is usual to seek blessings by chanting, spinning the wheels on altars, or burning incense. In contrast, Psalm 1 calls those who follow God to place their lives firmly upon his Word and to love it. True blessings mean avoiding sin and focusing on forming a relationship with God through reading Scripture. The Scripture calls Christians in Myanmar to review their spiritual journey. Do they seek God through reading his Word, or do they only join religious ceremonies?

Blessing Through the Name of Jesus, Not Ritual

Peter addressed the lame man in Acts 3:6: "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Faith in the name of Jesus alone cured him. No relic or ritual alleviated his anguish. John Stott says Peter's remarks are more about telling the truth than delivering miracles.[25] As a result of this event, Myanmar's tradition of using magic is being restrained. Many depend on charms, different rituals, or seeing religious leaders to ask for healing, blessings, or safety. Peter's model in Acts 3 demonstrates that blessings do not depend on a planned approach but come from the person of Jesus.

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[23]Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 200-205.

[24]Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 15 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 47-50.

[25]John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church and the World: The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 80-82.

Trusting that Christ provides all needs including healing, salvation, and blessing will be central for Myanmar's Christians.

Every Spiritual Blessing in Christ

Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians by noting God's blessing: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Eph 1:3). Peter T. O'Brien argues that what we gain from these blessings is spiritual, not material, and is possible only by being unified with Christ.[26]

Some in Myanmar think of Christianity solely as a way to earn more income. So, the Church should explain that Christian blessing is found in new spiritual life, forgiveness, adoption, and everlasting hope rather than wealth and possessions. Instead of adopting the doctrine of prosperity, the Church should declare that spiritual blessings far surpass the things we hope to obtain. Although these blessings may not be obvious all the time, they enable Christians to remain faithful during difficulties, show love to those at odds with them, and expect good things to come.

True *Baraka* Comes Through Knowing Jesus

According to the Bible, authentic *Baraka* is long-lasting and built on relationships. In his book on Muslim ministry, Don McCurry believes that meeting Jesus is the only genuine source of blessing, which is even more evident in Myanmar.[27] The gospel contains a unique blessing: God's forgiveness through Christ, incomprehensible peace, and an eternal inheritance that lives on (1 Pet 1:4).

As a result, evangelism and discipleship are undergoing dramatic transformations in Myanmar. Rather than focusing solely on happiness, the Church should guide people to Jesus as the greatest source of benefits. He not only helps solve current difficulties, but he also provides eternal life. The purpose is not to discover what lies beyond knowing him but to know him. This is the foundation for true biblical blessings.

Compared to religious rites, locations, and virtues that are so important in Myanmar, the Bible offers a fresh and peaceful message. The blessing stems not from labor or possessions, but from connection with God. Beginning with Abraham and continuing with Paul, Scripture

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[26]Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 91-95.

[27]Don McCurry, *Healing the Broken Family of Abraham: New Life for Muslims* (Colorado Springs, CO: Ministry to Muslims, 2001), 85-92.

declares that God's objective is to bless by being near his people and then sending his Son. Myanmar's church is called to share this blessing with others, bringing authentic spiritual life to the nation rather than keeping salvation only for themselves.

Christ's Supremacy Over Spirits, Suffering, and Ritual

Jesus replaces rituals with a more intimate interaction. Many Muslims in Myanmar believe that rituals or sacred objects like amulets convey *Baraka*. Folk Muslims believe that prayer, fasting, and visiting saints' graves earn heavenly favors and protection.[28] Nonetheless, the New Testament provides a distinct concept of blessing via Jesus Christ. Rather than performing rituals, Jesus desires that people encounter God immediately via him. In these words, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that true worshipers do not require a specific location or procedure to glorify the Father. The declaration brings religious groups together and alters the understanding of where God exists.

Knowing God directly through Christ is a significant shift in Myanmar, where the Muslim minority frequently confronts ethnic and religious conflicts. Jesus is personal and strengthens connection with God rather than responsibilities.[29] In a setting where religion is viewed as a powerful shared culture and a set of traditions, having a Christ-centered connection enables individuals seeking to connect with the supernatural to achieve dignity and freedom.

Jesus grants calm, healing, and protection via the Holy Spirit, not by charms. Many Folk Muslims in Myanmar's rural areas believe in things that cannot be seen. Many people think that charms and talismans (*Ta'wiz*), as well as incantations based on Qur'anic texts, can offer spiritual protection.[30] However, the tranquility and protection that Jesus bestows are made possible by the Holy Spirit's ongoing presence. In John 14:27, Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." It is a genuine, spiritual, and relational condition that does not change.

Jesus gives Muslims in Myanmar a unique comfort and a peace that surpasses all human understanding because many of them feel threatened, isolated from others, and terrified of the actions of spiritual forces (Phil 4:7). According to Rick Love, "With Jesus, the magical

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[28]McCurry, *Healing the Broken Family of Abraham*, 47-48.

[29]Ibid., 63. The word "responsibilities" refers to religious duties or ritual practices undertaken to obtain blessing or protection.

[30]Love, *Muslims*, *Magic,* 27-28.

view is supplanted by the power, healing, and wisdom available through the Holy Spirit."[31] Christians who engage Muslims in Myanmar should clarify that the Holy Spirit is genuine and will empower and encourage everyone who believes in Jesus.

Jesus has control over demons, disease, and terror (Mark 5:1-20). Many Muslims in Southeast Asia, particularly in Myanmar, fear ghosts and curses. As a result, knowing Jesus' authority over spiritual darkness is critical. Jesus plainly demonstrates that he is completely in command of the powers of evil (Mark 5:1-20). The man Jesus delivered from demons is now healthy and happier, and fear has given way to surprise and transformation. Myanmar's Muslims, who combined their Islamic religion with pre-Islamic traditions, can now find hope and deliverance in Jesus' power over demons. Jesus both spoke and demonstrated the reality of God's kingdom by ending demonic attacks.[32] This power provides enormous hope to those who are terrified of spells, ghosts, and ancestors.

Only Jesus can offer protection and a triumphant victory against evil. Jesus is the one who gives enduring hope, sovereign power, and eternal life. Merit-based religious systems of Islam and Buddhism emphasize human effort, obedience, and rituals as means to earn God's favor. Jesus offers salvation freely to all who place their faith in him. Jesus proclaims: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this" (John 11:25-26)? This reveals that *Baraka* is not a fleeting blessing or something earned by works, but an eternal reality grounded in a personal relationship with Christ. In a context like Myanmar where many Muslims face marginalization and hardship, Jesus offers a hope that transcends worldly circumstances. His gospel anchors identity not in ethnic heritage, religious achievement, or ritual observance, but in a transforming connection with God through faith. As Don McCurry insightfully observes, "True *Baraka* is obtained through new life in Christ not by rituals or saintly intercession."[33] For Christians ministering to Muslims in Myanmar it is crucial to present Jesus as the source of both present blessing and assured eternal hope.

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[31]Ibid., 69.

[32]Clinton E. Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions About Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997), 34.

[33]McCurry, *Healing the Broken Family of Abraham*, 87.

Challenges to Faith Among Folk Muslims

Many Muslims struggle to embrace faith in Christ because of challenges in their environment and inside their faith. One significant issue is the immense strain imposed on people by society. Don McCurry points out that the fear of rejection by family and community might deter people from converting.[34] People from communities that are deeply rooted in society and religion frequently assume that following Christ requires betrayal. According to Phil Parshall, the weight of family and established customs often forces Folk Muslims to remain with the group, lest the rest of the community alienate them.[35] In these situations, being a missionary entails not just teaching theology but also demonstrating genuine compassion and understanding for different cultures.

Spiritual dread is another major factor in stopping ordinary Muslims from making faith-related decisions. Rick Love notes that belief in spirits, curses, and charms is widespread; thus, many Muslims are concerned that abandoning Islamic traditions may result in punishment from the spirits.[36] Charles H. Kraft states that missionaries have to be aware of spiritual warfare and spiritual might is required in proclaiming the gospel to overcome such anxieties.[37] It is critical to emphasize that Jesus is the one who holds power over spirits. According to Jack Deere, when it comes to ministering in situations where people are spiritually oppressed, healing and deliverance are typically involved.[38] Asking God for freedom and healing affirms that Christ both delivers and saves us.

Many people also lack knowledge of what the Bible actually teaches. According to Timothy C. Tennent, many Folk Muslims have not heard the gospel as a message that reflects biblical principles and cultural sensibilities.[39] As reported by Paul G. Hiebert, missionaries need to understand the community's beliefs since the Christian faith cannot be comprehended without that context.[40] Because things are not

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[34]Ibid., 144-147.

[35]Phil Parshall, *Bridges to Islam: A Christian Perspective on Folk Islam* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 65-67.

[36]Love, *Muslims*, *Magic,* 42-44.

[37]Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 165-169.

[38]Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 112-114.

[39]Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2010), 310-312.

[40]Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 173-176.

always apparent, some new Christians continue to wear amulets and visit shrines, despite claiming to follow Christ. Michael Green observes that early Christians faced the same issues and addressed them by teaching graciously and consistently, assisting new believers in developing a solid basis in their teachings and Holy Spirit lifestyle.[41]

These issues should be addressed using a number of techniques. Teaching must be courteous and sensitive, explaining to new believers how to modify the views they have held for so long. Rick Love advocates for discipleship that includes worldviews and spirituality, encouraging the Church to build a community that never ceases caring for its people.[42] The Church family becomes vital as Christians seek to replace those they miss. According to John Piper and David Mathis, having intimate Christian contacts strengthens the faith of those who have yet to be touched by the Church.[43] As Christians love, pray for, and develop a community with Muslims, they may help them experience the freedom, authority, and hope that only Christ can provide.

Discipleship and Church Planting: Building Sustainable Movements

Myanmar's religious and cultural landscape is complex. Discipleship and Church planting should begin with the formation of genuine connections. In Myanmar, where most people practice Buddhism, spreading the gospel is most effective when done with honesty and reliability. Those who teach others about faith should participate in the community, listen to what they are going through, help them with their needs, and demonstrate Christ's love. Relationship building, as seen by numerous grassroots initiatives in Southeast Asia, is a potent type of evangelism in high-context cultures like Myanmar's.[44]

Myanmar's rural population mostly communicates via tales; therefore, storytelling is a powerful strategy. Telling Bible stories helps convey God's Word. Burmese people have historically learned by listening to parables, proverbs, and moral stories. In the instance of the Shan and Karen people, missionaries have utilized Jesus' parables to describe the kingdom of God in ways that are appropriate for their

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[41]Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Eastbourne, England: Kingsway Publications, 2003), 292-294.

[42]Love, *Muslims*, *Magic,* 89-90.

[43]John Piper and David Mathis, eds., *Finish the Mission: Bringing the Gospel to the Unreached and Unengaged* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 127-129.

[44]Steve Smith and Ying Kai, *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2011), 28-30.

cultures.[45] This method allows the gospel to be conveyed in peace, building new bridges of understanding.

Praying for specific needs is especially prevalent in Buddhist societies where Buddhism and animism coexist, such as among the Chin or Naga people. Many of these cultures believe in spirits (*nats*) and give prayers and rituals to seek protection. After Christians pray for health or protection in Jesus' name, many individuals are willing to test his power. Testimonies from church workers in the Irrawaddy Delta and Chin Hills demonstrate how answered prayers made it easier for people to receive the good news.[46] A village elder in Sagaing Division embraced Christ after a believer's prayers, and many others chose to congregate at his house for religious services.[47]

Straightforward discipleship is critical in areas where many people do not have access to education or training. Showing new Christians how to obey Jesus step by step is simpler than giving them knowledge. Because many people in Myanmar are unable to read, telling Bible stories lets them hear the Scriptures.[48] Auditory Bibles and Bible story sets have been effective in communicating the gospel with the Rohingya, a community that often obtains information through auditory means.

The new disciples join in-house fellowships, which are basic, replicable, and small gatherings. Because of persecution in places such as Rakhine or Kachin, house churches allow Christians to gather privately to worship, pray, and support one another.[49] Typically, these groups meet in people's homes, tea shops, or even outside, with locals directing rather than missionaries from other areas. This reduces the movement's reliance on external factors and promotes leadership that is appropriate for the time.

The final critical stage is to provide local leaders with the necessary training to build both disciples and churches among those they serve. Instead of relying on foreign seminaries or programs, Myanmar's discipleship movements assist individuals in becoming trustworthy, accessible, and teachable leaders. They may lead teams, establish new communities, and overcome opposition. Yangon has a proliferation of

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[45]Jerry Trousdale, *Miraculous Movements: How Hundreds of Thousands of Muslims Are Falling in Love with Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 86-90.

[46]David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake Resources, 2004), 183-185.

[47]U Win, in-person conversation with Khup Sian Sang, May 14, 2024.

[48]David Watson and Paul Watson, *Contagious Disciple Making: Leading Others on a Journey of Discovery* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2014), 102-106.

[49]Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church: And the Causes Which Hinder It* (Cambridge, U.K.: Lutterworth Press, 2006), 7-9.

house churches as a result of Burmese leaders educating others and witnessing their beliefs expand to the fourth and fifth generations.[50] The pattern from 2 Tim. 2:2 is evident and it is critical to expanding Myanmar's kingdom for many years to come.

Sharing Christ with Folk Muslims

Sharing the gospel with Myanmar's Folk Muslims involves extensive cultural knowledge, solid connections, and a discerning approach. Most Muslims in Myanmar, particularly the Rohingya in Rakhine State and the Muslim communities in Yangon and Mandalay, combine Islamic beliefs with indigenous spiritual and superstitious anxieties. The majority of these Folk Muslims think they are sensitive to supernatural creatures such as *Jinn*, spellcasters, the departed, and ghosts associated with rural spiritual activities. It is best to begin by listening to their experiences and concerns which are frequently shaped by trauma, displacement from their homes, and marginalization.

Listening is more than simply a polite habit; it also demonstrates both love and respect for others. Many Rohingya experience persecution on a daily basis and live in deplorable conditions in refugee camps or Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) areas.[51] Listening to their stories about sickness being the work of evil spirits or dreams being warning signs is critical to understanding what they believe. Don McCurry believes that acting with humility and care when visiting their culture might lead to trust and the prospect of forming Christ-centered relationships.[52]

When people begin to trust your testimony, your personal experiences with peace and healing from Jesus become an effective way to testify to them. Messages from preachers are often better received by Folk Muslims than formal disputes over theology. When a Myanmar Christian shares how Jesus gave them peace, a Muslim neighbor can appreciate it, as they are afraid of *Jinn* spirits or may look for things to protect them. According to Rick Love, people who follow Folk Islam are open to stories about victory because they face spiritual battles every day.[53] Myanmar folk traditions are strong, so these testimonies become tools to introduce God's Word.

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[50]Steve Addison, *Pioneering Movements: Leadership that Multiplies Disciples and Churches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 55-59.

[51]Amnesty International, *Caged Without a Roof: Apartheid in Myanmar's Rakhine State* (London: Amnesty International Ltd., 2017), 10-12.

[52]McCurry, *Healing the Broken Family of Abraham*, 64-66.

[53]Love, *Muslims*, *Magic,* 85-87.

Offering a prayer in Jesus' name is a powerful action. People in rural Myanmar are used to praying since health treatments are difficult to access and religion impacts attitudes about illness. Many Muslims are happy to accept prayers as long as they bring relief or healing. According to Don McCurry, mentioning Jesus' name in prayer invokes God and demonstrates that Jesus is still powerful and loving today.[54] A local Christian worker prayed for a sick Muslim kid in Jesus' name, and when the child recovered, the family was prepared to discuss Isa Al-Masih (Jesus the Messiah).

Patience and humility are essential at every stage of this process. As Phil Parshall says, our purpose is to draw people closer to Jesus rather than to sign them up for Christianity.[55] There is no easy method to change someone's culture. Introducing a new faith may make them apprehensive. Where religion is central to people's identities and social lives in Myanmar's Muslim communities, unanticipated changes might cause significant harm. As a result, the aim should be to authentically express Christ's love, focusing on Jesus and all he can accomplish to transform people, rather than on institutions.

Conclusion

The mission of God among Myanmar's Folk Muslims, particularly the Rohingya, must be biblically founded, have profound theological roots, and be culturally appropriate. Because many people are afraid of religion and feel marginalized by it, the gospel should be portrayed as a relationship that makes a difference rather than just an ideology. The person of Jesus Christ delivers actual blessing, and the Holy Spirit bestows glory and long-lasting serenity on believers. As a result, missionaries and Christian leaders have to do more than just share the gospel on a regular basis; they also need to live among the people and integrate into their culture. Using narrative, praying for healing, and strengthening local leaders, the Church will effectively witness to Jesus. The focus on building Christ-centered communities allows people who were formerly afraid and ashamed to experience the freeing pleasure of the gospel, which helps and allows them to enter into communion with God and fellowship with his people.

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[54]McCurry, *Jesus' Love for Folk Muslims*, 41-43.
[55]Parshall, *Bridges to Islam,* 134-137.

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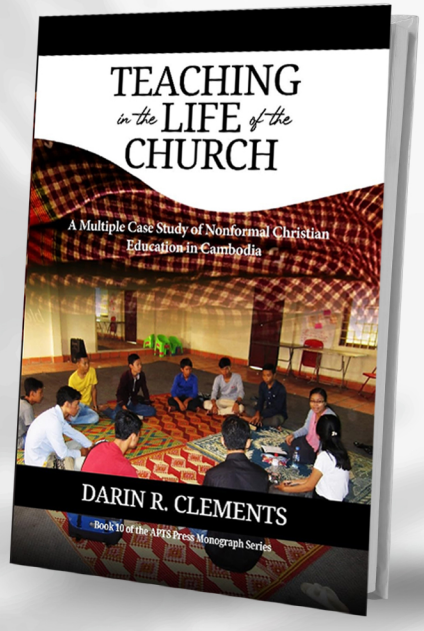

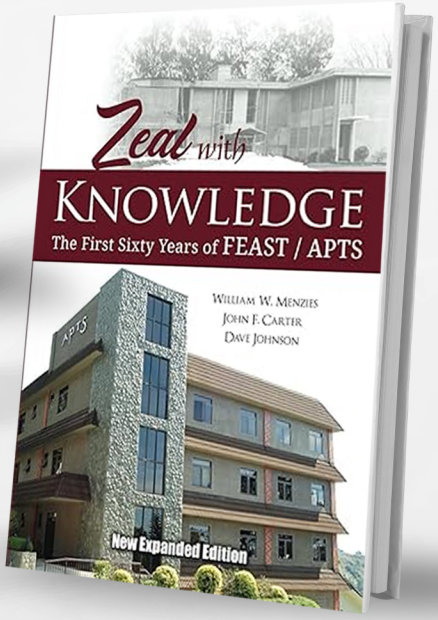

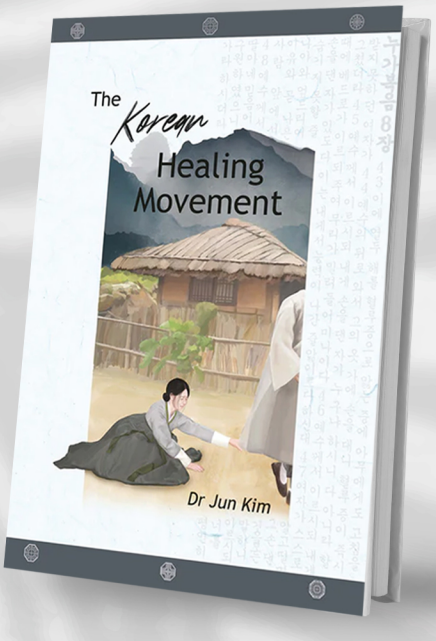

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Relevance of Pentecostal Practices and Missions to Overseas Filipino Workers in the Middle East

Jay Angeles

Introduction

The diaspora of millions of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) worldwide has significantly impacted the global labor market, with the Middle East being a key destination for short-term migrant workers from the Philippines. This migration has played a significant role in generating remittances for the government, which has increasingly depended on the earnings of these workers for foreign exchange.[1] Of the 1.83 million OFWs in the Middle East in 2021, 24.4% worked in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 14.4% in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), 5.9% in Kuwait, and 4.8% in Qatar.[2] This diaspora has reached even those regions of the Middle East where strict limitations on expressions of Christianity pose unique challenges. Despite these constraints, Pentecostal practices among OFW Christians transcend geographical boundaries and serve as a vital component of their spiritual and cultural identity.

Pentecostalism offers a beacon of hope and resilience for many OFWs, providing them an emotional sustenance and a sense of community in a culturally different environment. The spiritual identity rooted in Pentecostal beliefs not only helps nurture their faith and allows them to live a victorious life but also empowers them to share the gospel with both locals and fellow expatriates, particularly those from unreached people

[1]Robyn Rodriguez, "Philippine Migrant Workers' Transnationalism in the Middle East," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 79 (March 1, 2011): 48, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547910000384; Rappler.com, "History of OFW Deployment Bans in the Middle East," news, February 24, 2023, https://www.rappler.com/philippines/history-deployment-bans-middle-east.

