

## Book Review

– *Transmitting the Spirit: Religious Conversion, Media and Urban Violence in Brazil*, by Martijn Oosterbaan, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017

Pentecostalism, one of the world's most rapidly expanding religious-cultural forms, continues to grow at a stunning rate in Brazil. The 2010 Brazilian census placed the number of self-identified Pentecostals at 13% of the population, up from 6% twenty years earlier.<sup>1</sup> Whether one finds such numbers alarming or exhilarating, most observers will agree that it is hard to understand current Brazilian society (and politics) without grappling with the increased presence of Pentecostals in every corner of Brazilian culture (see, for instance, Lacerda 2017). Indeed, the current crises in Brazil have arguably once again pushed to the fore the question that has engaged scholars for the last half century: what explains the continuously growing popularity in Brazil of Pentecostal religious ideas and practices?

Over the years, the scholarship that has tried to answer this question has tended to look at some combination of the following factors: Pentecostalism as refuge from and survival amid violence and adversity; as a source of individual and collective empowerment and self-esteem; as enabler of the attitudes required by neoliberalism. With his book *Transmitting the Spirit* anthropologist Martijn Oosterbaan offers a new addition to these interpretations. Oosterbaan seeks to understand how Pentecostalism has drawn at least some of its fuel over the past decades from its growing reliance on the communications media of radio, television and print. To understand the growth in the number of Pentecostals, as well as the content and tenor of their views of self and society, Oosterbaan argues, we need to understand that Pentecostalism interacts in a kind of continuous feedback loop with Brazilian print and electronic media.

Oosterbaan makes a strong case. In particular, I am persuaded that he is right to argue that specific media formats trigger and intensify 'specific sensory perceptions that signal and authenticate divine presence' (p. 213). He shows, for example, that listening to religious music and talk shows on the radio resembles and taps into the experience of, and longing for, 'intimacy' (pp. 155-156), as well as rendering real and immediate the theological tenets of 'hearing

divine voices', including the voice of the Holy Spirit (pp. 158-169). He further demonstrates the strong parallels between the structure of Pentecostals' Manichean worldview and the format of both secular and non-secular print media reports on violence. And he convincingly analyzes the power of television to trigger visceral feelings of temptation that must be overcome, and to provide opportunities for a kind of moralistic voyeurism (p. 186). There can be no question that such experiences help us understand the continuing draw and character of Pentecostalism in Brazil.

While the overall argument is convincing, Oosterbaan's analysis also provokes new questions that remain for future research. Though he focuses on media, I imagine that Oosterbaan would not deny that a key source of Pentecostalism's growth and content continues to reside in, as it were, less physically remote and more face-to-face experiences – such as close interactions with co-congregants within small congregations, having hands laid on one's body and being healed, hearing the up-close-and -personal testimonies of family and friends at the front of churches, having music-triggered conversions within church, and so forth. Oosterbaan's argument that mediatized offerings of Pentecostal ideas are 'homologous' to these more intimate, visceral experiences is important, but leaves unexplored the differences, and relations, between the more and less 'mediated'. Do media, for example, more often draw people into a first, preliminary exposure, thereafter needing to be sustained by more direct, 'unmediated' experiences? What is the relative weight of more and less 'mediated' experiences in the strengthening and perpetuation of Pentecostal convictions and identities? Is Pentecostalism starting to differentiate into branches that are more and less dependent on the kinds of social relations enacted and extended by one or the other kind of experience (see, for example, Moreira 2018)? These are hard and complex questions, which would not be reasonable to expect Oosterbaan to have answered in this book. Indeed, it is a testament to the strength of his work that as I was reading I kept wondering about them.

There are other questions raised by Oosterbaan's work that would reward further study. It has long been pointed out that Pentecostal theology tends toward extremist, dualistic and apocalyptic thinking (Ribeiro 2017). While it is useful to point out that this worldview is reinforced by the tendency of the media to paint black-and-white portraits of society, it is also important to ask to what extent the influence goes the other way: how does Pentecostal dualism shape the way that editors, journalists and graphic designers represent Brazilian society? In addition, future research clearly needs to delve more deeply into a medium that had not entirely taken off during the period of Oosterbaan's fieldwork: digital social media. While some of the processes identified by Oosterbaan for electroacoustic media may apply to digital, I imagine that in

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many interesting ways the latter has unleashed entirely new experiential forces (see, for example, Spyer 2017). While the theories Oosterbaan invokes to help us understand different Pentecostal uses of 20<sup>th</sup> century technologies are helpful, I kept wondering to what extent they will continue to make sense in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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### Notes

1. See: 'Brazil's Changing Religious Landscape', 18 July 2013, Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/07/18/brazils-changing-religious-landscape/>

### References

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