

Paul Alexander, *Signs and Wonders: Why Pentecostalism Is the World's Fastest Growing Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009). xiv + 175 pp., \$24.95, cloth.

With the publication of Philip Jenkins' academic blockbuster *The Next Christendom* (2002), Pentecostalism became the undisputed "Next Big Thing" in the study of Christianity. Jenkins' work was perceptive and synthetic, standing atop an ever-growing tower of scholarly research into the persistence of global Christianity in the wake of the moribund "secularization thesis." Most members of this society were probably not surprised by Jenkins' conclusion that global Pentecostalism (and its genealogical relations) represents the majority future of Christianity. The Pentecostal future has been taken as a fact for decades by those with "eyes to see." Jenkins' book, arriving as it did among the urgency of post-9/11 debates about religion and America's global position, simply served to make the point loudly and clearly to the average *New York Times* reader.

But once awakened, surprised and alarmed, to the widespread beliefs and practices of Pentecostalism, the average *New York Times* reader still did not know *why* this movement was growing at such a rate all over the world. This is the question Paul Alexander attempts to answer in his recent book, *Signs and Wonders: Why Pentecostalism is the World's Fastest Growing Faith*. Complete with larger than average print, a winsome, anecdotal writing style, and the rare imprimatur of a glowing foreword from Martin Marty, Alexander takes on the role of a self-disclosing tour guide who wants to show the curious reader, from a comfortable distance, what the appeal of Pentecostalism is.

This distance does not mean that Alexander is cold to Pentecostalism. On the contrary, he challenges his reader to maintain a generous, open mind, with such comments as "For who knows, maybe miracles really do happen" (18), or "Tongues issue from the depths of the human experience and open up new ways of living, being and doing" (58). For Alexander, this tour is personal. One of the great merits of the book is that he is open about his own experiences with phenomena associated with Pentecostalism.

Though he has had many experiences that he names "Pentecostal," however, Alexander is ambivalent about the application of the category "Pentecostal" to himself. He writes, "I went from being an arrogant Pentecostal to an embarrassed and shame-ridden Pentecostal to a non-Pentecostal to an anti-Pentecostal — and now I'm just trying to be a faithful follower of Jesus who also prays in tongues sometimes" (98). This categorical evasion is illustrative of the strategy Alexander employs throughout the book. He plays on a distinction between historical Pentecostalism and Pentecostal experiences. Alexander spends no time developing either a historical or a theological definition of Pentecostalism; rather, he offers a description of Pentecostalism that is entirely rooted in the embrace of particular phenomena. Each of his eight chapters (miracles, music, tongues, prosperity, testimony, angels and demons, prophetic experience, and emotional hope) deals with the particular appeal of a certain type of experience that Alexander classes as typically Pentecostal. Thus, in his hands, the category "Pentecostal" has little necessarily to do with particular history, theology, or culture, and far more to do with a set of spiritual experiences typically associated with historic Pentecostalism but which, through "mere" participation, can leave Pentecostal fingerprints on a wide variety of faith traditions.

As such, the best and most explanatory parts of the book are his stories about Pentecostal experience. The pages are redolent with real-life stories of miracles, demons, prophecy, and healing. Alexander claims that his interest is not in proving their reliability but rather in showing their attraction, that is, the attraction of having a life full of practical hope for God's intervention in the face of struggle. Such stories are, he believes, ultimately why Pentecostalism is exploding, because they are, in some significant way, what Pentecostalism *is*. Alexander rehearses the contested chestnut that modernity (and, by extension, most Evangelicalism) has advanced a practically disenchanting worldview that forecloses on such experiences. But, according to his sociological sources, disenchantment fits with neither a biblical outlook nor the outlook of an average Global Southerner nor even with that of the average American. Thus Pentecostal practices are, in his view, *already* resonant with the outlook of most people in the world, though they run counter to the worldview of those Alexander calls "American Evangelicals," bound as they are by modernity (113-14).

My response to this approach is mixed. I have little doubt that Alexander would admit that the twentieth-century Pentecostal expression of these phenomena *can* be thoroughly historicized, located in a tradition that reinforces their validity through theologies and practices. I have even less doubt that the explosive growth of historic Pentecostalism has significantly contributed to the fact that the phenomena Alexander describes have become commonplace in a wide variety of "non-Pentecostal" denominational traditions, such as his story of the shy Baptist who speaks in tongues. But I do question the validity of explaining Pentecostalism simply by its characteristically emphasized experiences, particularly given that those experiences have been variously shared by Christians throughout the history of the church, even "American Evangelicals." It seems that there is a far more complicated story to be told than Alexander's conclusion that Pentecostalism has grown because it offers emotional freedom, dynamic spiritual experiences, and equality before a provider God. These are among the stated offerings of a wide variety of religious communities, but for some reason, Pentecostalism has been *particularly* apt to grow. As to why that is, Alexander does not offer a compelling answer. He cites a Pentecostal pastor who said that "people are tired of dry religion. They are looking for a relationship" (133). This could have been said by any Evangelical and has little explanatory power. One wants deeper explorations of the dynamics of race, class, nationalism, the rising stock of the therapeutic, Western primacy in globalizing culture, the spiritual cosmologies of the Global South, and so on. Perhaps those are the cultural concerns of a historian, and perhaps this is not the book that Alexander has set out to write. Nonetheless, they are issues crucial to answering adequately the question posed by his title.

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