[2]Rappler.com, "History of OFW Deployment Bans in the Middle East."

groups. Central to this identity is a distinct spirituality that emphasizes the figure of Christ as Savior, Baptizer of the Spirit, and Healer, which is expressed through their oral liturgy and communal practices. William and Robert Menzies assert that Pentecostalism is the most successful social movement of the past century[3] and Hwa Yung highlights its global impact, citing its mega churches, its penetration of the media, and its adherents' significant involvement in world evangelization.[4]

This essay aims to show the relevance of Pentecostalism for OFWs in the Middle East, particularly in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, where the intersection of faith and work creates a complex landscape for migrant workers. I will identify some Pentecostal practices (particularly among Assemblies of God believers), connect such practices to the compatibility of OFWs' spiritual, emotional, and social needs, and highlight how they enrich these workers' understanding of faith and community. Additionally, this paper will examine the role of church networks from the Philippines in strengthening the theological foundations of Pentecostal groups in the region. By evaluating the pressing need to equip OFWs with tools for intentional and culturally sensitive witnessing, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of Pentecostalism's impact on the lives of migrant workers in the Middle East.

The Pentecostal OFW Church and The Book of Acts

In this section, I describe the common practices of four Filipino Pentecostal churches in the Middle East. I have had personal connections with the pastors of the said churches and have attended their worship services both in-person and online. The information I gathered about these practices was through personal conversations with the pastors and some members, verbal and written interviews with the same pastors and members, and participating in their onsite and online services.

Filipino Pentecostal churches in the Middle East are predominantly led by former Pentecostal pastors and workers originally rooted in the Assemblies of God or other Pentecostal traditions in the Philippines. Thus, these individuals have been significantly influenced by the practices that characterize the Filipino Pentecostal Church's historic background.

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[3]William W. Menzies and Robert P. Menzies, *Spirit and Power: Foundations of Pentecostal Experience* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2000).

[4]Hwa Yung, "Endued with Power: The Pentecostal—Charismatic Renewal and The Asian Church in the Twenty-First Century," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003): 64.

The Pentecostal revival began in the Philippines in the 1920s, with earlier efforts by the United Free Gospel Church and the Assemblies of God (AG). The first American AG missionaries to serve there—the Caudles—arrived in 1926.[5] Dave Johnson highlights their ministry, which emphasized the manifestations of Pentecostalism, including signs and wonders,[6] which played a crucial role in shaping Filipino Christianity's spiritual landscape, particularly the AG.

One of the practices of 'classical Pentecostals' is the baptism in the Holy Spirit as evidenced by speaking in tongues.[7] Doreen Benavidez emphasizes speaking in tongues as a prerequisite for ministry readiness as practiced in the 1920s by the Messenger-of-the-Cross Bible Institute in Northern Luzon under the Church of God (another classical Pentecostal denomination).[8] Also central to their practices are healing through prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit, both felt needs for connection with the supernatural power[9] and a spiritual experience for many Filipinos.[10] According to Johnson, field research among groups like the AG revealed that healing played a major role in conversions and spiritual experiences.[11] Having such relevance in their culture makes it an integral part of their identity and tradition, even as they cross the borders of the Middle East**.** An examination of these Pentecostal practices will connect them to parallel distinctions of the early Church in the Book of Acts.

Natural and Spirit-Led Gatherings

What the Filipino Pentecostal churches in the Middle East had seen and practiced in the Philippines were continued throughout their journey in the Arab region. This is in parallel with the purpose of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2, where God envisioned the establishment of a community

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[5]Dave Johnson, *LED BY THE SPIRIT The History of the American Assemblies of God Missionaries in the Philippines* (Pasig City, Philippines: ICI Ministries, 2009), 7, https://www.academia.edu/34297392/LED_BY_THE_SPIRIT_pdf.

[6]Ibid., 8.

[7]Dave Johnson, "Pentecostal Spirituality and Traditional Practices in the Philippines," *Asia Journal of Theology* 37, no. 2 (2023): 186-199, 194.

[8]Doreen Benavidez, "The Early Years of the Church of God in Northern Luzon (1947-1953): A Historical and Theological Overview," *Asia Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 8, no. 2 (2005): 255-269, 268.

[9]Lora Angeline Embudo Timenia, *Third Wave Pentecostalism in the Philippines: Understanding Toronto Blessing Revivalism's Signs and Wonders Theology in the Philippines* (Baguio City, Philippines: Asia Pacific Theological Seminary Press, 2020), 102-103.

[10]Johnson, "Pentecostal Spirituality," 193.

[11]Dave Johnson, *Theology in Context: A Case Study in the Philippines* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publisher, 2017).

where believers would care for one another and reflect the essence of his kingdom's life to the world around them.[12] Although traditions are passed from one generation to another, this culture is patterned from Acts 2, which Robert Menzies describes as 'the apostles' story being our story.'[13] That story includes the unique Pentecostal contributions to spiritual formation.[14]

In the concluding portions of Acts 2, Luke narrates the early Christian community's commitment to several key practices, including devotion to the apostles' teachings, fellowship, communal meals, miracles, sharing of possessions, and collective worship through singing and prayer (vv. 42-46). Furthermore, this community placed strong emphasis on deepening its understanding of the apostles' teachings by diligently studying the Scriptures.[15] As noted by Ladd and Glasser, Luke illustrates how fulfillment of the promised hope through the Messiah (as foretold in the Old Testament) is now manifesting within the Gentile church.[16] This dynamic is echoed in contemporary contexts, including within the Pentecostal OFW churches in the Middle East, where Jesus remains the focal point of their gatherings and where a vibrant sense of hope thrives. Menzies wrote: "Any event in history cannot be repeated, but many events in the narrative of Acts are clearly presented as models for Luke's church. They are recorded by Luke precisely so that they will be repeated in the lives of his readers."[17]

Gathering Under Restrictions

The churches have successfully secured spaces for Filipino believers to gather, even in the face of various restrictions, particularly

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[12]Craig S. Keener, *For All Peoples: A Biblical Theology of Missions in the Gospel and Acts* (Baguio City, Philippines: APTS Press, 2020), 69-70.

[13]Robert P. Menzies, *Pentecost: This Story Is Our Story* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2013), 20-21; Robert P. Menzies, "Missional Spirituality: A Pentecostal Contribution to Spiritual Formation," in *A Theology of the Spirit in the Doctrine and Demonstration*, ed. Theresa Chai, (Baguio City, Philippines: APTS Press, 2014), 45.

[14]Robert P. Menzies, "Missional Spirituality: A Pentecostal Contribution to Spiritual Formation," in *A Theology of the Spirit in the Doctrine and Demonstration*, ed. Theresa Chai (Baguio City, Philippines: APTS Press, 2014), 41.

[15]Kenneth L. Barker and John R. III Kohlenberger, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary—Abridged Edition: New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2017).

[16]George Eldon Ladd, *The Pattern of New Testament Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 270; Glasser, Arthur F. *Announcing the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 265.

[17]Menzies, "Missional Spirituality," 46-47.

experienced during their establishment. For those OFWs who are Pentecostal believers, coming together for worship, prayer, and study of Scripture is a deeply ingrained practice, despite awareness of potential risks associated with such gatherings. This reflects the early Church's experience—namely, empowered by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2 and 4), the disciples boldly gathered to worship Jesus. Their courage amid adversity inspires believers to uphold faith and community in challenging times.

In a restricted Middle Eastern country, Lem (pseudonym), a pastor, led over fifty OFWs after the senior pastor's absence.[18] He and a co-pastor organized church activities, but their gatherings drew unwanted attention. Authorities raided a Friday service and detained ten participants for questioning. Some were held for three weeks, while others were imprisoned up to three months as officials investigated alleged illegal violations tied to their worship. The main accusation was simply holding a Christian gathering, which was prohibited in that nation.[19] Since the worship event did not involve any locals, the authorities struggled to build a case against them. Eventually, all ten were released from detention. Understandably, they became more cautious in their actions and strategic in planning their gatherings.

The incident, instead of creating fear, built courage (Acts 1:8, cf. Acts 4:31), with the pastor in charge feeling encouraged to bring more believers together to strengthen their faith and guide them in discipleship.[20] Elsewhere in this paper, I have highlighted that such persecution can be endured as part of the effort to fulfill the Great Commission, enabling more people to come to know Jesus as well as experience his transformative power.[21]

The Spiritual Gifts and The People of the Spirit

Jerry (pseudonym), a pastor, recounts his experiences upon arriving in a country in the Middle East and meeting some members of his congregation back in the Philippines.[22] He recalls the beginning of some small groups and notes that these communities mostly emerged from

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[18]Lem, "Interview on Raided OFW Church Service in the Middle East," FB Messenger, March 1, 2024.

[19]Ibid.

[20]According to Lem, he became more courageous and diligent, which also encouraged other OFWs not to allow fear in worship gatherings.

[21]Jay Q. Angeles, "A History of Protestant Missions in East Timor," *Journal of Asian Missions* 15, no. 2 (2014): 113.

[22]Jerry, "Interview on Gifts and Spirituality of OFWs in the Middle East," FB Messenger Online call, April 9, 2024.

spontaneous gatherings characterized by the active practice of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Jerry emphasizes that these believers possess a deep yearning for and openness to the move of the Spirit within their individual lives and their communities.[23] This follows the model of how Luke describes the experience of the early Church, which was led by God supernaturally.[24] It goes along with how the Holy Spirit prompts them in fulfilling what Jesus had promised in Acts 1:8—to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. This phenomenon aligns with Gordon Fee's characterization of "people of the Spirit,"[25] wherein the Church embodies a spiritual essence primarily due to the presence of the Spirit among them. Furthermore, the Church adopts a Charismatic identity by actively engaging in the gifts of grace that the Spirit bestows upon the members, as articulated in 1 Cor 12-14. Being Charismatic, believers are encouraged to share their spiritual gifts according to the Spirit's guidance and inspiration. In this context, Anderson asserts that Pentecostalism is more accurately understood within a broader context as being a movement focused primarily on the experience of the Holy Spirit's activity and the practice of spiritual gifts.[26]

The Gift of Faith

The gift of faith manifests in various ways, starting with the Holy Spirit's inauguration in Acts 2. After Peter's sermon (v. 40), 3,000 people believed in Jesus and were water baptized (v. 41). This faith was evident as believers gathered, worshiped, prayed, and supported one another (vv. 42-46). Faith for a personal relationship with God or Jesus is established and then nourished through "first-hand experience."[27] Such faith is a foundation for Pentecostal OFWs who come together to express love and support, particularly for the needy within their community. It is faith to meet God in their fellowship and corporate worship (Matt 18:20; 1 Cor

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[23]Ibid.

[24]Menzies, "Missional Spirituality: A Pentecostal Contribution to Spiritual Formation," 51.

[25]Gordon D. Fee, *Listening to the Spirit in the Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 38-39.

[26]Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 18.

[27]Martin Lindhardt, "(PDF) 'Introduction' Practicing the Faith: The Ritual Life of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians" in *Practicing the Faith. The Ritual Life of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians* (n.p.: Berghahn Books 2011), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/371965413_Introduction_Practicing_the_Faith_The_ritual_life_of_Pentecostal-Charismatic_Christians_Berghahn_Books_2011.

3:16). Through prayer, they actively exercise their faith, trusting that God will fulfill his promises. Gathering together serves as a manifestation of corporate faith, invoking his blessings upon the community.

Empowerment of the Holy Spirit enables these believers to become channels of faith and courage for others. They convene in large groups on Fridays for vibrant worship and participate in smaller gatherings on other days for Bible study and discipleship activities. This communal engagement not only strengthens their individual faith but also fosters a supportive network among members. Moreover, OFW believers acknowledge that the spiritual gifts they possess (plus all other gifts) are imparted by the Spirit, as Paul articulated in his first letter to the Corinthians—"the Spirit is the source of them all" (1 Cor 12:4). Consequently, it is essential for the OFW church, (both collectively and individually) to engage in frequent interactions with God, thereby deepening their spiritual experience and enhancing their communal faith journey.[28]

The Gifts of Healing

The Pentecostal belief in healing is frequently grounded in the testimonies of those who have personally experienced miraculous recoveries, which they interpret as direct acts of God's intervention.[29] According to the pastors of the OFW churches, it is one Pentecostal practice that they exercise either collectively in the church services or individually as the need arises. Luke presents it as a result of Pentecost, when Peter instantaneously healed a lame man, which caused that man to praise God and those who witnessed it to be filled with wonder (Acts 3:6-10). In effect, healing demonstrates the Spirit's power to bring back a person's wholeness.[30] Also, it is confirmed by Paul as a gift given by the Spirit to the Church (1 Cor 12.9), emphasized by James as part of the Church's function when there is a need to pray for sick people (Jas 5:13-20), and Pentecostals have carried on this tradition.[31]

Dahlia, a migrant worker in the Middle East, had for months been struggling with chronic shoulder pain, which affected her both physically

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[28]Andrew Murray, *Experiencing the Holy Spirit* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2000), 61.

[29]Allan Anderson, "Pentecostal Approaches to Faith and Healing," *International Review of Mission* 91, no. 363 (Jan. 1, 2002): 523.

[30]Commentary on chapter Acts 3:1-10, Wayne McCown, *Asbury Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

[31]"Spirit and Power–A 10—Country Survey of Pentecostals," *Pew Research Center* (blog), October 5, 2006, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2006/10/05/spirit-and-power/.

and emotionally.[32] A demanding work schedule made it difficult to visit a doctor, so she relied on church friends to help apply an intercare therapy device to her shoulder. Even simple tasks like lifting her arm became daunting challenges. In January 2023, Dahlia attended a church retreat, seeking solace and a fresh encounter with God. As the group sang worship songs, the atmosphere became filled with hope. At that moment, the senior pastor received a strong impression from the Holy Spirit that someone in the gathering was suffering from chronic pain and needed healing.[33] Without hesitation, he called for that person to come forward.

Feeling a stirring in her heart, Dahlia stepped out of the crowd and approached the front, where the church leaders laid hands on her and prayed for healing. As they did so, she felt an overwhelming warmth and sensed her shoulder becoming lighter. When the prayer concluded, she stood in awe of what had transpired, and with tears of joy testified to the congregation about her miraculous healing.[34] For the first time in months, she could raise her arm freely, without discomfort. In that moment, she experienced not only physical healing but also a renewed spirit that reminded her of both God's power and the caring community around her. The laying on of hands and healing not only strengthens one's faith by providing tangible evidence of divine intervention but also fosters communal ties among believers.[35]

Janno (pseudonym), a Filipino manager in one of this region's prominent companies, attests to the Holy Spirit prompting him to engage in prayer for healing.[36] He expresses firm belief that, when he experiences a compelling urge to pray, it means God intends to effect healing in someone, albeit not necessarily through Janno's capability. Additionally, he acknowledges that there are instances when healing does not occur in individuals for whom he prays, which may indicate either a lack of faith or that God will do so differently. Janno's and other believers' testimony that "Jesus healed all who came to Him" is taken as a current indication of God's will to heal all now.[37]

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[32]Jessica Lay, "Interview on Healing," FB Messenger Chat, September 3, 2024.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid.

[35]David Han, "Healing in the Pentecostal Tradition," *Spiritus ORU Journal of Theology* 9, no. 2 (2024): 239.

[36]Janno Aberda, "Chat with Carlo." *WhatsApp*, April 20, 2024.

[37]Ibid.

The Gifts of Tongues and Prophecy

Believers of the OFW churches readily hold to the doctrine that 'tongues' (just like in Acts 2) is the initial manifestation of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and is an important gift. One local church says its members both believe and openly exercise it in the church. Other fellowships emphasize Paul's statement in 1Cor 14:4 to use tongues privately to edify personally. Still others say that they do not know if their tongue is for everyone or for personal use, and thus speak it for personal hearing only. However, they do not disregard the gift, for Paul practiced it himself and encouraged the Church to desire it (1 Cor.14:18)[38] This one thing I note in my observations— that even though speaking in tongues is not the center of the church's spirituality, it is nonetheless a significant part of the identity of the Filipino believers in the Middle East. Menzies muses that "It is rather an empowering experience that enables its recipient to participate effectively in the mission of God."[39]

On the other hand, OFW churches certainly practice the gift of prophecy both congregationally, in small groups, or in one-on-one settings. It is a powerful means to uplift one another and reaffirm God's words to them as a personal revelation or rhema.[40]

The Relevance of the Pentecostal Practices of OFWs

Having provided some examples of Pentecostal practices of the OFWs, I will now discuss their relevance in the everyday lives of our Filipino migrant workers. What are the values and advantages of being in a Pentecostal church? What does it mean to them to be surrounded by fellow Filipinos who follow Pentecostal traditions in a faith-challenging environment?

Lennox, in his article on Filipino Labor Migration, highlights the reality of the Filipino diaspora—"Migration is a dominant economic strategy in the Philippines, but migrants often struggle to overcome challenges and achieve the success that they hope for."[41] Family

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[38]Menzies and Menzies, *Spirit and Power*.

[39]See the discussion on this issue in chapter nine of William W. Menzies and Robert P. Menzies, *Spirit and Power: Foundations of Pentecostal Experience* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2000), 179.

[40]Bill Hamon, *Prophets and Personal Prophecy*, vol. 1 (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 1987), 33. It would be interesting to have a separate study on tongues for the OFW churches in the Middle East.

[41]Amie L. Lennox, "Precarity and Improvisation: Challenges and Strategies in Filipino Labour Migration," *Sites: A Journal of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (Nov. 13, 2019): 188, https://doi.org/10.11157/sites-id439.

members are often compelled to make significant sacrifices for the well-being of their loved ones by pursuing migration; and doing so, they can send remittances, which unfortunately come at the cost of their physical presence and emotional connection.[42]

Some become successful and can handle financial obligations at home while living peacefully amidst busy schedules. However, despite their accomplishments, the daily realities of loneliness and homesickness are apt to weigh heavily, as the emotional toll of being separated from loved ones can be profound. For many, sending money home regularly is a priority, yet they frequently encounter uncooperative employers who may exploit their vulnerabilities. This can lead to a cycle of abuse, particularly for those in low-paying jobs, with their employers' lack of support and understanding exacerbating their struggles.

The challenges faced by OFWs are not just financial; they also likely encompass emotional and psychological hardships that require attention and compassion. Menzies proclaims that the Pentecostal movement is "a powerful and dynamic force impacting the lives of hundreds of millions of people." [43] How does this power link to the everyday living of our OFWs?

Relevance to Spiritual Growth (Even in Hardship and Personal Struggles)

> Thus, the eschatological kingdom of God is actualized already in part but not yet in the whole. Therefore, Pentecostalism is a Spirit empowered movement that seeks a divine encounter, bringing heaven to earth, creating an environment of love, joy, peace, holiness, and power in which the Holy Spirit reveals God's glory, transforms lives, heals the sick, delivers those who are bound, and forms faithful Christian community[44]

Despite the challenges faced by many OFWs, the Pentecostal church gathers the believers and attracts non-believers to itself because of its unity, which Gina (pseudonym), describes as 'the OFWs' second family.' In other churches, the pastor is considered the father (especially spiritual father) who provides guidance and mentoring as necessary. This Pentecostal church creates a healthy relationship that, like the early

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[42]Ibid., 189.

[43]Robert P. Menzies, "Missional Spirituality: A Pentecostal Contribution to Spiritual Formation," in *A Theology of the Spirit in the Doctrine and Demonstration*, ed., Theresa Chai, (Baguio City, Philippines: APTS Press, 2014), pp. 39-56, 39.

[44]Martin, "Pentecostal Identity: Embracing Heaven Below" (Unpublished).

Church, promotes and brings unity amidst living in a strange land. It entails supporting one another in the following five ways.

Serves as a Safe Space

The Pentecostal OFW small-group gathering, often held at members' homes, becomes a safe space for individuals to express their frustrations and struggles at work. Many face challenges in multicultural workplaces, encountering issues like discrimination or the need to bolster self-esteem when criticized by superiors. These life groups serve as support networks, offering prayer, wisdom, encouragement, and spiritual gifts that help members navigate their challenges. The groups foster deep relational connections that improve their sense of belonging and support.[45] As a result, the groups have become an essential part of OFWs' weekly routines, even if they meet after 9 o'clock at night. This community support plays a crucial role in helping them move forward and face their difficulties.

Cultivates Divine Encounters

Just as the early Pentecostals coming together for worship was central to their lives, so is the OFWs' focus on their gatherings after a long day of work. They meet mostly in homes where food is available for those who come straight from their jobs. Pentecostal gatherings are intentionally crafted to create an environment conducive to spiritual encounters and profound experiences with the Divine.[46] These encounters are facilitated by a heightened awareness of the presence of God, which paves the way for worship with individual and group debriefing. It teaches the believers how to lean on God, of the Lordship of Jesus, and of the powerful work of the Holy Spirit, which is available even in this generation. Hence, through the Spirit, God becomes directly accessible

[45]Terence Chong and Daniel Goh P.S., "Asian Pentecostalism: Revivals, Mega-Churches and Social Engagement," in *Handbook of Religions in Asia*, digital (Routledge, 2014), 402-17, https://www.academia.edu/127369443/Revivals_mega_churches_and_social_engagement.

