

Sects without tradition

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Scholars of contemporary Christianity rightly stress the enormous worldwide upsurge of Pentecostalism. In numerical terms at least, it represents the greatest success story in modern religion. A new movement just a century ago, Pentecostalism today claims hundreds of millions of adherents.

Much of that story involves demographic change. As populations have swelled in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, many millions have been uprooted from traditional villages.

Most have moved to new megacities in their own countries, but other former rural dwellers have journeyed to cities in the Global North. In the challenging situations they face in their new homes, migrants naturally gravitate to those religious groups that offer them the means of survival. They find there opportunities for fellowship and community, but also the basic necessities of welfare, education, and health that the state cannot provide. Commonly, it is the Pentecostal and charismatic churches that are best organized to supply these needs, and in turn they benefit most from the repeated infusions of the uprooted.

Social change means religious transformation. People abandon the old sacred landscapes they knew in their rural homes, with all their saints and shrines, and a sacred year marked by religious feasts and fasts. In the cities, they adopt a globalized form of modern faith, characterized by sophisticated modern media and advertising, including the most contemporary social media. They abandon their old languages and dialects, so that pastors hold their revival crusades in the global languages of modernity—English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese.

But whatever new believers have lost through cultural change, they feel that they have gained much. However poor in material things, they know in their hearts that they are following a pristine form of apostolic faith.

So far, that story is familiar enough and has been retold by many scholars. What is surprising, though, is how very closely that Christian narrative echoes trends in modern Islam. I have for years used the work of distinguished French scholar Olivier Roy as a source for understanding globalized Islam and resurgent fundamentalism, but only recently have I come to appreciate how much it illuminates the Christian story.

In books like *Holy Ignorance*, Roy relates global religious change to such megatrends as mass migration, urbanization, and modernization. He stresses how deeply integrated Islam was in traditional societies like Morocco or Pakistan, where faith was tied to particular communities and clan structures, to shrines, saints, and sacred landscapes, and to a sacred calendar. All were severed with the migration to the West, creating an Islam that was suddenly and painfully deterritorialized.

While early immigrants kept their personal memories alive, none of these traditions was available to younger generations born in Europe. Like their Christian counterparts, they lost the moorings of sacred time and place. As Roy remarks, “The religion of their parents is linked to a culture that is no longer theirs.” (How thoroughly that phrase applies to Christian Pentecostals!) Yet while losing traditional culture and faith, they find little appeal in the materialist values offered by their new host countries. Muslims, like Christians, face an age-old dilemma: How can they sing the Lord’s song in a strange country?

In the Muslim case, the young respond by rejecting both the lost traditional culture and the new Western alternative. They turn instead to the apparent certainties of a universalized or globalized Islam, which in practice offers the sternest and most

demanding standards of the Wahhabis or Salafists. In return, believers receive a vision of themselves as the heroes of a glorious historical narrative in which faith defeats the temporary and illusory triumph of disbelief and paganism.

Although presented as pure and exclusive Islamic truth, these ideologies are in fact quite recent concoctions, which would have made little sense to most Muslims only a century or so ago. This seemingly ancient version of faith is a quintessentially post-modern response to social dislocation and destabilization, and it is presented through strictly modern electronic media.

Other cross-religious parallels abound. Around the world, Islamist mosques attract fervent loyalty by their excellent range of social and medical services, which literally make a life-and-death difference for the urban poor. Hamas and Hezbollah both operate superb social ministries.

I am not at all suggesting parallels between the fanaticism and violence of the radical Islamist fringe and the peaceful and socially constructive work of the Pentecostals. But however different such movements may seem, they have emerged in response to very similar social circumstances. Hard as it might be to believe sometimes, Christians and Muslims do in fact share the same planet.