[46]Daniel E. Albrecht, "Pentecostal Spirituality: Looking Through the Lens of Ritual," *Pneuma* 14, no. 1 (Jan. 1, 1992): 121, https://doi.org/10.1163/157007492X00104.

to those who earnestly seek him, eliminating the need for any form of external mediation.[47]

Strengthens Faith and Molds Character

As individuals grow in their dependence on God, they become more aware of the diverse characters and cultures around them, which can lead to frustration and bitterness. Often, they will avoid conflicts with coworkers or employers in order to prevent workplace friction. However, by engaging with God's Word in the spiritual gatherings, they expand their understanding of others, which helps to release them from unforgiveness and foster a more compassionate outlook.[48] This reflects from Peter's sermon in Acts 2 that forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit are now available to those who repent (vv. 36-40).[49]

Ignites a Passionate Pursuit of Spiritual Gifts (1 Cor 14:1)

When OFW church's pastors and workers were imprisoned (as noted by Lem), the congregation came together to fervently pray for their protection. During this time of seeking the Lord, Gina joyfully reported the Holy Spirit descended upon many members, filling them with his presence and empowering them to speak in tongues. Testimonies from the congregates revealed that being baptized in the Spirit instilled in them greater courage to follow God and boldly share their personal testimonies with fellow migrant workers. Additionally, other spiritual gifts began to manifest as members sought guidance on how to minister

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[47]Juan Sepúlveda, "Reflections on the Pentecostal Contribution To the Mission of the Church in Latin America," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 1992): 93-108. https://doi.org/10.1177/096673699200100107, 100.

[48]Elizabeth Gassin, "Meaning, Function, and Performance of a Christian Forgiveness Ritual," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 22, no. 1 (2008): 29.

[49]Four basic themes from Peter's sermon (Acts 2:16-40): 1. Old Testament prophecy has been fulfilled in the coming of the Spirit (vv 16-21); 2. Jesus of Nazareth has been vindicated as Lord and Christ (vv. 22-28); 3. Death has been overcome as evidenced by the presence of the Spirit (vv. 29-35); and 4. Forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit are now available to those who repent (vv. 36-40)—Arthur F. Glasser, *Announcing the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 266.

to one another through these gifts, all of which fostered a profound sense of joint participation with Christ.[50]

Offers Vital Support in Times of Need

The church serves as a place that offers support when most needed. Reflecting the spirit of the early Church, a congregation in the Middle East assists OFWs who have been laid off or whose contracts ended. The church provides temporary housing in rented properties, ensuring a safe place to stay. During this time, members receive daily meals and free accommodation while searching for new jobs. Additionally, experienced members and senior workers generously share insights that guide newcomers through the challenges of finding employment.

Relevance to the Family in the Philippines

Living away from loved ones, family, and friends presents significant challenges. One member of an OFW church emphasizes that having a spiritual support group is crucial for protecting oneself from attacks of the enemy and various temptations. Regular spiritual gatherings foster a deeper connection with God, strengthen faith, and enhance awareness of spiritual battles.[51]

Many Filipinos turning to migrant work due to economic necessity experience working alone as well as being separated from spouses and children. Gubat et al. describe the experience of a mother who is an OFW and faces profound loneliness due to isolation.[52] Time zone differences hinder her ability to maintain regular communication with her children, which, in turn, affects her ability to guide them in their decision-making processes.[53] Another respondent shared that her greatest struggle is being

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[50]Pentecost represented something unheard of under the old covenant, apart from Moses' wistful prayer: "I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them" (Num 11:29 NIV 2011); Glasser, 264.

[51]Ruth Marshall, "Destroying Arguments and Captivating Thoughts: Spiritual Warfare Prayer as Global Praxis," *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 2, no. 1 (2016): 92-113.

[52]Maricel T. Gubat, M. Ed, et al. "BEYOND MOTHERS LIGHT: THE ADAPTATION STORY OF OFW MILLENNIAL MOTHERS IN QATAR," *International Journal of Research Publications* 69, no. 1 (Feb. 2021): 185, https://doi.org/10.47119/IJRP100691120211683.

[53]Ibid., 185.

apart from her husband, which significantly impacts their joint decision-making in various aspects of their lives.[54]

The church has become a vital family for OFWs, offering protection and guidance as they manage their families from afar. One leader from a regional church said that their intercessory team collects prayer requests from life groups in order to foster openness and accountability in spiritual journeys. Additionally, the church organizes family seminars to strengthen bonds, helping members maintain connections although physically separated from loved ones. As a Pentecostal congregation, they emphasize empowerment and support, fostering an environment where they anticipate signs and wonders in their relationships with one another.[55] Through consistent prayers within this church, they can uplift and intercede for one another, reinforcing the sense of community and shared faith.

The OFWs' immediate or extended families back in the Philippines are also part of the church's ministry. To help alleviate the burden of the OFWs, the church sees to it that they regularly pray for their families. Through this spiritual act, the Holy Spirit also ministers to those families so that they themselves likewise experience the Spirit's working.

An OFW named Christy (pseudonym) sought prayer from her church for her mother, who was suffering from COVID-19, had breathing difficulties, and was a diabetic. During an online service, a speaker emphasized trusting in God's power and encouraged the congregation to experience it. Christy prayed for her mother, believing in divine healing. Remarkably, that same day she learned her mother's breathing had returned to normal. This bolstered the faith of Christy, her mother, and the family. In another church, the members who compile monthly prayer requests have witnessed healings from such conditions as strokes, pneumonia, and psoriasis. These miracles have strengthened their faith, deepened their trust in God, and helped them resist temptations and negative influences. Menzies muses that their commitment to the Lord drove them to bring light into dark places, [56] prioritizing spiritual engagement above all else.

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[54]Ibid.

[55]Robert P. Menzies, "Missional Spirituality: A Pentecostal Contribution to Spiritual Formation," in *A Theology of the Spirit in the Doctrine and Demonstration*, ed. Theresa Chai (Baguio City, Philippines: APTS Press, 2014), 43.

[56]Ibid., 47, 56.

Relevance in Missions

Linda (pseudonym) prayed for her friend in the workplace, a Hindu lady from India who suffered from a severe ankle sprain, which could have been a bone fracture. Having no local insurance, the woman used crutches. Linda sought her permission to use the name of Jesus in praying for her, to which she agreed. After the prayer, they went their separate ways and did not see each other for almost a week. When they met again, the lady, now without crutches, not only thanked Linda but also asked her about Jesus. God used that incident to open the door for Linda to share the gospel with her fellow workers, who are mostly from South Asia region.

Another testimony is shared by an OFW who works as a nurse in the hospital. Prompted by the Spirit to pray for a local child in need of healing, she courageously sought permission of the father to do so. After the prayer, she sensed that a certain power had entered the boy. This initiated her connection with the family that she believed could pave way for her to present the gospel in due time. Such is the Acts 1:8 promise of a missiological power for every believer[57] so the gospel will be heard by every person on earth. According to Menzies, this is the product of the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit, where he highlights that Pentecostal spirituality is missional spirituality.[58] On the other hand, Wonsuk and Julie Ma call it "mission in the Spirit."[59] This recognizes the great need of the Holy Spirit not just as an accompaniment but also the power that makes it possible for the Church to continue Jesus' mission to save the world.

Joel (pseudonym) says that having the power of the Spirit gives him boldness to share the gospel through casual conversation. He explains that his office mates became curious about him being a Christian and about some of the Christian teachings, such as the atonement and why a need for a sacrificial lamb. What a great chance if the questions are right and do not cause him to be paranoid. This could strike a people's

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[57]Menzies and Menzies, *Spirit and Power*, 217.

[58]"This is Lukan and missiological emphasis, transmitted largely through the stories in the book of Acts, and that Pentecostal spirituality also points to a significant difference distinguishing the Pentecostal movement from the Charismatic movement." Menzies, "Missional Spirituality: A Pentecostal Contribution to Spiritual Formation," 44.

[59]Wonsuk Ma and Julie C. Ma, *Mission in the Spirit: Towards a Pentecostal/ Charismatic Missiology (with Julie C. Ma, Oxford: Regnum, 2010)* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), https://www.academia.edu/7837941/Mission_in_the_Spirit_Towards_a_Pentecostal_Charismatic_Missiology_with_Julie_C_Ma_Oxford_Regnum_2010_.

minds, thinking that being bold in their witness is their primary calling. "Mission is woven into the fabric of their DNA."[60]

The theme of bold, Spirit-inspired witness is prominently featured in Jesus' teachings. In Luke 12:11-12, he sets the stage for the events that will unfold at his second coming by sharing this significant promise, which emphasizes the Holy Spirit's role in guiding believers during challenging moments,[61] empowering them to speak with confidence and clarity (John 14:26 and John 16:13-15).

Thus, we must not limit the Holy Spirit's role in awakening faith (justification) or perfecting it (sanctification). He is the vital force propelling God's people into action, moving them beyond personal faith into global mission.[62] He empowers believers to boldly share the gospel with those who have never heard it, breaking through cultural and geographical boundaries. The Spirit ignites a passion that transforms individuals and mobilizes communities for kingdom of God purposes. Through his guidance, boldness, and power, they are assured that the message of Christ will reach every tribe and tongue—bringing hope, life, and the fullness of God's love to all who receive and believe.

Conclusion

Pentecostal traditions play a vital role in the ongoing formation of communities that embrace and perpetuate essential Pentecostal practices, such as the baptism of the Holy Spirit, vibrant worship, and the operation of spiritual gifts. This commitment to their denominational heritage is not merely a tradition; it is a fundamental aspect of their identity as Pentecostal Christians.

Pentecostal practices have proven essential in nurturing the spiritual life and resilience of OFWs in the Middle East. In environments where Christian expression is restricted, these practices provide emotional support, spiritual empowerment, and a strong sense of community. Continuation of classical Pentecostal expressions such as healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues reinforces OFWs' identity and sustains their faith. Their fellowship gatherings mirror the early Church in the Book of Acts, offering both a spiritual home and a safe space.

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[60]Menzies, "Missional Spirituality," 42.

[61]Moses Wibowo, Jamin Tanhidy, and David Ming, "The Role of the Holy Spirit for Church Believers in the Hermeneutic Context between Biblical Authority, Illumination and Interpretation," *Pharos Journal of Theology* 103, no. 2 (2022): 7, https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.103.2039.

[62]Ma and Ma, *Mission in the Spirit*, 17.

Beyond personal growth, Pentecostalism equips these believers for mission, enabling bold witness to unreached people groups. Stories of healing, conversions, and Spirit-led encounters reveal the tangible impact of the Holy Spirit in their lives. OFW Pentecostal churches also extend care to families back home through intercession and spiritual support. As a second family, these churches bridge the gap of loneliness and cultural displacement. Spirit-empowered life transforms not only individuals but also entire communities in foreign lands. Ultimately, Pentecostalism empowers OFWs to live purposefully as active participants in the Great Commission wherever they are.

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From *Kalougata* to Shalom: A Pentecostal Reflection on Divine Blessing in the Fijian Context

Flint Hicks

Introduction

In Fiji, the noun *Kalougata* is often translated as "good fortune, happiness, and blessings."[1] Since the arrival of the Wesleyan Methodist missionaries in the 1830s, with their commitment to language development and evangelism, culminating in the publication of the first Fijian Bible in 1864, the term *Kalougata* has come to be understood as 'blessed or blessing.' However, some argue it originally signified a curse,[2] especially given that the Fijian gods were, ". . . malignant, mischievous, seductive, tormenting and murderous."[3] In earlier times, *Kalougata* was a mode of worship directed to *Degei,* who was envisioned as a massive serpent in the cave of *Nakauvadra*.[4] He was considered the supreme deity and was believed to control natural phenomena and judge the souls of the dead.[5]

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[1]Ronald Gatty, *Fijian-English Dictionary: With Notes on Fijian Culture and Natural History* (Suva: Ronald Gatty, 2009), 102; see also Arthur Capell, *A New Fijian Dictionary* (Suva, Fiji: Government Printer, 1968), 82-83.

[2]Apenisa Lewatoro, "*Kalougata in the Fijian Bible: Does It Mean Blessing or Curse?"* (paper presented at ATCON, Hong Kong, 2010), Academia.edu, https://www.academia.edu/31871724/Kalougata_in_the_Fijian_bibible_pdf (accessed September 5, 2025).

[3]Andrew Thornley, *A Shaking of the Land: William Cross and the Origins of Christianity in Fiji* (Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 2000), 168-169.

[4]Arthur Capell, *A New Fijian Dictionary* (Suva, Fiji: Government Printer, 1968), 82-83; see also Gatty, *Fijian-English Dictionary,* 102. *Nakauvadra* is the Ra province of Viti Levu.

[5]Joseph Waterhouse, *The King and the People of Fiji* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 250-251.

Joseph Waterhouse posits that *Degei* was also acknowledged as a serpent-god in Tonga, likely originating from Fijian tradition.[6] Invoking his name for rain, harvests, and protection demonstrates that *Kalougata* was associated with material gain and ancestral power. Furthermore, invocations used fear, taboos, and rituals to enforce social order, often involving human sacrifice and punishment to appease the gods.[7]

Kalougata embodies deep cultural and spiritual significance. Historically, as it is today, the installation of chiefs symbolized endowment of ancestral power, accompanied by prayers for the land and sea to be *Kalougata* (blessed and prosperous).[8] The new chief notes Ilaitia Tuwere "is essentially a fertility god and bringer of *Kalougata* (blessings) and *Sautu* (peace and prosperity) to the land."[9] The chief served as a spiritual mediator and vessel through whom ancestral power is sustained, ensuring the well-being of both the community and the environment.

Though often reduced to material favor, *Kalougata* carries a profound significant spiritual meaning that invites a theological dialogue and reinterpretation through the biblical concept of *shalom,* which offers a more expansive redemptive framework. *Shalom* appears in the *Tanakh* hundreds of times. It implies wholeness, harmony, alignment with God, and the entirety of the created order.[10]

Unlike *Kalougata*, in Scripture, God's blessings are seen as 'empowerment' for holistic flourishing,[11] rather than arbitrary favors. Within Pentecostal theology, *shalom* provides a deeper lens through which *Kalougata* can be reinterpreted, not as a mere foretaste of peace, well-being, or blessing in the present, but also deeply eschatological, moving toward God's ultimate restoration of all things to their pristine state.[12]

In Fijian tradition, natural elements like trees, rivers, and rocks are seen as sacred, embodying spiritual essence. Blessings often involve

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[6]Ibid., 256.

[7]For a full discussion, see Waterhouse, *The King*, Chapter XII, 250-302.

[8]Ilaitia S. Tuwere, *Vanua: Towards a Fijian Theology of Place* (Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific; Auckland: College of St John the Evangelist, 2002), 54.

[9]Ibid., 96.

[10]Allison Stokes, *Shalom, Salaam, Peace* (New York: United Methodist Church General Board of Global Ministries, 2006), 8.

[11]Jeff F. Anderson, *Blessing and the Curse: Trajectories In the Theology of the Old Testament* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 26.

[12]William A. Dyrness, Veli-Matti Karkkainen, Juan Francisco Martinez, and Simon Chan, eds., *Global Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 638.

invoking these spirits for protection, fertility, and prosperity.[13] The practice of *Kalougata* expresses a deep ancestral longing for harmony with nature and spirits. This theme is echoed in Christian hymns, prayers, and doxologies,[14] reflecting a world in which blessings are communal and embedded in the sacredness of place and being.[15]

The biblical concept of *shalom* not only responds to these yearnings but also reframes *Kalougata* with God's broader vision for all human flourishing. In Pentecostal theology, *shalom* represents both a lived experience and its eschatological promise, signifying the restoration and transformation of all things.

In this paper, I demonstrate that *Kalougata* (blessing) in the Fijian context must be reinterpreted not merely as a personal or material reward but as a dynamic embodiment of the biblical concept of *shalom*, God's vision for relational, communal, and holistic flourishing across all creation. This paper analyses and compares the traditional understanding of *Kalougata* (blessing) with the biblical notion of *shalom*, particularly within the framework of Fijian traditional religion. While *shalom* is a rich and multifaceted biblical theme, this study selectively focuses on its relevance to holistic flourishing through God's redemptive work rather than offering an exhaustive theological analysis. Drawing from a Pentecostal perspective, the paper examines indigenous understandings of divine blessing through a scriptural lens, moving beyond material interpretations toward alignment with God's design for all creation. The linguistic nuances in translating *Kalougata* and *shalom* may limit interpretive depth, so the biblical engagement is intentionally selective rather than exhaustive. Additionally, the historical evolution of *Kalougata*, especially under missionary influence, is acknowledged but not explored in detail, narrowing the scope to contemporary theological reflection. This research does not include ethnographic fieldwork or interviews, relying instead on theological and literary sources, which may limit cultural insight.

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[13]Jacqueline Ryle, "Burying the Past—Healing the Land: Ritualising Reconciliation in Fiji," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 157 (April 2012): 103, https://journals.openedition.org/assr/23638.

[14]*Ai Vola ni Sere ni Lotu Wesele e Viti*. Suva, Fiji: Methodist Mission Press, 1950. National Library of New Zealand Catalogue.https://natlib-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?vid=NLNZ&docid=NLNZ_ALMA71241381810002836&context=L&search_sco (accessed September 6, 2025); see also Tuwere, 63.

[15]On the Fijian view of the sacredness of place, see Tuwere, *Vanua*, 87-104.

Contextualizing *Kalougata*

Although *Kalougata* is not synonymous with *Degei* (snake god), it echoes the serpent imagery associated with divine favor, blessing, and curse. Fijians believed ". . . they were made and peopled by *Degei*."[16] Tuwere notes that *Kalougata* reverses Genesis, where the serpent brings evil in Scripture; in Fijian cosmology, the *Gata* is a god of blessing.[17] Historian Andrew Thornley examines the interactions between Christianity and traditional Fijian beliefs, as well as the veneration of the snake god *Degei.* He highlights how missionaries like William Cross and David Cargill navigated *Lakeba's* spiritual landscape, where *Degei* was a central figure. Thornley analyses the effects of these encounters on conversion, resistance, and cultural negotiation in reshaping beliefs.[18] Conversely, Waterhouse maintains that ordinary Fijians genuinely revered *Degei* and may reflect a distorted concept of the one true God.[19]

While Thornley and Waterhouse critique *Degei's* divinity from a theological standpoint, Fijian linguist and scholar Apenisa Lewatoro approaches the term *Kalougata* from a linguistic angle. *Kalougata* historically stems from *Kalou* (god) and *Gata* (snake), though Lewatoro suggests *Gata* also means 'sharp' or 'active,' thereby framing *Kalougata* as an active deity, one who keeps promises.[20] He warns against relying solely on etymology to determine meaning.[21] While his caution about etymology is valid, it does not diminish the symbolic resonance within Fijian culture. Modern speakers may not link *Gata* to the serpent god *Degei*, but its historical significance is deeply rooted in cultural memory. Thus, the concept of *shalom* provides a richer reframing, extending beyond communal blessings to encompass God's vision of holistic flourishing of all creation.

Jacqueline Ryle argues that Fijian Christian spirituality acknowledges the existence of ancestral spirits but reinterprets them through a Christian lens, recasting these once-revered entities as spiritually dangerous or

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[16]Paul Geraghty, "How a Myth Is Born: The Story of the Kaunitoni Story," *Mana Review: A South Pacific Journal of Language and Literature* 2, no. 1 (Oct. 1977), quoted in Ilaitia S. Tuwere, *Vanua: Towards a Fijian Theology of Place* (Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific; Auckland, NZ: College of St John the Evangelist, 2002), 21.

[17]Tuwere, 137.

[18]For a detailed discussion see, Thornley, *A Shaking of the Land,* 146-183.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Lewatoro, 5*;* see also David Hazlewood, *A Fijian and English and an English and Fijian Dictionary* (London: William Nicholas, 1872), 120.

[21]Ibid., 1-2.

evil.[22] *Kalougata's* symbolic resonance, rooted in Fijian myth, gains new meaning within Fijian Pentecostal spirituality. Ancestral spirits, formerly perceived as spiritually dangerous, are reframed within the context of spiritual warfare and God's redemptive work.[23]

The meaning of *Kalougata* is shaped by historical, cultural, and social contexts, reflecting people's unique experiences and perspectives.[24] Therefore, *Kalougata* will retain traces of its original meaning, preserved by culture, unless transformed by the Spirit as believers embody *shalom*. This emphasizes, then, the need for Christian discipleship that centers on worldview transformation.[25]

The use of the word *Kalougata* by missionaries, particularly figures like William Cross and David Cargill, created a linguistic bridge between indigenous and Christian understandings of divine favor and blessing.[26] Cross and Cargill, "devised a written form for the language which until then had existed only in oral form."[27] Albert J. Schütz notes that the key achievement of Wesleyan missionaries David Cargill and William Cross was creating a consistent written language system.[28] With the help of the local converts, they employed *Kalougata* for its alignment with biblical blessing, but its material focus limits the fuller vision of *shalom*. Cultural and linguistic constraints also narrowed its theological depth.

Missionary activity shaped both the language and myths surrounding *Degei*, the snake-god. Journalist Kim Gravelle, citing Thomas Williams (1840–1853), notes the absence of oral traditions linking *Degei* to Fijian origins. Between 1872 and 1892, historians recorded fifty legends, none mentioning *Degei, Lutunasobasoba*, or *Vuda*.[29] The most recognized

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[22]Ryle, "Burying the Past," 103.

[23]Ibid., 103-104.

[24]Heidi Grasswick and Nora Andersen, *Bibliography of Feminist Epistemology* (2002), quoted in Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, "Decolonising Framings in Pacific Research: Indigenous Fijian Vanua Research Framework as an Organic Response," *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 4, no. 2 (2008): 141.

[25]For a discussion on how relationships, prayer and community shifts world-view toward a Christ centred paradigm, see S. Joseph Kidder and Katelyn Campbell Weakley, "Worldviews Transformed: How God and His People Can Change Worldview," *Ministry Magazine* 94, no. 9 (September 2022): 1-4. https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2022/09/Worldviews-transformed; Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 31-72.

[26]See Thornley, *A Shaking of the Land, 146-189.*

[27]Roseline NgCheong-Lum and Debbie Nevins, *Culture of the World: Fiji*, 3rd ed. (New York: Cavendish Squire Publishing, 2020), 92.

[28]Albert J. Schütz, *The Fijian Language* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), 21-22.

[29]See Kim Gravelle, *Fiji Times: A History of Fiji* (Suva: Kim Gravelle, 1992), 5-7; on Kaunitoni Migration, see Tuwere, 20-22.

origin story surfaced only in 1892 through a *Na Mata* competition. Historian Peter France suggests *Degei* may have emerged from missionary influence to account for Fijian origins.[30] However, early colonial records may have deliberately excluded indigenous narratives that conflicted with Christian or colonial ideologies.

Thornley and Waterhouse contend that *Degei* was revered as a central ancestral deity and creator.[31] Thornley cites John Hunt's account, noting that locals once worshipped a supreme god named *Ove* before *Degei*.[32] Ultimately, *Degei* was a significant object of worship among Fijians.

These differences in interpretation highlight the complex interplay of oral traditions, missionary influences, and cultural memory in shaping narratives of identity and origin. As Philip Fountain and Geoffrey Troughton note, translation in the Pacific was not fixed. Pacific peoples, both converts and critics, actively reimagined and adapted Christianity through local agency and cultural interpretation.[33]

Many Fijians view *Degei* as a pre-Christian figure central to tradition, though colonial and missionary reinterpretations have shaped historical records. Maria Orcherton asserts that missionaries prioritized erasing or merging ancestral beliefs with Christianity.[34] While Thornley and Waterhouse may agree, Waterhouse adds that Cross, despite his resolve, often appeared harsh and culturally insensitive.[35]

Ryle highlights how mainstream Fijian Christians deeply revere *Yahweh* while honoring ancestral spirits as part of their identity.[36] Building on this, Christian Toren notes that these beliefs are expressed through ritual, often outweighing formal theology, with the Christian God seen as transcendent and ancestral spirits active in daily life.[37]

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[30]Ibid., 7.

[31]Thornley, 169. "Degei, the creator-god, although known throughout the group, belong to Rakiraki. His shrine is a serpent who lives in a cave in the hills Nakauvara. When he closes his eyes, evening falls; when he opens them, the sun rises." Tuwere, 142.

[32]Ibid., 162.

[33]Philip Fountain and Geoffrey Troughton, "Christianity and Development in the Pacific: An Introduction," *Sites: New Series* 16, no. 1 (2019): 6, https://doi.org/10.11157/sites-id435.

[34]Maria Orcherton, "The Social and Cultural Refocussing of Itaukei Landscapes of Identity through Traditional Healing Practices" (Basel, Switzerland: MDPI, 2017), quoted in Jameson Alagappan, *Towards Contextualization of Itaukei Healing in Fiji* (D.C.S. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, March 24, 2025), 17. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

[35]Waterhouse, *The King,* viii.

[36]Ryle, "Burying the Past," 80.

[37]Christina Toren, "Becoming a Christian in Fiji: An Ethnographic Study of Ontogeny," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 9, no. 4 (2003): 717-735,

Together, Ryle and Toren's insights affirm that *Kalougata* is not merely a semantic construct, but a deeply embodied spiritual practice,[38] best reinterpreted through a biblical and Pentecostal lens of *shalom*, where the deep longings for healing, cleansing, deliverance, and wholeness central to Fijian spirituality find their ultimate fulfillment.[39]

Biblical Foundations of Shalom

Biblical *shalom* means "peace, wholeness, completeness, and harmony."[40] The Hebrew word *shalom* has no precise equivalent in English. Often translated as "peace," its true meaning extends far beyond that. It encompasses concepts like harmony, wholeness, well-being, and completeness.[41] Accordingly, this section explores *shalom* as holistic flourishing through God's redemptive work, not as a full theological analysis.

Grace Milton suggests that ". . . *shalom* as God's original plan for creation and his promises for new creation . . ."[42] Craig B. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen build on this concept in their book *The Drama of Scripture*. They note that "the creation is redolent with *shalom*, . . . meaning the rich, integrated, relational wholeness God intends for His creation. The life of Adam and Eve is the life of *shalom*."[43] *Shalom* reflects God's original design for how creation was meant to function.[44]

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https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2003.00170.x.

[38]Capell, *A New Fijian Dictionary*, 82-83. The verbs "*vakalou-gata-taka* (to bless) and *vosa ni veivakalougatataki* (a blessing)" imply an active subject, one who blesses, and historically this points to the worship of Degei, whose favor and blessing were sought.

[39]Healing and deliverance from what Pentecostals in Fijian villages call *ancestral gods and curses* is often a point of contention with Methodists who still revere ancestral traditions. For a fuller discussion, see Lynda Newland, "Turning the Spirits into Witchcraft: Pentecostalism in Fijian Villages," *Oceania* 75, no. 1 (Sept. 2004): 1-18.

[40]Matthew S. DeMoss, *Zondervan Dictionary of Bible and Theology Words*, ed. Matthew S. DeMoss (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 221. "In the Hebrew Bible, in Genesis Chapter One, we read *implicitly* about *shalom* in all its fullness: In the beginning, the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the chaotic deep, and hovers now emanating, vibrating, and resonating the very Source of Life - over, in, and through all created things." Michael Christensen, *Experiencing and Expressing Shalom as Spiritual Formation* (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, Madison, NJ, 2016), 11. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

[41]Grace Milton, *Shalom, the Spirit and Pentecostal Conversion: A Practical-Theological Study* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 205.

[42]Ibid., 206.

[43]Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 40.

[44]Hugh Whelchel, "Understanding Shalom & the Grand Metanarrative of Scripture," *Institute for Faith, Work & Economics*, August 16, 2021, https://tifwe.org/

Boubakar Sanou underscores that *shalom* captures the fullness of life as it connects to God, other people, and all of creation.[45]

Genesis 1-3 reveals humanity's original vocation to spread Eden's *shalom* under God's rule, but disobedience disrupted this vocation. Though created for divine communion and flourishing, humans resisted God's presence, seeking their own versions of *shalom*, often distorted by culture and religion, only to deface God's good creation.[46]

Christian theologian Alister E. McGrath explains that the search for 'beauty' is ultimately a search for its origin, which is expressed through the objects of this world rather than being found within them.[47] Echoing this insight, Michael Christensen notes "there is a primordial spark of Divinity within all things, and that this spark draws all of creation toward *shalom*."[48] Christensen's use of the word 'primordial spark' does not imply inherent deity, but rather is a poetic expression of human desire for communion and longing for *shalom*.[49] Building further on this concept of the longing for *shalom*, Christa L. McKirland argues that humans are primarily made for and deeply need *shalom*. Still, it is only in union with God that this need is truly fulfilled.[50] She emphasizes that only God's presence enables humans to truly flourish[51] and to satisfy their insatiable quest for beauty, concepts that resonate deeply with *shalom*.

Christ's redemptive mission, therefore, was to launch God's kingdom reign through his death, resurrection, and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, inaugurating God's plan to restore *shalom* in a creation marred by human rebellion and sin. (Isa 53:5; Rom 6:4; 8:19-21; 1Cor 15:21-22; Col 1:19-20; Rev 21:4-5). Expanding on the concept of *redemptive mission*, New Testament scholar Tom Wright stresses that creation flows from God's love, and redemption is not foreign to him;

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understanding-shalom-the-grand-metanarrative-of-scripture.

[45]Boubakar Sanou, "Shalom: Health, Healing, and Wholeness in Biblical Perspective," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 20, no. 1 (2024): 30, https://doi.org/10.32597/1553-9881.1554.

[46]"Eden was a sacred space, a model or prototype of divine-human connection. Humanity was created to live in God's presence, but the fall disrupted this purpose." Daniel T. Lioy, "The Garden of Eden as a Primordial Temple or Sacred Space for Humankind," *Conspectus* 10, no. 1 (Sept. 2010): 25-57, https://sats.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Lioy-Garden-of-Eden.pdf.

[47]Alister E. McGrath, *Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers and Skeptics Find Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 114.

[48]Christensen, *Experiencing and Expressing*, 18.

[49]Ibid., 12-17.

[50]Christa L. McKirland, *God's Provision, Humanity's Need: The Gift of Our Dependence*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 18.

[51]See McKirland's discussion on true flourishing is a result of covenant relationship with God, 33-47.

it is a joyful act of self-giving that he undertakes willingly.[52] Hence, *shalom* reflects God's gracious intent for the full flourishing of every aspect of human life across all cultures.[53]

Kent D. Miller observes that *shalom* in the biblical narrative is tied to God's sovereign rule. The Hebrew prophets foretold that a promised Messiah would bring about *shalom* through his life, message, death, resurrection, and exaltation.[54] To this end, Christ restores *shalom*, ". . . the peace or wholeness and well-being of creation, which has become chaotic and violent through the power of sin."[55] Through him, humanity can experience a foretaste of *shalom*, healing, wholeness, and flourishing, while anticipating its eschatological fullness. This eschatological fullness is rooted in the hope that one day all of creation will be delivered once and for all from the stains and scars of sin, death, and cosmic evil forces (Acts 3:21).[56] At Christ's return, *shalom* will be fully and finally established across the whole of creation[57] (Eph 1:9-10; Rom 8:20-21; 1Cor 15:24-26; Rev 21:4-5).

Describing this eschatological fullness, T. Desmond Alexander posits that, while our future life will share some similarities with the present, it will be profoundly transformed. All that hinders true fullness of life will eventually be removed. Only then will we truly experience life as God originally designed it.[58]

The biblical concepts of *shalom* offer a transcendent vision of human flourishing. They recognize cultural terms like *Kalougata* while reorienting them toward God's redemptive mission, inspiring deeper Christian engagement with God's restorative project for all creation.[59]

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[52]Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007), 107.

[53]Sanou, "Shalom," 31.

[54]Kent D. Miller, "Reorienting Strategy to Shalom," *Christian Scholar's Review*, August 26, 2024, 37, https://christianscholars.com/reorienting-strategy-to-shalom. See also Miller's broader treatment of the meaning of *shalom*, 36-40.

[55]Richard J. Plantinga, Thomas R. Thompson, and Matthew D. Lundberg, *An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 264.

[56]"When God set out to redeem his creation from sin and sin's effects on it; his ultimate purpose was that what he had once created good should be utterly restored, that the whole cosmos, should one gain live and thrive under his beneficent rule." Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture, 227.*

[57]Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, 224.

[58]T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2009), 192. For a brief discussion on the relationship between soteriology and eschatology, see Gordon D. Fee, *Jesus the Lord according to Paul the Apostle: A Concise Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 4-5.

[59]"The story of Israel, starting with Abraham himself, had always been and in Saul's day was seen to be, the start of rescue operation, the beginning of a long purpose to put humans right and so, in the end, to put the whole world right again." N. T. Wright, *Paul:*

Fijian Cultural Understanding of Blessing

To grasp the Fijian cultural conception of blessing, one must first engage with the rich heritage and philosophy of life. The triadic framework that constitutes the living architecture of Fijian identity is embedded in *Vanua* (culture and land), *Lotu* (Christian faith), and *Matanitu* (government).[60] *Vanua, Lotu, and Matanitu* are deeply interwoven and connected.[61] In Fijian tradition and belief of vanua, land has not only territorial but also religious, spiritual, and political dimensions.[62]

In her field work among the iTaukei population[63] anthropologist and psychiatrist Anne E. Becker notes that "Fijian identity is grounded in one's connections to the immediate kinship group and social network. Ideally, individual activity is devoted to developing and reinforcing social relationships and promoting collective interests."[64] Becker's emphasis on relational identity and shared interests reflect the core social ontology of the three pillars.[65]

These three pillars are further illustrated by other Fijian words for well-being, prosperity, and abundance, such as *Sautu* and *Mana*.[66] Simione Sevudredre notes that "in the indigenous *iTaukei* philosophy, the word *Sautu* is used to connote peace, harmony, prosperity, and

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A Biography (New York: HarperOne, 2018), 46.

[60]See Ryle, "Burying the Past," 105-107.

[61]For a detailed discussion see Tuwere, *Vanua,* 52-69.

[62]Hans Mückler, "The Ideological Sense of *Vanua*," in *Fiji: Coups, Crises and Reconciliation*, ed. Brij V. Lal and Michael Pretes (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 2000), 32–45, quoted in Lena Zipp, *Educated Fiji English: Lexico-grammar and Variety Status* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2014), 6.

[63]Simione Sevudredre, *"Indigenous iTaukei Epistemologies and Ethics and Its Place in Peace Building: The Contextualization of the Rights of Children and Women"* (paper presented at the Pacific Peace Conference: Strengthening the Role of Peace in Nation Building, Suva, Fiji, September 18–21, 2016), https://www.academia.edu/36917057/_INDIGENOUS_ITAUKEI_EPISTEMOLOGIES_AND_ETHICS_AND_ITS_PLACE_IN_PEACE_BUILDING_The_contextualization_of_the_rights_of_children_and_women (accessed September 1, 2025).

[64]Anne E. Becker, *Body, Self, and Society: The View from Fiji* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 16.

[65]For a detailed discussion, see Becker's treatment of embodiment and socialization in *Body, Self, and Society*, 7-26.

[66]I chose to use the words *Sautu* and *Mana.* First, *Sautu* integrates other words like *Vakacegu* (rest, peace), *Veivakacegui* (comfort, consolation), and *Siga Vinaka* (blessed day, goodness), *Vakalougatataka* (to bless), *Vosa Ni Veivakalougatataki* (to speak a blessing). Second *Mana*, not only corresponds but is the creative power to usher *Kalougata* and *Sautu*. While each word has its distinct semantic weight, *Sautu* resembles a holistic vision of well-being within Fijian culture.

well-being. . . ."[67] Eseta Materiviti-Tulavu further explains that the term *Sautu* refers to abundance, prosperity, or a condition of wellness.[68] Sevudredre highlights that *Sautu* and its future will flourish when oral traditions, cultural values, and ancestral ways are honored and preserved.[69] *Mana* is also deeply nuanced. Briefly, it is a "creative force that issues from the *kalou*."[70] Tuwere notes that the concept of *Mana* is intertwined with *Kalougata*. Receiving *Mana* corresponds with receiving a blessing, as both signify spiritual empowerment and favor.[71] Collectively, *Kalougata*, *Sautu*, and *Mana* reflect the spiritual core of *vanua*, *lotu*, and *matanitu*, expressing divine favor and communal well-being rooted in ancestral traditions and values.[72]

While most people, especially Methodists, closely link tradition and faith, Pentecostals believe *lotu* is sacred and should be kept separate from *vanua* and *matanitu*.[73] This separation emanates from the concern that *vanua* customs often invoke ancestral spirits, maintaining their cultural influence.[74] Pentecostal believers view these entities as demonic and malevolent spirits to be resisted through ongoing spiritual warfare.[75]

To discern how these cultural expressions align or diverge from a biblical theology of blessing, it is essential to examine a brief scriptural foundation of 'blessing and curse' within God's covenantal relationship with his people (Deut 28:1-14, 15-68; Lev 26:3-13, 14-39, 17:5-8; Ps 1:1-3).

While biblical 'blessing' is God's empowerment to flourish in life, 'cursing' is the reversal.[76] Mary J. Evans describes Deuteronomy as a national constitution for Israel, defining their identity as a covenant people. Central to this covenant is their relationship with God as his chosen people, called and blessed to live faithfully before him.[77] Building

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[67]Sevudredre, *"Indigenous iTaukei Epistemologies,"* 4.

[68]Eseta Mateiviti-Tulavu, "Sautu: A Fijian Theological Exploration of Wellbeing," *Anglican Journal of Theology in Aotearoa and Oceania* 2, no. 1 (2023): 106-122.

[69]Sevudredre, "*Indigenous iTaukei Epistemologies,"* 5.

[70]Tuwere, *Vanua,* 141.

[71]Ibid., 137.

[72]See Tuwere, *Vanua*, 140-141.

[73]An interview in Navuniyasi sheds further light on Fijian beliefs; see Ryle, "Burying the Past," 103-107; Waterhouse, *The King,* 66-72. Historically, priests would mediate for divine favor, ensuring protection, victory, and prosperity.

[74]Tuwere, *Vanua*, 137.

[75]Ibid., 103-104.

[76]Jeff F. Anderson, *Blessing and the Curse: Trajectories in the Theology of the Old Testament* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 26.

[77]Mary J. Evans, "Blessing/Curse," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. D. Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 398.

on this, Ephraim Radner emphasizes that blessing is rooted in God's life-giving act and aligns with his creative will and purpose.[78] Mary J. Obiorah and Favour C. Uroko argue that blessing is God's sovereign 'gift' to humanity, not a transactional reward for human effort.[79] These theological views frame God's purpose in blessing Israel through Abraham, challenging readers who reduce these texts to principles of blessings and curses while ignoring their cultural and covenantal context.[80]

The motif of 'blessing and cursing' primarily underscores that God intends the ultimate good of his people (Gen 1-2). However, the most significant 'blessing' in the covenant is a right relationship with *Yahweh*. Evans emphasized, "To be in a relationship with Yahweh is the *blessing* and to be outside a relationship with Him is the *curse*."[81] God longs for relationship with humans and will go to any lengths to restore it freely without coercion.[82] It becomes evident that the Fijian terms *Kalougata*, *Sautu*, and *Mana* that reflect peace and well-being differ from the biblical concept of blessing, which transcends transactional cultural and religious expressions.[83] These Fijian terms must align with the biblical concept of *shalom*, which begins in Christ (Col 1:27)[84] and thus transcends cultural and religious expressions.[85]

The vision of blessing grounded in *shalom* reflects God's design for the flourishing of all creation. It honors the cultural meanings of terms like *Kalougata, Sautu,* and *Mana*, inviting deeper reflection on God's

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[78]Ephraim Radner, "Blessing: A Scriptural and Theological Reflection," *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 19, no. 1 (2010):9-10, 6-26. https://www.academia.edu/64520129/Blessing_A_Scriptural_and_Theological_Reflection.

[79]Mary J. Obiorah and Favour C. Uroko, "Genesis 27:27-29 in the Face of the Popular Christian Concept of Blessing in Nigeria," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75, no. 3 (2019):1-2, 1-15, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i3.5383.

[80]On contextualizing God's message in new settings, see Craig K. Keener, "Global Reading: Contextualization and Scripture," in *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in the Light of Pentecost* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 67-76; Craig A Evans, "New Testament Use of the Old Testament," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theological*, ed. T. D. Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D.A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 72-80.

[81]Evans, "New Testament Use," 399.

[82]Eugene B. Habecker, *Rediscovering the Soul of Leadership: Inner Disciplines for Effective Leaders* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 242.

[83]For a detailed discussion on well-being and the transactional nature of blessing and curse in their cultural worldviews see Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion,* 131-161.

[84]Ibid.

[85]Ibid.

redemptive purposes. Ultimately, it calls all cultures to a transformative relationship with Christ, where true blessing begins.

A Pentecostal Reflection of Divine Wholeness

A Pentecostal reflection of divine wholeness aligns with God's overarching purpose of *shalom*, restoring creation and healing human brokenness from the fall (Gen 3:15; Acts 3:19-21; Joel 2:5-26; Rom 8:18-23; 1Thess 5:23). Sanou highlights health, healing, and wholeness as key biblical themes reflecting God's desire for global flourishing.[86] Building on this vision, Willem A. VanGemeren says the Spirit of God has an eschatological mission. It acts as a restorative force to create a new humanity, applying end-time blessings, deepening the connection among believers, expanding the kingdom, and sustaining hope in a world of alienation.[87] God has begun restoring this cosmic alienation through Christ's first coming and Pentecost and will consummate it in the eschaton.

In Pentecostal theology, Allan Anderson notes that 'full salvation' means holistic well-being, spiritual deliverance, and freedom from affliction, poverty, and misfortune.[88] Alan Le writes that the Holy Spirit perfects creation by transforming it into the fullness of God's kingdom. The Spirit, who gave life at the beginning of creation, will bring forth new life in the eschaton.[89] This captures the overarching vision of full salvation noted by Anderson. Simon Chand observes that the Spirit's work is revealed at creation's beginning (Gen 1:2) and in the new creation (Rev 22:17).[90] These themes show the Spirit's role in creation and redemption, actively working from Genesis to the eschaton to renew all things. The Spirit is progressively moving believers forward toward God's vision of 'wholeness' that awaits them.[91]

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[86]Sanou, "Shalom," 30.

[87]Willem A. VanGemeren, "The Spirit of Restoration," *Westminster Theological Journal* 50, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 82.

[88]Allan Anderson, "Pentecostal Approaches to Faith and Healing," *International Review of Mission* 91, no. 360 (2002): 528, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6631.2002.tb00365.x.

[89]Alan Le, "Limitless Beauty: Human Dignity and the Spirit's Renewal of the Image of God" (Ph.D. diss., Regent University, Virginia Beach, Virginia, 2021), 69. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

[90]Simon Chan, *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 111.

[91]Frank D. Macchia, *Introduction to Theology: Foundations for Spirit-Filled Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 262.

Pentecostal theology teaches that divine wholeness will be fully realized at Christ's return.[92] However, believers are called to actively pursue it through Spirit-led growth in the present age. A Pentecost reflection on divine wholeness thus proclaims and celebrates a salvation that includes all aspects of life's challenges and struggles, providing empowerment that fosters a sense of dignity and helps individuals cope with life's difficulties.[93] Salvation, as God intends, unfolds gradually now and beyond death until its fullness is accomplished in his people.[94]

Additionally, a Pentecostal reflection entails pathways of healing and transformation in the present. It heralds the inbreaking of the Kingdom and the fuller restoration yet to come. David Han explains that "the Spirit's outpouring in Acts 2 was only a foretaste of the coming Kingdom of God."[95] This experience of Spirit-baptism awakens a deep longing for the future fulfillment when God will reign completely.[96]

Leslie A. LaPrise argues for identity healing in Christ, a keynote resonant with Pentecostal theology. A Christ-centered approach can fill gaps where secular methods fail, allowing Christians to replace brokenness with their identity in Christ and find a path to healing.[97] He emphasizes healing from 'brokenness' through Christ, aligning with God's vision for *shalom* and complete wholeness of creation.

Pentecostals affirm that divine wholeness reflects the Spirit's work as both personal and cosmic. Through this comprehensive restoration, God brings about the *shalom* he intended his people to be experiencing from the very beginning[98] (Gen 1-2).

The vision of divine wholeness rooted in the biblical concept of *shalom* resonates with Fijian expressions like *Kalougata* (blessing and divine favor), *Sautu* (peace and abundance), and *Mana* (a creative force).

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[92]For a detailed discussion on eschatology, see Frank D. Macchia, *Tongues of Fire: A Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2023), 377-424; Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation* in *New Covenant Commentary Series* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2013), 289-307; Brenda Clark, *The Lamb Has Won! The Revelation of Jesus Christ to John* (Primedia eLaunch LLC, 2018), 351-364.

[93]Anderson, "Pentecostal Approaches," 535.

[94]Andrew M. Davis, *An Infinite Journey: Growing Toward Christ Likeness* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador International, 2014), 55.

[95]David Han, "Healing in the Pentecostal Tradition," *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology* 9, no. 2 (2024): 238, https://doi.org/10.31380/2573-6345.1368.

[96]Ibid.

[97]Leslie A. LaPrise, "Identity In Christ: Transformation From Aces-Related Identity Wounds To Wholeness" (D.E.L. diss., Trevecca Nazarene University, 2024), 92-93. Digital Commons@George Fox University.

[98]Walter Brueggemann, *Peace: Understanding Biblical Themes* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), 15.

These cultural longings for wholeness and flourishing find ultimate fulfillment through God's redemptive mission.

Pentecostal theology, therefore, redeems cultural meaning through the Spirit, enabling present healing and transformation while anticipating divine wholeness in the eschaton. The Spirit's presence in believers is a foretaste and agent of God's intended *shalom* for all creation (Eph 1:13-14; 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5).

Reframing Blessing as Participation in God's Holistic Vision: Practical Implications for Ministry and Community

Blessing must be reimagined as participation in God's holistic vision. Otherwise, it risks falling into the traditional and contemporary trappings that focus only on material, communal benefits, and prosperity.[99] While blessings may include material prosperity (Deut 28), they ultimately serve God's purpose in advancing creation's flourishing.

Biblically, God's blessing is not only the origin of all good things but also provides the foundation for all human flourishing.[100] The Church must recognize that God's blessing is empowerment for engagement in his holistic vision of *shalom* across all creation. Wolfgang Vondey notes, "Pentecostal theology therefore understands creation primarily as God's activity 'for us . . . and thereby invites all of creation to participate in the divine life."[101] Blessing primarily starts with a relationship with the benevolent triune God of the Bible and develops into alignment with his redemptive mission for *shalom*. According to Sanou, "For Christians, the call to pursue *shalom* involves active participation in God's mission of restoration . . . this calls for an integral approach to mission and ministry and a holistic approach to discipleship."[102]

Scripture begins with God blessing creation to be fruitful (Gen 1:28), then calling Abram to bless the nations (Gen 12:2-3). Bartholomew and Goheen highlight its cosmic redemptive intent: "The pronouncement

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[99]For detailed discussion on blessing, see Obiorah and Uroko, "*Genesis 27:27–29 in the Face of the Popular Christian Concept of Blessing in Nigeria*," 1-15; Younghoon Lee, "David Yonggi Cho: A Statesman for Global Pentecostalism," in *Pentecostal Education: 2022 Pentecostal World Conference Special Issues* 7, (2022): 139-150. I'm of the opinion that David Yonggi Cho's view on blessing is more holistic than most contemporary preachers of wealth and health of his day and ours. It was not centred on accumulation of wealth for self-aggrandizement but on expressions of the inbreaking of God's salvation for humanity.

[100]Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion,* 135-136.

[101]Wolfgang Vondey, *Pentecostal Theology: Living the Full Gospel* (London: T&T Clark, 2017), 160.

[102]Sanou, "Shalom," 40.

and repetition of the blessing was to reverse the curse in Genesis 3 in the garden with Adam and Eve."[103] God's mission in the Old Testament, particularly the Pentateuch, is the advancement of this promise in Genesis 12:3.[104] Biblically and contextually, Abraham's call involved his descendants joining God's restorative mission, fulfilled by Jesus and the Church through Spirit-empowered discipleship and mission (Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; 2:1-4; 3:25; Gal 3:16).

This missional trajectory (Gen 12:1-3) continues even in exile, where God's people are called to seek the welfare of their captor's city (Jer 29:7). The implication is clear: when the city prospers, God's people also prosper, participating in a shared vision of well-being. The book of Micah reframes blessing as God's ethical mandate for justice, love, and mercy (Mic 6:8). His prophetic vision of blessing culminates in Jesus' teaching of kingdom ethics.[105] Graham Stanton observes that Jesus' ethical teaching is the demands or standards of behavior that confirm the will of God.[106]

Taken together, these texts demonstrate that God's blessed people embody his transformative mission in the world. Reframing blessing shifts discipleship from our broken desires to character formation (Eph 1:3) and God's missional purposes (Rev 21:3-5). It captures God's vision for his creation where humanity is empowered to fulfill his will, so that the whole of creation can be the *garden* he desires. R. Paul Stevens surmises that the final vision in Revelation fulfills the mission of Genesis, the promise to Abraham, and Ezekiel's prophecy. It includes a presence (the Lord with his people), a community (all tribes united around the Lamb), and a dwelling (the new heaven and new earth).[107] This new creation is the renewed cosmos, the fullness of community, and Christians' new

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[103]Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture,* 53.

[104]R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 198-199.

[105]"The Beatitudes are thoroughly Jewish in form and content. They challenged those who made up Israel in Mathew's time by delineating the kinds of persons and actions that will receive their full reward when God's kingdom comes. They remind Christians today of the Jewish roots of their piety and challenge each generation to reflect on what persons and actions they consider to be important or blessed." Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, in *Sacra Pagina Series*, vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 84.

[106]Graham Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 67.

[107]Ibid., 201. "As we move through scriptures, we witness a moral advance—or, in many ways, a movement toward improvements toward restoring the Genesis ideal." Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 61.

eternal home.[108] Reframing blessing through *shalom* empowers the church to see itself as God's renewed community, stewarding his gifts in alignment with his grand meta-story.

This framework guides the Church's teaching on blessing and prosperity, shaping how it stewards gifts and serves others through humble discipleship. It invites strategic collaboration with her ecumenical brothers and sisters[109] to embody the love and compassion of Christ in tangible ways. These include evangelism, missions, and various forms of ministry outreach to those who are broken, hurting, and marginalized. Embracing the mission of all creation and partnering with other Christian agencies for justice and peace,[110] the Church becomes a conduit of *shalom*. It becomes a vessel of healing and wholeness, ushering in the inbreaking of the kingdom of God upon human hearts and cultures through the good news of Christ our Lord.

Kalougata and its cognates in the Fijian language, while rich in religious and cultural meaning, cannot fully express the biblical vision of *shalom. Only God's redemptive work through Christ and the continual work of the Spirit* embody the fullness of divine blessing, one that transcends all cultural limitations and inaugurates God's vision for the holistic restoration of all creation.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argued for a reinterpretation of the word *Kalougata* through the lens of *shalom*. Many Fijians no longer associate *Kalougata* with the snake god *Degei,* some interpret it as a potent god, one who keeps his word; others still retain that ancestral connection. The term continues to carry echoes of ancestral invocations of protection, prosperity, and communal well-being.

Reframing *Kalougata* through *shalom* offers an expansive theological vision that aligns with God's redemptive purpose for all creation. This vision is further illuminated in Pentecostal theology, where divine wholeness aligns with the Bible's grand narrative. God's new creation, inaugurated through Christ's death and resurrection

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[108]Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 247-250.

[109]For a helpful discussion on the benefits of dialogue with other churches and our shared mission, see Jean-Daniel Plüss, "The Reformed–A Pentecostal Dialogue: A Journey in Discipleship," in *Pentecostal Education: 2022 Pentecostal World Conference Special Issues* 7, (2022): 191-204.

[110]Kirsteen Kim, "Mission in the Spirit: From Edinburgh to Canberra and Athens," in *A Theology of the Spirit in Doctrine and Demonstration*, ed. Teresa Chai (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 106.

and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, offers a foretaste of the eschatological glory to come.

Reinterpreting *Kalougata,* often translated as 'blessed, happy, or prosperous,' through the lens of *shalom* invites the Fijian Christian community to embody God's cosmic vision as a foretaste of the flourishing he intends for all of creation. This vision inspires humble discipleship, prayer, worship, and faithful stewardship of all that he bestows.

Such a theological shift challenges cultural and contemporary paradigms of blessing and prosperity that center on individualism, ethnocentrism, and xenophobic exclusion. It calls the Fijian Church to a vision of blessing grounded in God's desire for the holistic flourishing of all people and cultures, a vision he is committed to fulfilling in the eschaton.

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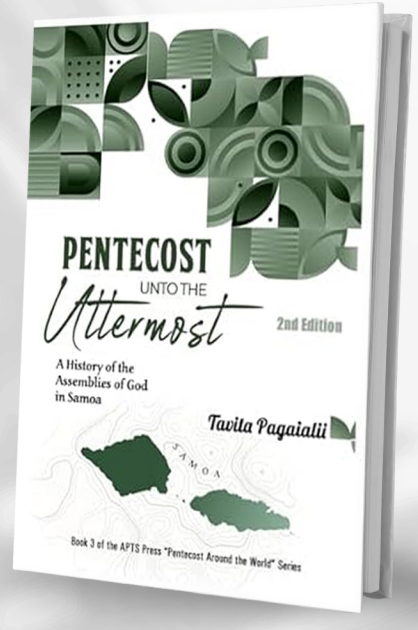

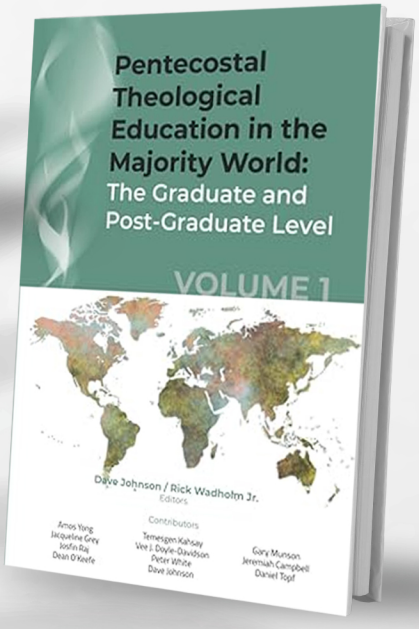

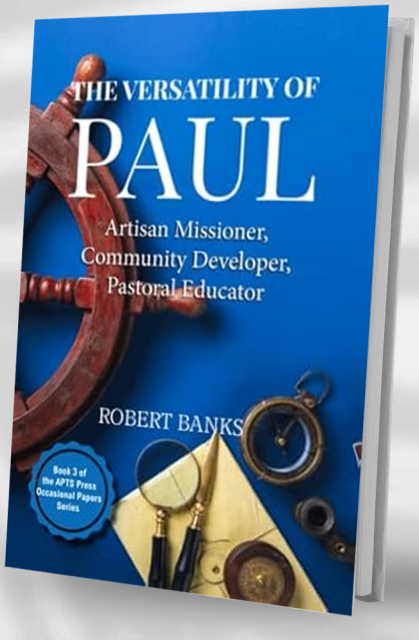

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Press Release

CATHOLICS AND PENTECOSTALS: KERYGMA/PREACHING AND CHRISTIAN LIFE
Rome, 8-14 July 2022

The second session of the seventh phase of the Catholic - Pentecostal International Dialogue took place in Rome, Italy, from 8 to 14 July 2022. Participants in the Dialogue include Catholics appointed by the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity and some Classical Pentecostal churches and leaders. The general theme for the present phase, which started in 2018, is "Lex orandi, lex credendi". Pandemic has interrupted the regular in-person meetings but contacts continued. In fact, the participants met twice online also in view of preparing the second session on the topic "Keryma/Proclamation and the Christian Life."

The session in Rome marked the 50th anniversary of the beginnings of the Dialogue which started in 1972. Since its inception the goal of the Catholic Pentecostal International Dialogue is to promote mutual respect and understanding in matters of faith and practice. Genuine exchange and frank discussion concerning the positions and practices of the two traditions have been guiding principles of these conversations.

The Catholic Co-Chair of the Dialogue is the Most Reverend Joseph Bambera, Bishop of Scranton, PN, USA. The Pentecostal Co-Chair of the Dialogue is Rev. Cecil M. Robeck, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, USA (Assemblies of God). Cardinal Kurt Koch, Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, hosted a dinner in the Vatican, to mark the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Dialogue and read the message that Pope Francis sent to the Members of the Dialogue for the golden jubilee.

During this second session of the seventh phase, Rev. Cecil M. Robeck presented the paper "Pentecostal Preaching." The Catholic paper entitled "Keryma: A Catholic Perspective" was prepared by Fr. Lawrence Iwuamadi. Each day included daily prayer services that were led alternatively by Catholics and Pentecostals.

On Sunday the members of the Dialogue attended the Holy Mass at St Peter's Basilica, presided by Cardinal Mauro Gambetti, who greeted

them; they also celebrated the Vespers at the Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls together with the Benedictine Community. The participants were also given the opportunity to visit the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican and to get acquainted with the activities of the Holy See accompanied by Msgr. Christopher Washington of the Secretariat of State as well as a guided tour to the Catacombs of St Callixtus.

According to Bishop Bambera: "As one of the newest members of the Dialogue, I have been touched by the genuine sense of mutual respect, fraternity and shared faith in Christ that has so permeated our time together. It is clearly the presence of Christ's love that has given this Dialogue life for the past 50 years. The words of Pope Francis have resonated in my heart during these blessed days of dialogue: 'When we walk together and when we collaborate together in the proclamation of the Gospel … we are already united.'"

Rev. Robeck noted, "With my new colleague, Bishop Bambera, I rejoice that this dialogue has now celebrated its golden jubilee. In its earliest years, some called its value into question. Yet, it has become clear that this dialogue is a work of our common Lord Jesus Christ. While we continue to identify differences between us, we also continue to gain greater understanding of one another that demonstrate our true relationship as sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ. We pray that the Lord will continue to bless this dialogue over the next 50 years."

The members from the Classical Pentecostal churches are: Rev. Cecil M. Robeck, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, USA (Assemblies of God), Co-Chair; Rev. David Cole, Liaison to the Greater Christian Community for the Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches of North America, Professor of Historical Theology, The King's University, Southlake, TX, USA (Open Bible Churches), Co-Secretary; Rev. Marcia Clarke, Pastor Faculty Vanguard University, London School of Theology, Los Angeles, USA/UK (Church of God); Rev. Dale Coulter, Professor of Historical Theology, Pentecostal Theological Seminary (Church of God); Rev. Jacqueline Grey, Professor of Biblical Studies, Alphacrucis University College, Australia (Australian Christian Churches); Rev. Pedro Manuel López Castillo, Co-Coordinator, Pentecostal Fraternity, Peru (Assemblies of God of Peru); Rev. Opoku Onyinah, Co-Chair, Scholars Consultation Empowered21, Ghana (Church of Pentecost); Rev. S. David Moore, M.G. "Pat" Robertson Professor, The King's University, Dallas, TX, USA (International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, USA) unable to attend, and Rev. David Wells, Vice-Chair of the Pentecostal World Fellowship, (General Superintendent of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada).

The members of the Catholic team are: Most Reverend Joseph Bambera, Bishop of Scranton, PA, USA, Co-Chair; Rev. Msgr. Juan Usma Gómez, Bureau Chief of Western Section, Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, Vatican City/Colombia, Co-Secretary; Dr. Mary Healy, Associate Professor at Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit, MI, USA; Rev. Lawrence Iwuamadi, Catholic Professor, Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, Switzerland/Nigeria; Sr. Maria Ha Fong KO, F.M.A., Professor, Pontifical Faculty Auxilium, Rome and Holy Spirit Seminary, Hong Kong, China; Rev. Marcial Maçaneiro SCJ, Professor, Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná, Brazil; and Dr. Teresa Francesca Rossi, Associate Director, Centro Pro Unione and Professor, Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Rome, Italy.

CATHOLICS AND PENTECOSTALS: WORSHIP/PRAYER AND CHRISTIAN LIFE
Ghana, 12-18 July 2023

The third session of the seventh phase of the Catholic-Pentecostal International Dialogue took place in the Pentecost Convention Centre, in Millennium City (Gomoa Fetteh near Kasoa), Ghana, from 12 to 18 July 2023. Participants in the Dialogue include Catholics appointed by the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity [DPCU], and Pentecostals appointed by some Classical Pentecostal churches affiliated with the Pentecostal World Fellowship [PWF].

The general theme of the current phase, which started in 2018, is "*Lex orandi, lex credendi*" ("the law of prayer is the law of faith"). After reflecting on the general topic and discussing "Kerygma/Preaching and Christian Life" (2022), the third session was dedicated to "Worship/Prayer and Christian Life". The goal of the Dialogue, started in 1972, is to promote mutual respect and understanding in matters of faith and practice. Genuine exchange and frank discussion concerning the positions and practices of the two traditions have been the guiding principles of this bilateral theological dialogue.

Meeting for the first time in Africa, the Dialogue benefitted from local contacts, exchanges and visits. On Friday 14 July, the Catholic Archbishop of Cape Coast, the Most Reverend Gabriel Charles Palmer-Buckle met, prayed and had a vibrant exchange with the participants. On Sunday 16 July, the Dialogue attended a church service at the Pentecost International Worship Centre Atomic-Accra. The members of the Dialogue were hosted by local pastor, Rev. Anthony Mensah and welcomed by the General Secretary of the Church of Pentecost, Rev. Alexander Kumi-Larbi. The participants had a deeply meaningful guided tour to Elmina Castle, 17 July, with its testimony to the Atlantic slave trade, which provided an opportunity to learn about a very painful chapter of human history in which Christians were complicit. Participants acknowledge with gratitude the cordial and fraternal assistance provided

by many members of the Church of Pentecost, chaired by Apostle Eric Kwabena Nyamekye, which hosted us in Ghana.

During the third session, Catholics presented a paper entitled "Catholic Worship, Prayers and Liturgy", prepared by Rev. Dr Paschal C. Mbagwu. The Pentecostal paper, entitled "Worship and Prayer: A Pentecostal Perspective", was prepared by Rev. Prof. Jacqueline N. Grey. Morning and evening prayers each day were led alternately by Catholics and Pentecostals.

Co-Chairs of the Dialogue are the Most Reverend Joseph Bambera, Bishop of Scranton, Pennsylvania, USA and Rev. Prof. Cecil M. Robeck, Jr, Professor of Church History and Ecumenics, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, USA (Assemblies of God). They were assisted by Rev. David Wells, Chair of the PWF Christian Unity Commission, as well as by Rev. David Cole, Liaison to the Greater Christian Community for the Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches of North America, and by Msgr Juan Usma Gómez, DPCU, who served as co-secretaries.

According to Bishop Bambera: "Pope Francis' message for the 50th anniversary of the Dialogue (Rome 2022), has resonated throughout this week: 'One thing is certain. Unity is not chiefly the result of our activity, but a gift of the Holy Spirit. Yet, unity will not come about as a miracle at the very end. Rather, unity comes about in the journeying.' The Dialogue's meeting in Ghana, recognizing the global nature of the work of Christian unity and highlighting the depth of Christian faith of the African continent, has been a powerful reminder to us all of the challenges and blessings of the work before us. The path of unity, as Pope Francis reminds us, is not the path of proselytism or uniformity. It lies in journeying together. The path of unity most clearly emerges when each of us continues to grow in our mutual respect for one another, as is so evidenced in our Catholic-Pentecostal International Dialogue."

Prof. Robeck noted, "By bringing the dialogue to Accra, Ghana this year, we have taken it to the global South, where the majority of Christians now live. This move enabled the delegates to participate in a vital Pentecostal worship service together among these growing churches. It also enabled us to hear something of the slave trade that ravaged the African continent. In the midst of all these things, the Church of Pentecost Convention Centre offered gracious hospitality on its beautiful campus in Millennium City. Rev. Opoku Onyinah, immediate past Chairman of the Church of Pentecost, continues to be an active member of our dialogue."

The members from the Classical Pentecostal churches are: Rev. Prof. Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena,

California, USA (Assemblies of God), Co-Chair; Rev. Prof. David Cole, The King's University, Southlake, Texas, USA (Open Bible Churches), Co-Secretary; Rev. Dr Marcia Clarke, Vanguard University, Costa Mesa, California, USA and London School of Theology, UK (Church of God); Rev. Prof. Dale M. Coulter, Pentecostal Theological Seminary, Cleveland, Tennessee, USA (Church of God); Rev. Prof. Jacqueline N. Grey, Alphacrucis University College, Sydney, Australia (Australian Christian Churches); Rev. Pedro Manuel López Castillo, Pentecost Fraternity (Assemblies of God of Peru); Rev. Prof. Opoku Onyinah, Pentecost University, Ghana (Former Chairman, Church of Pentecost); Rev. David Wells, Pentecostal World Fellowship (General Superintendent of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada); and Rev. Prof. S. David Moore, The King's University, Southlake, Texas, USA (International Church of the Foursquare Gospel), unable to attend.

The members from the Catholic Church are: Bishop Joseph Bambera, Diocese of Scranton, Pennsylvania, USA, Co-Chair; Msgr. Juan Usma Gómez, Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, Vatican City/Colombia, Co-Secretary; Prof. Mary Healy, Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit, Michigan, USA; Rev. Prof. Lawrence Iwuamadi, Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, Switzerland/Nigeria; Sr. Prof. Maria Ha Fong Ko FMA, Pontifical Faculty *Auxilium*, Rome, Italy and Holy Spirit Seminary, Hong Kong, China; Rev. Prof. Marcial Maçaneiro SCJ, Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná, Brazil; and Dr. Teresa Francesca Rossi, Associate Director, *Centro Pro Unione* and Professor, Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Rome, Italy. Rev. Dr Paschal C. Mbagwu was the author of the Catholic paper.

Press Release
Catholic – Pentecostal International Dialogue
Lisbon, Portugal, 6-12 July 2024

The Catholic – Pentecostal International Dialogue met in Lisbon, Portugal from 6-12 July 2024 at the Center of Spirituality, Alfragide. This dialogue began in 1972 and is co-sponsored by the Catholic Church's Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity (DPCU) and the Pentecostal World Fellowship's Christian Unity Commission. The primary goal of this dialogue is to promote mutual respect and understanding between the Catholic Church and Classical Pentecostal leaders and churches. All participants are convinced that Christian unity is the will of Christ. In the context of the general theme *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, the fourth annual session discussed "Sacramentality and Christian Living."

Dr. Jean-Daniel Plüss presented the Pentecostal paper "Conformed to the Image of Christ: Pentecostal Spirituality, Sacramental Practices and Daily Living." Rev. Fr. Marcial Maçaneiro S.C.J. presented the Catholic paper "The Sacraments and Sacramental Life: A Catholic Perspective." Morning and evening prayers, led alternately by the participants, were also essential for the work together.

The meetings prior to 2024 were devoted to the following: *Lex orandi, lex credendi:* Introductory Considerations (2018); *Kerygma*/ Proclamation and the Christian Life (2022); Prayer/Worship and Christian Life (2023). With this fourth session, the dialogue is concluding its thematic discussions of the seventh phase and starting to prepare the final report.

The visit to "Our Lady of Fatima Shrine," where the participants attended Sunday Eucharist at the main square, was an occasion for exchange, dialogue, clarification, and reflection. It significantly marked this session in light of the topic discussed: the devoted expressions of many pilgrims impacted the participants, who saw in them a hunger for God and a confidence in God's action.

At the end of the meeting, Bishop Joseph Bambera, Catholic Co-Chair, described the session as follows: "This year's dialogue has once again affirmed what Pope Francis noted in reflecting upon the upcoming 1700th anniversary of the First Council of Nicaea, 'Jesus Christ is the

heart of ecumenism … and our mission is to bear witness to him.' Our discussions, while candid and probing, reflect a depth of mutual respect, understanding and fellowship that emerges from shared faith in Jesus. These days continue to be a blessing to us all as we journey together as brothers and sisters in the Lord."

Rev. Dr. Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. Pentecostal Co-Chair, affirmed: "After 52 years of dialogue together, we continue to be encouraged as we gain new insight and knowledge of one another. Our visit to Fatima highlighted our discussion on the sacramental life of the Church. We are still discovering how much we hold in common, which leads us to greater love and appreciation for the unique gifts that we bring on the same issues. It has been a rich time of giving and receiving these gifts."

All participants benefitted greatly from the shared meals, conversations, and fellowship together.

The members from the Classical Pentecostal churches are: Rev. Cecil M. Robeck Jr., Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, USA (Assemblies of God), Co-Chair; Rev. David Cole, Liaison to the Greater Christian Community for the Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches of North America, Professor of Historical Theology, The King's University, Southlake, TX, USA (Open Bible Churches), Co-Secretary; Rev. Marcia Clarke, Pastor, Vanguard University, London School of Theology, Los Angeles, USA/UK (Church of God, Cleveland, TN); Rev. Dale M. Coulter, Professor of Historical Theology, Pentecostal Theological Seminary (Church of God, Cleveland, TN); Rev. Jacqueline Grey, Professor of Biblical Studies, Alphacrucis University College, Australia (Australian Christian Churches); Rev. Opoku Onyinah, Former Chairman of the Church of Pentecost, Ghana; Rev. David Wells, Vice-Chair of the Pentecostal World Fellowship, (General Superintendent of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada); Rev. Pedro Manuel López Castillo, Co-Coordinator, Pentecostal Fraternity (Assemblies of God of Peru), (unable to attend); and Rev. S. David Moore, Professor of Pneumatology, The King's University, South Lake, TX, USA (International Church of the Foursquare Gospel), (unable to attend). Dr. Jean-Daniel Plüss (Pentecostal Assemblies of Switzerland) was the author of the Pentecostal paper.

The members of the Catholic team are: Most Reverend Joseph Bambera, Bishop of Scranton, PA, USA, Co-Chair; Rev. Msgr. Juan Usma Gómez, Bureau Chief of Western Section, Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, Vatican City/Colombia, Co-Secretary; Rev. Lawrence Iwuamadi, Catholic Professor, Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, Switzerland/Nigeria; Sr. Maria Ha Fong Ko, F.M.A., Professor, Holy Spirit Seminary, Hong Kong, China; Rev. Marcial Maçaneiro, S.C.J.,

Professor, Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná, Brazil; and Dr. Teresa Francesca Rossi, Co-Director, Centro Pro Unione and Professor, Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Rome, Italy; Dr. Mary Healy, Professor, Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit, MI, USA, (unable to attend).

CATHOLICS AND PENTECOSTALS INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE IN QUEBEC
Quebec, Canada, 11-17 July 2025

The fifth session of the seventh phase of the Catholic-Pentecostal International Dialogue took place at the Monastere des Augustines, Quebec City, Canada, from 11 to 17 July 2025. An initiative co-sponsored by the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity [DPCU] and the Pentecostal World Fellowship's Christian Unity Commission [PWF]. During this session the participants have continued their work on the theme of lex orandi, lex credendi (the law of prayer is the law of faith).

The goal of the Dialogue, started in 1972, is to promote mutual respect and understanding in matters of faith and practice. The group started to prepare the Final Draft of the current phase, which includes among its topics: kerygma/proclamation and Christian faith; prayer/worship and Christian life as well as sacramentality and Christian Living. The report will be finalized and presented to the respective constituencies by 2026.

Meeting in Quebec gave the opportunity to get acquainted with the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada [PAOC]. Participants acknowledge with gratitude the assistance provided by Rev. Gary and Gwen Connors (PAOC) as local hosts. Particularly important was the Sunday worship at a local Francophone PAOC congregation, Le Carrefour Chretien de la Capitale, led by Rev. Jean-Frederic Laroche, as well as worship facilitated by the Pentecostal team at the Chapel of the Monastere des Augustines. The participants also engaged in a meaningful learning experience as they were exposed to the faithful ministry of the Augustinian sisters in Quebec. During the meeting, entirely devoted to the Final Report, the participants were informed about the participation of Rev. David Wells and Rev. Opoku Onyinah at the inauguration of the ministry of Pope Leo XIV. Morning and evening prayers each day were led alternately by Catholics and Pentecostals.

Co-Chairs of the Dialogue are the Most Reverend Joseph Bambera, Bishop of Scranton, Pennsylvania, USA and Rev. Prof. Cecil M. Robeck, Jr, Professor of Church History and Ecumenics, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, USA (Assemblies of God). They were assisted by Rev. David Wells, Chair of the PWF Christian Unity

Commission, as well as by Rev. David Cole, Liaison to the Greater Christian Community for the Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches of North America, and by Msgr Juan Usma Gómez, DPCU, who served as co-secretaries.

According to Bishop Bambera: "Our time in Quebec City has afforded us the opportunity to experience the fruits of the tenant of faith upon which we've reflected the past seven years: Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi - As we worship, so we believe! From our experience of a vibrant Pentecostal community to the very halls where we lived and worked in the Monastere des Augustines, founded by the Sisters of Saint Augustine who established the first hospital in North America in 1639, we have been blessed to witness the fruits of discipleship lived in and through a deep respect and reverence for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Reflecting the heart of the work of Christian unity, Pope Leo XIV, shared these words on the day following his inaugural Mass with representatives of other churches and ecclesial communities, including two members of our Dialogue. Recalling his episcopal motto, "In the one – that is Christ – we are one," Pope Leo encouraged us "to pray and work together to reach this goal, step by step, which is and remains the work of the Holy Spirit." Rev. Robeck noted, "Prayer is important to all of us. It is a primary means that we use to communicate with God. Are our prayers essentially self-centered or do they move us to greater love for God and for our neighbor? How we pray holds implications for how we face life, especially life in community. This dialogue has helped us to see such questions more clearly as together we express our desire for greater unity."

The members from the Classical Pentecostal churches are: Rev. Prof. Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, USA (Assemblies of God), Co-Chair; Rev. Prof. David Cole, The King's University, Southlake, Texas, USA (Open Bible Churches), Co-Secretary; Rev. Dr Marcia Clarke, Vanguard University, Costa Mesa, California, USA and London School of Theology, UK (Church of God); Rev. Prof. Dale M. Coulter, Pentecostal Theological Seminary, Cleveland, Tennessee, USA (Church of God); Rev. Prof. Jacqueline N. Grey, Alphacrucis University College, Sydney, Australia (Australian Christian Churches); Rev. Prof. Opoku Onyinah, Pentecost University, Ghana (Former Chairman, Church of Pentecost); Rev. David Wells, Pentecostal World Fellowship, (General Superintendent of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, Chair of the PWF Christian Unity Commission); Rev. Prof. S. David Moore, Life Pacific University, San Dimas, CA, USA (International Church of the Foursquare Gospel), and

Rev. Pedro Manuel López Castillo, Pentecost Fraternity (Assemblies of God of Peru) unable to attend.

The members from the Catholic Church are: Bishop Joseph Bambera, Diocese of Scranton, Pennsylvania, USA, Co-Chair; Msgr. Juan Usma Gómez, Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, Vatican City/Colombia, Co-Secretary; Rev. Prof. Lawrence Iwuamadi, Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, Switzerland/Nigeria; Sr. Prof. Maria Ha Fong Ko FMA, Holy Spirit Seminary, Hong Kong, China (unable to attend); Rev. Prof. Marcial Maçaneiro SCJ, Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná, Brazil; and Dr. Teresa Francesca Rossi, Associate Director, Centro Pro Unione and Professor, Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Rome, Italy.

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Ben Witherington III, *2 Corinthians*, *Word and Spirit Commentary on the New Testament,* edited by Holly Beers and Craig Keener (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024). xii + 154 pp. $49.99 hardcover; $26.99 paperback; $26.99 Kindle. ISBN: 978-1-5409-6746-6.

Ben Witherington III wrote a substantial paragraph by paragraph biblical commentary titled *2 Corinthians*. This volume is part of what is known as the "Word and Spirit Commentary on the New Testament," edited by Craig Keener and Holly Beers. This commentary series is meant for "Christians who identify as Spirit-filled, including renewalists, charismatics, and pentecostals, as well as others who want to learn more from this sphere of the church" (vii). This volume does not disappoint. It holds a lot of promise as a model volume in fulfilling the purpose of the commentary series in being sensitive to the "distinctive interests for Spirit-filled audiences" (viii). A good example on the part of Witherington, in identifying himself with his target readers, is when he expressed that he himself experienced speaking in tongues and how this experience led him to walk closer with Christ (123). Witherington engages the biblical text of 2 Corinthians within its first-century historical-cultural particularities and underscores how the current audience hears together with the original recipients the voice of the Holy Spirit in contemporary period.

In the process of writing his commentary, Witherington developed the inference that the ". . . theme of comfort predominates in 2 Corinthians more than in any other Pauline letter" (20). In other words, he sees that the divine comfort Paul refers to here is that "the sufferings of Christ flow over into [Paul's] own life, but also the comfort of God, which then can flow over into the life of those he is addressing in 2 Corinthians, but only as they also patiently endure the same sufferings Paul is undergoing" (21). Witherington's perspective on the governing theme of this Pauline writing is what leads him in seeing what is the central theme of 2 Corinthians. What brings Witherington's work to the front of current scholarly discussion on 2 Corinthians is his position that this Pauline writing is a single writing of Paul in contrast with other scholars who think that it is a composite letter. His presentation starts with a significant observation on one of the earliest Greek manuscripts of the New Testament to argue this point:

> Our earliest manuscript of this Greek text, P^{46}, which dates to about AD 150 if not a bit earlier, has the heading in Greek, *Pros Korinthious B*, which in turn means that the person who

> added this header saw this document as a single document and, further, didn't know of any others written by Paul to the Corinthians other than the one called *Pros Korinthious A*, which is to say our 1 Corinthians (1).

Witherington further points out that: (a) "there is no textual evidence for 2 Cor 10-13 being a separate document" and (b) "in any case, long discourses like our 2 Corinthians often were composed in stages, sometimes over many days . . ." (1). Moreover, for the author, Paul's digressions in his longer letters are not strange with his apostolic style (1). Likewise, he remarks that in his previous commentary on the same Pauline epistle, he has specified details, which are not necessarily needed to be repeated again, on "why this document can be viewed as a rhetorical unity with some digressions" (1). Hence, *2 Corinthians* is a commentary written from the perspective that this Pauline writing is a unified document rather than composite in nature. Nevertheless, for Witherington, this letter was in all probability written over an interval season, during the period of mid- to late 50s CE (2). In connection with these claims, the author sees no reason why the authorship of Paul is questionable and that the traditional view that the apostle wrote it in Macedonia during his unsettled rapport with the Corinthians is established (2).

In addition, Witherington considers 2 Corinthians to be the fourth letter that the apostle sent to the Corinthians: "The first is mentioned in 1 Cor. 5:9, where Paul refers to a letter written before our 1 Corinthians. And then in 2 Cor. 2:1-4 we hear about a severe or sorrowful letter, likely written prior to our 2 Corinthians" (1). Thus, with the understanding of the other two letters of Paul, the hypothesis that 2 Corinthians is actually a composite document is followed by many scholars (1). The current germane discussion on these supposedly four letters of Paul to the Corinthians has been relevantly considered by the author within the context of the Corinthian correspondence with a sound exegetical argument (28). The view that 2 Corinthians is a unified document guided Witherington in his analysis of the rhetorical outline of this epistle.

Another scholarly dispute addressed in *2 Corinthians* is the controversy of Paul's "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor 12:7) and what it means. Witherington links this idea of thorn to Paul's sight problem and argues that in Gal 4:13-15; 6:11 there are clear indications that Paul had an eye sight issue. A further support to his case that "Paul's thorn in the flesh had to do with his eyes" is that although not illiterate, the apostle used scribes to write his letters (Rom 16:22; cf. 1 Cor 16:21; Col 4:18; 2 Thess 3:17). Moreover, the author asks why at the end of Paul's life, Luke

[the physician] alone is with him (2 Tim 4:11). In addition, Witherington notes how Paul recovered from his blinding encounter with the Lord, "but apparently not entirely, and it continued to bother him." Finally, he points out how this "thorn in the flesh" physical issue was only referred to by the apostle "directly after speaking about his extraordinary revelations (12:7)" while apparently making a correlation (122-124).

2 Corinthians is a very useful commentary that is full of pertinent information for properly interpreting this Pauline letter. It is full of insightful thoughts and the sidebars are attentive to biblical backgrounds and further applications of the material on hand. This volume is a welcome contribution to the number of excellent commentaries on Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. This book is a reflection of the kind of scholarship of an astute academic whose contribution to Evangelical New Testament studies is beneficial for the spiritual growth of scholars, clergy, and laypeople. It is a valuable tool for the study of 2 Corinthians for any person who is interested in the deeper study of the Christian scripture. It is recommended reading particularly for those whose Christian tradition is Pentecostal-Charismatic. *2 Corinthians* is in line with the purpose of the commentary series where it belongs. If a reader is looking for an understandable, trustworthy, and accessible commentary on this Pauline letter then it is highly recommended for purchase. This volume will certainly inform, enrich, and challenge the interested student of 2 Corinthians.

The main strength of *2 Corinthians* is that its text is very readable and thus its content is helpful indeed for the user. A busy pastor or Bible teacher could glean a goldmine of spiritual insights and rich teaching material. One will find a balanced exegetical presentation, rhetorical analyses, contextual interpretations, and practical applications in the pages of *2 Corinthians*. A weakness of *2 Corinthians*, if it may be considered weakness, is that it is a short volume. It makes the reader want more insights and exposition of the text of this letter. Presented from the perspective of Renewalists, Charismatics, and Pentecostals, the larger evangelical audiences and the wider ecumenical communities are invited to engage it. Although the target audience of this commentary series is narrowed down, it is more apparent that its scope is much broader in reaching out to the variety of different Christian traditions.

Witherington produced a carefully written and instructive commentary on Paul's canonical second letter to the Corinthians. The writing style of the author is easy to follow and clear. He is knowledgeable on the issues raised by biblical scholars about the context and content of this Pauline letter. Furthermore, *2 Corinthians* is produced as a sensible commentary on its biblical text. The exposition of this Pauline writing

is judiciously expressed. It is an observable strength to notice that it is very instructive in understanding what Paul was saying to the Corinthian believers in Christ according to its original historical-cultural context of writing. *2 Corinthians* is a work that is both informative and enlightening to the reader. The presentation of materials is well executed wherein the information given and the interpretations become interesting to read. The details presented in the commentary are impressive given the fact that it is a thin volume. The demonstration of Witherington's exegetical skill is apparent in every page of *2 Corinthians*. This work is a timely contribution to the increasing interest in the study and appreciation of the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians.

R. G. dela Cruz, Ph.D.
Asia Pacific Theological Seminary,
Baguio City, Philippines

Philip E. Blosser and Charles A. Sullivan, *Speaking in Tongues: A Critical Historical Examination, Volume 2: Tongues Through Church History* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2023). 206 pp. $31.00 paperback; $46.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781666737783.

In *Speaking in Tongues: A Critical Historical Examination, Volume 2: Tongues through Church History*, Philip E. Blosser and Charles A. Sullivan embark on a meticulous scholarly journey to trace the doctrine and practice of speaking in tongues over nearly two millennia of Christian history. This volume, the second in a planned three-part series, aims to reveal results from historical-theological research that modern understanding of glossolalia—ecstatic, unintelligible speech—was not perceived by early Christians. Instead, the authors argue, the gift of tongues was consistently perceived as the miraculous speaking of known human languages (2). The word "perceived" is used in this review because the authors themselves explained that their study was a study of "perception of Christian tongues through history" (4).

Blosser, a professor of philosophy at Sacred Heart Major Seminary, and Sullivan, an independent scholar and linguist, employ a reverse chronological methodology in their examination. Beginning with the 18th century and working backward to the early Church Fathers, they meticulously analyze theological writings, ecclesiastical documents, and historical accounts to uncover how the gift of tongues was perceived and practiced across different eras. This approach allows them to highlight the evolution of the doctrine and its divergence from contemporary interpretations.

The volume is organized into five thematic chapters, each focusing on a specific period or figure significant to the history of tongues. The first chapter delves into the life and works of St. Francis Xavier, a 16th-century Jesuit missionary who was reputed to have spoken in tongues. The authors examine the controversies surrounding these claims and the ecclesiastical investigations that followed. Subsequent chapters explore the theological perspectives of figures such as Pope Benedict XIV, Francisco Suárez, Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, John Chrysostom, and others, analyzing their writings to uncover their views on the nature of tongues.

The central argument of the book is that the Christian tradition—both Eastern and Western—has consistently understood the gift of tongues as the miraculous speaking of known human languages, and that the modern reinterpretation of tongues as unknown language by Pentecostal-Charismatics has no antecedent in Church history (169). The authors assert that there is no historical evidence of tongues being perceived as an unintelligible, personal prayer language prior to the nineteenth century. Through detailed analysis, they demonstrate that Christian theologians and Church Fathers uniformly interpreted the tongues described in Acts and 1 Corinthians as real languages, often miraculously spoken by the apostles to evangelize diverse peoples.

An intriguing aspect of the book is its examination of the "miracle of speaking" versus the "miracle of hearing" debate (45ff). While the majority of interpreters have favored the former—that the apostles miraculously spoke in foreign languages—the authors note that some theologians considered the possibility that the miracle was one of hearing, where listeners understood the apostles in their own languages. This nuanced discussion adds depth to the understanding of early Christian perspectives on tongues.

The authors also uncover instances of glossolalia-like practices in certain heterodox groups, such as the Montanists (150). However, they argue that these instances were deviations from mainstream Christian thought and were not representative of orthodox beliefs regarding tongues. This distinction is crucial in understanding the development of the doctrine and its eventual divergence in modern charismatic movements.

Commendable aspects of this work include its rigorous scholarship. Blosser and Sullivan demonstrate a willingness to comb through historical and theological sources, offering detailed analyses that shed light on the historical discussions. Their ability to do a close reading of historical documents and present them in a clear and accessible manner is a testament to their expertise. Additionally, the authors' balanced

approach ensures that the work is not polemical. While they challenge contemporary interpretations of tongues, they do so with respect for the experiences of modern Charismatics and Pentecostals. This respectful tone enhances the book's credibility and makes it a valuable resource for scholars and practitioners alike.

Despite its considerable strengths, the volume reveals a certain methodological limitation. Ideally, scholars approach their data with a critical and dialectical posture—one that remains open to alternative interpretations or antithetical possibilities. In this work, however, the authors' conclusion—that speaking in tongues has historically referred to the miraculous speaking of foreign languages—appears to underlie the entire analysis from the outset. As a result, their reading sometimes seems to presuppose rather than critically test this thesis, leaving less space for genuine engagement with competing perspectives.

Here are a few dialectical observations from my reading. First, in discussing Gregory of Nyssa's *one sound* theory—a view suggesting that the Holy Spirit utters a single, unintelligible sound or voice that becomes intelligible to hearers through divine agency—Blosser and Sullivan conclude that there is little basis for identifying this "unintelligible" sound with the ecstatic vocalizations of Pentecostal glossolalia (57). Yet one might ask: what if Gregory's "unintelligible voice" is precisely analogous to the kind of ecstatic tongues-speech experienced by some Pentecostals today?

Second, the authors cite Talmudic passages which, they argue, express the idea that "God's communication transcends the construct of human languages" (71). Nevertheless, by the end of the chapter they reaffirm their overarching conclusion that speaking in tongues refers exclusively to intelligible human languages (73). If divine communication indeed transcends human linguistic structures, could it not also manifest in forms of speech that likewise transcend human intelligibility?

Third, the treatment of Tertullian—who later affiliated with Montanism—is somewhat cursory. The authors describe him as anti-Catholic and ambiguous about his stance on tongues (153-154), yet Montanist communities were historically associated with ecstatic, unintelligible utterances. Would it not be reasonable, then, to infer that Tertullian's acceptance of Montanist spirituality implies at least a tacit affirmation of *glossolalia*?

Fourth, in interpreting Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* (Book V), where he refers to brethren who "prophesy . . . and spoke in all kinds of languages . . . declaring the mysteries of God . . . partaking of the Spirit . . . and becoming purely spiritual," Blosser and Sullivan read this as a reference to the miraculous ability to speak foreign languages

(158). However, from an alternative vantage point, might Irenaeus be describing a *spiritual language*—one that expresses divine mystery and, by its very nature, may be unintelligible to human understanding? If, as they themselves note, God's communication transcends the limits of human language, then should not the possibility of unintelligible spiritual speech remain open?

Taken together, these examples illustrate that while Blosser and Sullivan's study is both rigorous and illuminating, it would have benefited from a fuller engagement with its dialectical counterpart—the possibility that ecstatic, non-cognitive speech may also bear theological legitimacy within the Christian tradition.

Another methodological weakness is that the authors' focus on theological writings means that less attention is given to the lived experiences of early Christians, which could provide a more holistic understanding of the practice of tongues. Lived experience is legitimate evidence, and the New Testament is replete with the "living witness" metaphor. Sadly, most of those who spoke in tongues in early Christianity may not have had the opportunity to write as scholastically as Aquinas and Augustine. Furthermore, while the authors acknowledge the existence of glossolalia-like practices in certain heterodox groups, they do not delve deeply into the implications of these instances for the development of the doctrine. A more thorough exploration of these practices could offer valuable insights into the complexities of early Christian beliefs and practices regarding tongues.

Honestly, I approach this review as one who has personally experienced Spirit baptism and the practice of speaking in tongues. Reading Blosser and Sullivan's work from this standpoint of lived experience, I recognize both the historical academic silence surrounding the phenomenon and the enduring ambiguity over whether the biblical gift of tongues was a miracle of speech or of hearing. Yet, as one who has spoken in tongues, I serve as a living witness to its contemporary expression. Today, approximately 600 million believers identify with Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity, and a significant proportion of them likewise speak in tongues—often in forms that are ecstatic or unintelligible. My experience does not invalidate Blosser and Sullivan's historical conclusions; rather, it offers a counterpoint and an alternative horizon from which further theological and historical inquiry might proceed.

Speaking in Tongues: A Critical Historical Examination, Volume 2: Tongues through Church History is a significant contribution to the field of historical theology. I commend Blosser and Sullivan's meticulous research and analysis. They provide a compelling case for understanding

the gift of tongues as a miraculous speaking of known human languages throughout Christian history. While the volume has some limitations, it is still an essential resource for scholars and students interested in the history of Christian doctrine and practice.

Lora Angeline E. Timenia, M.Th.
Asia Pacific Theological Seminary,
Baguio City, Philippines

Jos Moons, *The Holy Spirit, the Church and Pneumatological Renewal: Mystici Corporis, Lumen Gentium, and Beyond,* Brill's Series in Catholic Theology 10 (Leiden: Brill, 2022). 302 pp. $123.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-90-04-49856-3.

In *The Holy Spirit, the Church and Pneumatological Renewal*, Jos Moons presents a rigorously researched and theologically nuanced study of the Holy Spirit's place within the Catholic Church's self-understanding as articulated through two landmark magisterial documents: Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* (1943) and Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* (1964). The book is written in recognition of the issue of *Geistvergessenheit* (neglect of the Holy Spirit in Christian theology) (8-9). Moons attempts to explore the extent of *Geistvergessenheit*, what has been done to overcome it, and what may still be done moving forward, in an effort to contribute to the restoration of "pneumatological balance" in Christian theology (9).

Using a close reading method, that is, a hermeneutical analysis of texts, Moons aimed to answer his question on "how a given document understands the Spirit" (15). His investigation is guided by the term *Spiritus* and holds in tension both diachronic and synchronic research. He analyzed how the term Spirit was used in the text, as well as "the place of Spirit-references in the structure of the text" (17). Moons doesn't only do text analysis but also analyze theological content and argumentative significance. The overall thrust of his method is to determine if pneumatological renewal occurred (for the better) in Roman Catholic magisterial ecclesiology within the twentieth century (18).

The book is divided into three main parts. Part One investigates the theological context and pneumatology of *Mystici Corporis Christi*. Moons demonstrates how this 1943 encyclical, though often celebrated for its organic vision of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, largely relegated the Holy Spirit to an implicit and functional role (65). The Spirit's agency is acknowledged primarily as the soul that animates

the ecclesial body, yet without being explored as a personal and dynamic subject in the Church's life.

Part Two turns to *Lumen Gentium* and constitutes the heart of the study. Here Moons engages in meticulous text analysis, tracing how the constitution's text evolved through successive schemas and drafts during the Second Vatican Council. This historical-critical work is one of the book's major strengths. Drawing on conciliar archives, Moons examines the debates surrounding key sections—especially those addressing the People of God, the hierarchical structure of the Church, and the Charismatic dimension. His analysis reveals an uneven pneumatology in the *Lumen gentium*, suggesting even that there may have been tensions (stops and starts) in the understanding, use, and rediscovery of pneumatology in the Council (135).

The detailed comparison between *Mystici Corporis* and *Lumen Gentium* forms the basis for Part Three, where Moons assesses the actual degree of pneumatological renewal and proposes constructive directions for further theological reflection. Moons finds many similarities between in the two in the area of theological content. *Lumen Gentium* though demonstrates a more modest change in terms of pneumatology (141-142). Nevertheless, in both documents Christological and institutional frameworks continued to dominate.

Moons writes a constructive proposal as his final chapter. This chapter is one of the book's most engaging aspects. He calls for a more "robust pneumatology" that would place the Spirit not merely as an agent of internal sanctification but as a dynamic and relational principle of discernment, mission, and renewal (337). He envisions a church more consciously open to the Spirit's unpredictable movement, attentive to the gifts and insights of the faithful, and discerning of the Spirit's presence both within and beyond institutional boundaries.

Moons' study demonstrates several notable strengths. Its methodological precision—combining close textual reading, historical reconstruction, and theological analysis—offers a model of rigorous scholarship. His mastery of conciliar sources, including preparatory schemas and redaction debates, reveals how pneumatological themes in *Lumen Gentium* emerged not spontaneously but through complex theological negotiation. The book also shows conceptual clarity, as Moons carefully defines "renewal" and "pneumatological," distinguishing modest from radical developments and avoiding the vague enthusiasm of some post-conciliar interpretations. His tone is balanced and fair, acknowledging Vatican II's genuine advances—greater attention to the laity, charisms, and the unity of the People of God—while recognizing its enduring limitations. Finally, his writing displays pastoral sensitivity,

aiming not merely to analyze but to foster the church's openness to the Spirit's renewing presence through discernment, *sensus fidelium*, and shared listening.

The book's limitations arise mainly from its methodological focus. By confining his analysis to magisterial texts and their redaction history, Moons offers a study somewhat detached from the lived reception of *Lumen Gentium* and its impact on post-conciliar movements such as the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, ecumenical dialogues, and grassroots ecclesial communities. His limited engagement with non-Western or contextual theologies also narrows the scope of his findings. Greater dialogue with contemporary pneumatological thinkers—such as Yves Congar, John Zizioulas, and Jürgen Moltmann—could have situated his work within the broader ecumenical and theological landscape. Finally, Moons' claim of "modest renewal," though persuasive, may appear overly cautious; one could argue that *Lumen Gentium's* emphasis on the People of God, charisms, and the Spirit's presence in the world already marks a substantial theological shift. The degree of renewal, therefore, depends on one's interpretive lens, and Moons' restraint, while methodologically sound, risks underestimating the Council's transformative legacy.

Despite these caveats, *The Holy Spirit, the Church and Pneumatological Renewal* makes a major contribution to Catholic ecclesiology and pneumatology. It offers one of the most thorough textual and theological comparisons between *Mystici Corporis* and *Lumen Gentium*, illuminating both continuity and change within the magisterial tradition and providing a valuable resource for understanding doctrinal development. Moons also proposes an implicit hermeneutic for ecclesial reform: by showing that Vatican II's pneumatology remains incomplete, he calls theologians and church leaders to ongoing discernment and renewal. His vision of a Spirit-led church attentive to the voices of the faithful anticipates contemporary discussions of synodality, mission, and discernment. Moreover, his theological method—faithful to tradition yet open to transformation—models a disciplined approach that treats magisterial texts as living resources for a historically grounded, intellectually rigorous, and pastorally responsive theology.

Indeed, this book is an impressive scholarly achievement. Its meticulous research, historical insight, and theological balance make it essential reading for anyone interested in the Holy Spirit's role in the church's self-understanding. While the book's focus on textual analysis may limit its accessibility to non-specialists, it provides a foundation upon which future pneumatological and ecclesiological work can build.

I highly recommend Moons' *The Holy Spirit, the Church and Pneumatological Renewal* for Pentecostal readers and scholars because

it offers a Catholic theological framework deeply engaged with the person and work of the Holy Spirit, while also addressing themes central to Pentecostal experience—charisms, discernment, renewal, and the dynamic life of the Spirit in the church. Though written from a Roman Catholic perspective, Moons' argument resonates strongly with Pentecostal concerns about how the Spirit empowers the whole body of believers and not only hierarchical leadership. His analysis of *Lumen Gentium*'s attention to charisms and the *sensus fidelium* provides valuable points of contact with Pentecostal understandings of the Spirit's distribution of gifts among all members of the community. Pentecostals can find in Moons' work a serious Catholic conversation partner who values the experiential and charismatic dimensions of Christian faith.

Lora Angeline E. Timenia, M.Th.
Asia Pacific Theological Seminary,
Baguio City, Philippines

Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, *Introducing Spirit-Empowered Christianity: The Global Pentecostal & Charismatic Movements in the 21st Century* (Tulsa, OK: ORU Press, 2023). 217 pp. $24.99 Paperback. ISBN: 9781950971138.

A substantial body of well-researched literature on Pentecostalism has emerged from both Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal scholars. Within this body of work, Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo contribute a significant volume through their extensive study of global Pentecostalism. Their aim of writing this book is 1) to provide readers with a comprehensive historical and research-based overview of the movement, focusing on how Pentecostalism has been counted, classified, and described over time. 2) The book explores early attempts to measure Pentecostal growth, the development of denominational taxonomies, and the influence of Pentecostalism on mainline churches. 3) It further offers statistical estimates of Pentecostals and Charismatics, categorized by type, country, and region. By presenting detailed demographic data at national, regional, and global levels, 4) Johnson and Zurlo seek to establish a foundation for nearly all subsequent quantitative and qualitative studies of Pentecostalism. Taking a demographic and social-scientific approach, they frame Pentecostalism and the wider Charismatic renewal as interconnected expressions of a global spiritual phenomenon (3).

They begin the first chapter, "History and Characteristics," with the wider scholarly debate on Pentecostal origins. Johnson and Zurlo resist the temptation to locate the movement solely at Azusa Street, instead situating it within a broader landscape of 19th—and early 20th—century revival movements. This framing challenges the often U.S. centric narrative by highlighting Pentecostalism's missionary drive and its immediate global expansion, thereby underscoring its inherently transnational character from the outset. Their discussion of early missionary efforts—whether marked by naïve expectations of xenolalia or later formalized through mission agencies—signals a recurring theme in Pentecostal studies: the dynamic interplay between Charismatic experience and institutional adaptation.

The chapter also contributes to the larger conversation on world Christianity by connecting Pentecostal expansion to seismic demographic shifts. By tracing the shift of Christianity's center of gravity from the West to the Global South, the authors underscore Pentecostalism's role in shaping, and being shaped by this transformation. Their analysis shows how the proliferation of denominations, especially in Africa and Asia, reflects not merely numerical growth but also new cultural and ecclesial expressions of Spirit-empowered faith. Finally, the authors' cleverly use the "family resemblance" metaphor to describe Pentecostal and Charismatic diversity that advances the conversation about classification. While acknowledging the limits of this model, they open space for scholars to consider Pentecostalism less as a tightly bounded tradition and more as a constellation of movements held together by shared emphases on Spirit baptism, gifts of the Spirit, and experiential spirituality. In this way, the chapter's contribution lies in reframing Pentecostalism as both a historically diffuse and globally interconnected phenomenon—one that resists simplistic definitions yet continues to command scholarly attention as the fastest-growing expression of Christianity worldwide.

In Chapter Two, "Pentecostals in Global Christianity," Johnson and Zurlo categorize Spirit-empowered Christianity into three broad streams: Classical Pentecostals, Charismatics within historic denominations, and Independent Charismatics. This typology offers a structured framework for grasping the vast diversity of the movement while highlighting shared emphases on Spirit baptism, gifts, and experiential faith. By grounding their discussion in extensive quantitative data and historical analysis, the authors write their stated aim of providing a reliable taxonomy for measuring Pentecostal growth and influence.

The chapter's contribution is twofold. First, it firmly situates Pentecostalism as a central force within world Christianity, demonstrating that these movements are not peripheral but transformative in their impact—even shaping worship, theology, and practice in mainline denominations. Second, it provides one of the most comprehensive demographic mappings of global Spirit-empowered Christianity available, establishing a reference point for future scholarship.

At the same time, the very strength of their taxonomy exposes a limitation. By grouping such diverse expressions into three overarching categories, the authors risk flattening the local variations, theological nuances, and cultural distinctives that give each stream its vitality. While their "big picture" view is invaluable, it requires further engagement with case studies and contextual analyses to ensure that the lived realities of Pentecostal and Charismatic communities are not overshadowed by broad statistical patterns.

Johnson and Zurlo shift from taxonomy to analysis by highlighting key trends shaping global Pentecostalism: women in leadership, social justice, prosperity teaching, and mission in Chapter Three. They argue that these trajectories, whether innovations or reflections of surrounding culture, carry significant theological weight for the global church. Through varied examples, the chapter shows how such trends take root differently across contexts yet collectively shape the identity and witness of Spirit-empowered Christianity.

The chapter contributes by portraying Pentecostalism as adaptive and socially engaged rather than static, demonstrating its ability to respond to contemporary issues while influencing broader Christian practice. However, the analysis tends toward description rather than deep critique. For example, while the prosperity gospel and women's leadership are acknowledged, the underlying theological and structural tensions receive limited engagement. Thus, the chapter successfully maps the trends but leaves important questions open for further scholarly and theological exploration.

In Chapter Four, Johnson and Zurlo tackle the complex task of quantifying global Pentecostalism. They revisit the pioneering work of David Barrett, whose statistical efforts in the *World Christian Encyclopedia* represents one of the earliest large-scale attempts to measure Pentecostal and Charismatic populations. While acknowledging Barrett's groundbreaking contribution, the authors also note the methodological critiques that his approach has attracted, particularly

regarding definitions, classifications, and the reliability of self-identification in diverse cultural settings. The chapter also offers a brief but significant overview of the Pew Research Center's surveys, which have provided more recent and widely cited data on global Pentecostal and Charismatic communities.

The contribution of this chapter is its careful positioning of demographic research as both indispensable and contested. By engaging with Barrett's legacy and situating it alongside Pew's methodologies, Johnson and Zurlo underscore how critical the "numbers question" is to any serious study of Pentecostalism. They show that statistics are not merely neutral data but interpretive tools that shape how the movement is understood in relation to world Christianity.

At the same time, a critical note should be made: while the chapter highlights the importance of counting, it stops short of probing more deeply into how methodological choices influence theological interpretation and public perception. For instance, whether Spirit-empowered Christianity is defined narrowly or broadly can dramatically alter its perceived scope and influence. In this sense, the chapter invites further reflection on how quantitative research should be integrated with qualitative insights to provide a fuller picture of Pentecostalism's complexity.

Johnson and Zurlo's work makes a major contribution to the study of global Pentecostalism by combining historical analysis, demographic research, and conceptual framing into a single volume. From their reframing of Pentecostal origins beyond Azusa Street, to their categorization of Spirit-empowered movements, to their mapping of contemporary trends and demographic shifts, the authors demonstrate the scope and vitality of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity as a global force. Their introduction of *"Spirit-empowered Christianity"* as a unifying concept is especially helpful in recognizing commonalities across diverse movements, while their statistical and historical rigor provides a reliable foundation for further scholarship.

The book's strengths lie on its breadth of coverage, its demographic depth, and its ability to situate Pentecostalism within the wider transformation of world Christianity. It is, without doubt, a resource that will be repeatedly consulted by students, pastors, and scholars alike. At the same time, its weaknesses reveal its character as a reference work rather than a fully critical theological engagement: the treatment of prosperity theology, women's leadership, and other trends often remains descriptive, while the broad taxonomies risk flattening the nuances of local contexts.

Nevertheless, the book succeeds in its central aim—to provide a comprehensive, research-based overview of global Pentecostalism that demonstrates both its diversity and its interconnectedness. By charting the movement's growth from scattered revivals to a worldwide spiritual force numbering over 600 million adherents, Johnson and Zurlo highlight Pentecostalism's significance not only for the present landscape of Christianity but also for its future. As such, this book stands as both a milestone in Pentecostal studies and a starting point for further critical, contextual, and theological reflection.

William Toh, D.Min.
Asia Pacific Theological Seminary,
Baguio City, Philippines

Wonsuk Ma, Opoku Onyinah, and Rebekah Bled, editors, *The Pandemic and the Holy Spirit: From Lament to Hope and Healing* (Tulsa, OK: ORU Press, 2024). 425 pp. $24.99 paperback; $14.99 Kindle. ISBN: 9781950971220.

This book is a brilliant invitation to walk through the global responses of the Pentecostal churches through a movement, the Spirit Empowered churches, to the COVID-19 pandemic. Its purpose is to provide a picture for open learning on how the unique role of the churches in this movement with their distinct theological leanings have negotiated the transitions from pain and grief to hope and recovery from this health emergency that brought the world to its knees. With studies, surveys, and reflections that presented multiple strategies for responding to the pandemic, coupled with concept and data analysis contextualized in historical backgrounds that cut across historical epochs, geographical and cultural boundaries, this book gives us a menu of insights, paradigms, and practices that have helped many to rise above the lamentable situation caused by this illness. And more importantly this book recounts how people and institutions: the church and faith-based organizations; the state and non-government organizations have tried to offer hope and healing, and rediscover humanity's resilience in the midst of grief and lose.

The thematic organization of the book gives a formidable entry to the world of the pandemic which has become the crux of the studies and discussions considering the unique role of the churches, with their distinct orientations both cultural and spiritual. The foundational articles bring the readers to a biblical/historical incidence of the pandemic as experienced in ancient societies where stories of plagues have afflicted many. The historical fact of the 1918 flu pandemic was brought up to

present responses to this current pandemic. Following these foundational readings are contextual narratives that prepare readers to fully grasp the studies in the context of the church dialogue and language. The core of the book are the case studies with reflections and observations in diverse settings on how the churches ministered to their members about lament, hope, and healing through varied strategies. It is in navigating the transitions from pain, to hope and healing that the church has strongly manifested its presence in the struggle for health and wellbeing in a world when rational science cannot answer all the hard questions about physical frailty. The ministry of the churches, together with state-partnership which implemented responses and protocols based on medical and rational scientific findings, offered a back-to-back guide to healing and recovery. Although there were some slight tensions between church-led responses and rational medical responses mandated by government as evidenced in the stories of the co-researchers, the journey to healing and recovery for economic and social life was patiently and carefully navigated in finding a way towards health and wellness.

Responses to the pandemic can be classified in two pathways: (1) the church's responses, including faith-based organizations, and (2) the state or government mandated protocols to halt the spread of the virus. These two pathways are not necessarily contrasting but complementary despite some tensions observed as the economic impact of the later affected people's survival.

The Pentecostal theology of healing as empowered by the Holy Spirit was a major response of the church. The church basically anchored its responses toward divine and miracle healing to ease the lament, feel the pain of the suffering and the agony of losing loved ones, and work towards recovery. The power of prayer and the anointing of the church as ministers, believers, and healers came out as a big refuge for many who embraced this faith tradition. The church had to consider the communally infected because the illness knew no bounds. It affected everyone who had weak immunity to diseases. Community outreach was visible both online and face to face in small group prayers, worship circles, storytelling, and grief sessions that expressed faithfulness to a loving God. There were some church-led interventions so navigate believers to lament, hope, and heal. These spiritualistic modes of responses coded as triumphalistic theology made their way to the healing process of the suffering.

With its adherence to rational science and scientific medical practice, government mandated measures to prevent the spread of the virus including wearing of face masks; total ban on big crowd gathering; lockdowns; minimal outdoor activities; isolation; and administering of

vaccines to protect people from contracting the disease. When businesses shut down and mobility was restricted, the economy suffered and social life was clipped affecting family relationships and bonding activities.

The book's contribution to the discussion borders on the phenomenon of a holistic modality of responses where church-led strategies to lament, hope and heal ought to be blended with modern medical practitioners' scientific measures. Here can be seen the fusion of religious theological practices where faith in God co-exists with the medical western modalities of healing, creating a vision of justice and destiny. In some instances, some churches and faith-based organizations shared and disseminated to their members the very same measures employed by government to minimize the spread of the virus. Christians' prayers for healing also include praying that the wisdom of the medical practitioners and the medical procedures and medicines be blessed and be anointed by the Almighty. There is no more chasm between religion and rational science in practice but a holistic modality for healing and recovery path that centers on the wholeness of being. The journey to healing physically, individually, spiritually, as a community, socially, economically, and psychologically, can be achieved if one is ready to embrace a holistic paradigm that borders beyond the physical world and is realistically factual as seen and felt. Viewing this contribution from the lens of cosmic anthropology, the world beyond is a cosmic rendition of a bondless space and time where notions of eschatology and pneumatology as responses to COVID-19 can be elevated to a higher dimension. It could be that a Spirit-led journey to healing is a powerful pathway where God leads. God is not an idea. God is the reality of our wholeness that sits people in a cosmos that continues to breath love as humanity evolves to a higher dimension.

I find the strengths of this book are its (1) evidence-based narrative; (2) vivid storytelling of accounts of the phenomenon—COVID-19; and (3) striking format of the presentation that starts with an abstract and ends with a conclusion. This format gives the reader a glimpse of what to expect at the start and a wrap up at the end.

I couldn't find any weaknesses in the presentation or in the way the accounts are gathered. These are exploratory studies, phenomenological in approach (narrating and reflecting on lived experiences), and some are surveys that attempt to record what this phenomenon is about at a global context. These materials can serve as a road map for future researchers who would later want to make a more serious study on the other aspects of responses on this COVID-19 pandemic.

Firstly, I would consider it an historical account of a phenomenon that occurred in modern society after one hundred years. It is important to

find out how humanity has progressed or how a medical crisis is tackled at this present time when we thought we have improved our knowledge and technology that science has brought to bear. It is an additional literature of the stories of health issues that picks up the perspective of the church and the Holy Spirit.

Second, the undisputed call of the Holy Spirit in healing is a remarkable element in this narrative that poses a significant reminder that Science alone cannot answer humanity's woes. There is a higher being, the Creator, who commands all the happenings and possibilities in a world where the cosmos is beyond time and space.

Third, I appreciate how the fusion of religious traditions and medical science in the responses have been embodied into a phenomenon that calls for an anthropological lens to account for it as spiritual transformation.

Remedios Nalundasan-Abijan, Ph.D.
Asian Social Institute, Manila, Philippines

Swee Sum Lam, *Kerygmatic Hermeneutics: Formulating a Pentecostal-Charismatic Practice of Reading Scripture in the Spirit in Community*, foreword by Mike Higton (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications/Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2021). xvii + 238 pp. $48.00 hardcover; $33.00 paperback; $29.00 eBook. ISBN: 978-1-6667-0144-9.

Swee Sum Lam's *Kerygmatic Hermeneutics*, published by Pickwick Publications in 2021, offers an in-depth examination of the Holy Spirit's role in biblical interpretation. Submitted as her Ph.D. dissertation at Durham University's School of Theology and Religion, the book carries the subtitle, *Formulating a Pentecostal-Charismatic Practice of Reading Scripture in the Spirit in Community.* This book targets "Spirit-filled" confessing communities, likely alienating cessationist Christian groups.

Although the title includes the term "Hermeneutics," this book takes a unique approach compared to typical Bible interpretation guides. Rather than concentrating on genre, grammar, and the original authors' social, political, and cultural contexts, it presents a program to help the Christian community engage with the Holy Spirit's voice beyond the boundaries of the biblical text.

Dr. Lam's thesis applies the methodology practiced by Tabernacle Church and Missions in Singapore, led by David Jeremiah Seah, the senior pastor. Seah launched a "praying in the Spirit" initiative to shape the church's vision and mission, in which church leadership participated in Participatory Active Listening (PAL). Spiritually mature participants

engaged in prayer, seeking guidance for the church's growth and direction. This spiritual discipline, combined with qualitative analysis methods from organizational management (9), provided a framework for evaluating outcomes. Over two years, members were assessed on their ability to understand and apply biblical truths to current issues. The outcome was a cohesive scriptural understanding among church leaders and believers, unified through the Spirit in carrying out Christ's commission.

Lam set out to explore whether Seah's PAL method allows for interpreting Scripture through the Spirit, particularly questioning if "praying in the Spirit" enables insights that surpass the biblical authors' original intentions. According to Lam, the purpose of interpreting the Bible is to apply its truths to contemporary life, with a strong emphasis on Scripture leading to proclamation. This kerygmatic (proclamatory) approach to reading is called Kerygmatic Hermeneutics. *Lam's thesis is that the proper context for interpretation is a Spirit-led process, which results in an embodied witness to Jesus Christ* (13).

Lam supports her thesis by constructing a theology of the Spirit, beginning with its unique place in the Trinity. She notes that the Spirit's work is frequently confused with that of Jesus, making its identity seem "elusive," unlike the clearly outlined roles of the Father and the Son in Scripture. Lam highlights how the Spirit uniquely engages with believers, forming them individually and as a community to serve as powerful witnesses for Jesus. She argues that while God reveals himself through Scripture, it is the Spirit who enables believers to understand both the literal meaning and the deeper communication from God. Ultimately, "reading in the Spirit" is meant to shape one into an embodied witness of Jesus Christ.

In Lam's constructive theology of the Spirit, five key points frame its understanding:

1. Knowledge of God: Understanding God and his workings comes not from theologians' writings about the Spirit but from the lived experiences of God's people in the world.
2. Contextual Revelation: Modern readers must acknowledge that God's revelation through Jesus, the apostles, and Christians is specific to its context and time, which limits its application. The revelation to modern believers extends beyond the text and is realized when they proclaim Jesus in their lives.
3. Fresh Reading of God: The Spirit provides new significance to the text based on what he is doing in a specific context.

This fresh understanding of God emerges not from systematic theology but from the Spirit's revelation as believers proclaim Jesus to the world.

4. Openness to the Spirit's Work: A theology of the Spirit grounded in human philosophical systems is reductionist, forcing believers into predefined categories about God. Such an approach misses the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the mystery of God.
5. Discernment Challenges: Crucial to reading Scripture in the Spirit is the ability to discern whether it is the Spirit at work or merely human influence or other sources. Discernment methods from the humanities, social sciences, and organizational science can confirm the Spirit's activity.

Lam's constructive theology focuses on the Spirit's otherness, guiding readers toward ongoing Spirit-led revelation and transformation. Her *Kerygmatic Hermeneutics* diverges from traditional Pneumatology, urging interpreters to embrace new and unbounded revelations from the Spirit that go beyond the propositions of biblical studies and systematic theology.

Seah developed the Participatory Active Listening (PAL) program of praying in the Spirit to transform the church he leads (168). Initially crafted to direct the church's vision and mission, Lam later adapted PAL to biblical interpretation. With some adjustments, Lam describes two crucial stages: The first stage, the Pre-PAL Scriptural Interpretation Program, has participants study historical and contemporary interpretations, carry out exegetical analysis to identify valid readings, and practice daily Bible reading, prayer, meditation, and proclamation. Through prayer in the Spirit, they discern, document spiritual insights, and refine key scriptural interpretations.

Second is the main program where participants gather weekly for 90-minute sessions to collectively discern the Spirit's guidance in reading a text, focusing on how the Spirit illumines and inspires their understanding. Crucial to this stage is how the participants hold themselves accountable to the Spirit and each other "to perform this Spirit-led interpretation of the text" (185). The efficacy of these stages, according to Lam, rests on "readers learning to read Scripture in the Spirit *in community*" (21).

To read Scripture in the Spirit, both individuals and communities need to develop the ability to discern the Spirit's voice. This discernment arises from a special relationship with the Spirit, marked by specific experiences. One marker is Intoxication—a deep, loving communion

with the Spirit that creates a strong bond with God and others, awakening and drawing them closer (63). Another is Life, where the Spirit invites the reader into a new way of living that can be shared with others. There is also Participation, which involves ongoing transformation into Christlikeness (logos enfleshed, 67) and participation in his mission. Finally, Revelation of Truth occurs when the Spirit leads believers to integrity, often through conviction of sin and correction of error (69). Genuine participants are selfless, willing to accept criticism for the community's benefit, and maintain integrity in proclaiming Christ.

Lam's *Conclusion* emphasizes its contributions to Pneumatology and the advantages of a Spirit-led approach to Bible interpretation, highlighting the Spirit's active role in the faith community (200). Additionally, Lam's adaptation of Seah's PAL Prayer in the Spirit method has established its own identity in biblical hermeneutics. A critique of Lam's thesis, however, yields important observations:

1. Lam's (and Seah's) PAL Program is not entirely new, as Christian communities— particularly Pentecostals and Charismatics—have long engaged in praying to the Spirit for guidance in personal and ecclesial decision-making. Through day and overnight prayer meetings, Spirit Encounter Revival camps, and other Spirit-oriented church gatherings, these communities anticipate the Spirit's revelation and empowerment for proclamation. The key distinction of Lam's method is its clear articulation of steps for encountering the Spirit, filling a gap that has not been addressed by others who have not presented a structured program for experiencing the Spirit and receiving divine revelation.
2. Is Lam's method a program or a ritual? Pastor Seah introduced his PAL method to seek the Spirit's guidance in defining the group's vision and mission, focusing on an external objective rather than the divine. In contrast, Lam's adaptation aims to deepen believers' relationship with the Spirit—an internal objective—promoting a closer connection with God and revealing the unseen workings of the Spirit. While Seah's intent was on church structure and leadership transformation, Lam highlighted the Spirit's otherness, making her methodology straddle the line between a program and a ritual.
3. Lam's method "reduces typical reductionist tendencies found in hermeneutical categories (like tradition, Scripture, reason, and experience)" (202). In contrast, it places a strong emphasis on the "discernment of the Spirit." Such a claim

> lacks quantifiable metrics, allowing for varied interpretations of what the Spirit discloses. In other words, the written text becomes less crucial in gauging the integrity of these spiritual revelations, as it is restricted to its specific context, space, and time. While Lam stresses the importance of "hermeneuticians" conducting text exegesis to help the community understand the author's intent and interpretive history, Lam did not define any boundaries for identifying the Spirit's actions outside the Scripture, which could result in unverifiable interpretations.

This book significantly enhances understanding of the Spirit's identity. Lam's method not only introduces a new discipline for grasping the Spirit but also provides a structured approach to drafting the direction of the church and strengthening community relationships. Lam's thesis publication is a blessing. If the language were simplified, it would be even more beneficial for lay leaders and churchgoers, especially in the Pentecostal and Charismatic communities.

Nelson Estrada, Ph.D.
Asia Biblical Theological Seminary–
Cornerstone University

Steven Félix-Jäger and Yoon Shin, *Renewing Christian Worldview: A Holistic Approach for Spirit-Filled Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023). 224 pp. $49.99 hardcover; $21.99 paperback; $17.99 Kindle. ISBN: 978-1540965912.

In contrast to Protestant theological traditions founded on systematized propositional statements of faith, Pentecostalism was born of embodied and affective modes of knowing that are often non-propositional and difficult to quantify. The experiential underpinnings of Pentecostalism have led to accusations of anti-intellectualism. In an attempt to accommodate anti-intellectual criticism from modern academia, many Pentecostals have opted for a bifurcation of theology and spirituality when constructing theological proposals. *Renewing Christian Worldview: A Holistic Approach for Spirit-Filled Christians,* authored by Félix-Jäger and Yoon Shin, offers a holistic alternative to the demarcation of theology and spirituality in academic discourse, advocating a triperspectival approach that integrates the mind, body, and soul with the transcendentals of beauty, goodness, and truth.

The holistic and triperspectival approach employed is rooted in the Pentecostal narrative, which the authors rightly note has served as the

theological symbol from which the Pentecostal tradition has interpreted its experiences. The methodological choice to ground the pursuit of a renewal worldview in the Pentecost event draws out the embodied (body) and affective (soul) sensibilities embedded in the Pentecost narrative, alongside the propositional-oriented (mind) construction of a worldview utilized within the Protestant tradition. It is the willingness to assign epistemological value to embodied and affective activities that the authors assert differentiates a renewal worldview from existing proposals. In alignment with the tendency of renewal spirituality to give priority to experiential encounter and in resistance to propositionally dominated approaches employed to construct a worldview, the authors opt to reverse the traditional order in which transcendatials of truth, goodness, and beauty are examined. In doing so, the authors privilege the embodied and affective impulses integral to the renewal worldview. A renewal ethos commences with theological aesthetics (the pursuit of beauty), which informs ethical reasoning (goodness) and ultimately dictates the formulation of beliefs (truth) that comprise the building blocks of a worldview.

The book's consistent format is a significant advantage, providing readers with continuity and consistency in its advocacy for a renewal worldview. Each division contains four chapters, and the opening chapter of each frames the transcendental being discussed within a contemporary setting. The following two chapters lay the theoretical groundwork through a broad historiography of the transcendental under investigation. While each of these two chapters can be read as a standalone essay, the historical progression from the ancient to the modern world is easily detected across both. A final constructive chapter, structured around the Pentecost event narrated in Acts 2, integrates the transcendental under exploration with the embodied and affective ethos embedded in the Pentecost narrative. This final chapter serves as a linchpin from which the authors prosecute the case for a renewal worldview.

Part 01, titled "Renewing Beauty," commences a discussion concerning the role of aesthetics in shaping a worldview. The authors argue in the opening chapter that Pentecostalism critiques modern naturalism by affirming an enchanted naturalism in which the corporeal and the incorporeal coexist. Chapters two and three serve to provide the historical underpinning for the concept of an enchanted naturalism. The authors trace the interaction of the spiritual and material realms in chapter two, beginning with ancient Israel and moving through the Greek poets and philosophers to theologians of the Middle Ages, culminating in Enlightenment Era ideology. This provides the reader with historical validity for the concept of enchanted naturalism up to the Enlightenment,

where the authors cite that aesthetics and beauty shifted from theological to anthropological centers as evidence of the turn from transcendence to immanence in modern culture. Chapter three explores aesthetics as a theological category by examining beauty from the three major traditions within the Christian faith. The final chapter of Part 01 articulates the connection between theological aesthetics and Pentecost, highlighting specific and practical ways the embodied and affective sensibilities found in the Pentecost narrative contribute to a deeper knowledge of the beauty of God.

Following the blueprint deployed in Part 01, the subsequent division titled "Renewing Goodness" is concentrated around the transcendental of goodness. Chapter five opens with a division that properly situates ethical reasoning within the public domain by engaging in a discussion of civic engagement. The following two chapters lay the historical parameters for goodness, examining how Christian ethics was shaped by the philosophers of ancient Greece and the Hebraic ethics. Chapter seven discusses the work of three significant contributors to the field of Christian ethics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: Reinhold Niebuhr, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Stanley Hauerwas. The authors assert in the final chapter that the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost provides a triperspectival lens from which to pursue virtues, shifting the telos of goodness from behavioral to formational.

The final division, titled "Renewing Truth," examines epistemology from the perspective of a renewal worldview. Chapter nine proposes pragmatic strategies for speaking truth in an age of misinformation. In doing so, the authors model the epistemological role of experience without succumbing to the charge of relativism. Félix-Jäger and Yoon Shin press the issue in chapter nine, arguing from observations in behavioral economics that cognition is not free from bias. Chapter ten begins with the role Greek Philosophy plays in shaping the scriptural understanding of knowledge and proceeds to rationalism and empiricism, which serve as the two primary epistemological systems of modernity. This lays the foundation for a dialogue with the most significant theologians and scholars over the past two hundred years. Finally, the division concludes with a discussion of the potential of the Pentecost narrative to expand pursuits of truth beyond the cognitive, asserting that affection and embodied activities can create knowledge.

The authors propose that the long-standing historical connection between Christ and confession yields theological proposals that prioritize propositional statements of belief over experiential encounters. In the concluding chapter, Félix-Jäger and Yoon Shin argue that the ministry of the Holy Spirit better captures the affective and embodied modes of

knowing that are essential to Pentecostalism. Here, the authors miss an opportunity to tease out the trinitarian nature of a renewal worldview, which they note is presupposed through the text. Specifically, a more targeted discussion of the ministry of Jesus as the Spirit-Baptizer would have been beneficial for ensuring readers avoided interpreting a renewal worldview as diminishing or as an attempt to replace worldviews built on a Christological framework.

Renewing Christian Worldview: A Holistic Approach for Spirit-Filled Christians is another example of the excellent material being produced by Pentecostal scholarship. The work serves as an excellent model for how the Pentecost narrative can be employed to shape our pursuits of worldview. Doing so provides an alternative to constructing a worldview more congruent with the key building blocks of a Pentecostal ethos. The holistic and triperspectival approach provides a roadmap for constructing a worldview in which affection and embodiment are permitted to be central players, no longer relegated to the periphery, making it worth the investment of time and money for individuals who prioritize the role of the Spirit in their expressions of faith.

Michael Young, D.Min.
Pacific Rim Christian University,
Honolulu, Hawaii

Contributors

Jay Angeles is a dentist with master's degrees in Public Health and Intercultural Studies, and he is currently completing his Th.M./Ph.D. in Orality Studies at the Asia Graduate School of Theology. He serves as the director of the School for Missionary Service of PGCAG World Missions and leads training and education for the Orality Collaborators. Jay is married to Jennie, and they have three children: AJ, Risse, and Luke.

Febriani (M.Div.) is from Bogor, Indonesia. She currently serves in the Kids Ministry at an international church in Jakarta.

Flint Hicks (D.Min. candidate) volunteers with a community that supports the homeless through meals and essential services. Originally from Fiji, he now resides in New Zealand with his family. He has a passion for theological study with hands-on ministry experience in multicultural contexts.

Ryan Caput Hortizuela (D.Min. candidate) is the pastor of Villasis Assembly of God in Pangasinan, Philippines. He is married to Marlene Agnes Niebres, and together they serve on the faculty of Luzon Bible College in Binalonan where they contribute to theological education and the ministerial formation of pastors and leaders in Northern Luzon and beyond.

Joan Carlos Milo is a M.Div. student with a concentration in missions. She was born in Benguet in the Cordillera region and is a full-blooded Ibaloi Igorot with a growing interest in contextual and cross-cultural ministry, particularly in communicating Christ to diverse people groups. She is currently gaining ministry exposure in the Mindanao region among Muslim communities and other indigenous and tribal groups.

Monte Lee Rice (Ph.D.) lives in Singapore with his wife, Jee Fong, where he has been primarily based as a missionary since 1989. He has served as a pastor and theological educator, currently an adjunct faculty at ACTS College, and is the author of *Pentecostal Liturgical Theology: On the Altar, Willed to Pentecost* (Bloomsbury, 2025).

Cecil Mel Robeck (Ph.D.) is an Assemblies of God minister. He has served as an editor and author, a professor and dean at Fuller Theological Seminary, a church historian and ecumenist. He has worked with many of the global ecumenical bodies, including the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, and the Global Christian Forum. He remains very happily married to Patsy, and they have four sons and nine grandchildren.

Khup Sian Sang is a M.A. student focusing on ministry at Asia Pacific Theological Seminary, where he serves as the lead coordinator of the media ministry. He also leads the Baguio Myanmar Christian Fellowship (BMCF) as its lead coordinator. His ministry focuses on disciple-making, media ministry, and outreach among children, families, and marginalized communities, including teaching Myanmar children online.

(Continued from front inside cover)

MANUSCRIPTS AND BOOK REVIEWS submitted for consideration should be sent to *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, P.O. Box 377, Baguio City 2600, Philippines (fax: 63-74 442-6378; E-mail: apts.press@apts.edu). Manuscripts and book reviews should be typed double-spaced. Manuscripts should conform in style to the current edition of Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations.* An additional style guide will be sent upon request. The *Journal* encourages contributors to submit an electronic copy prepared through a popular word processor mailed in a Windows-compatible disk or sent as an email attachment.

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