

Cosmologies in Collision: Pentecostal Conversion and Christian Cults in Asmara

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Abstract: This article aims to contribute to a better understanding of the popularity of Pentecostalism and the formation of religious identity in an Eritrean city. Examining the penetration of Pentecostal Protestantism into longstanding Christian churches in Asmara during a time of rapid socioeconomic change in Eritrea, it looks at how Pentecostalism discontinues its relation with the past, conceptualizes the present, and generates an autonomous image of itself in the highly competitive religious marketplace of an Eritrean urban space. The article discusses how and why this movement increasingly favors Bible reading and networks of religious meetings as the principal mediums of transmission of its teachings and the expansion of its denomination, breaking deliberately from traditional Christian churches and using local forces and resources.

Résumé: Cet article a pour objectif de contribuer à une meilleure compréhension de la popularité de l'église de pentecôte et de la formation d'une identité religieuse dans une ville Érythréenne. En examinant la pénétration du protestantisme de pentecôte dans les églises chrétiennes bien établies in Asmara pendant une période de changement socio-économique rapide en Erythrée, il envisage la manière dont l'église de la pentecôte rompt ses liens avec le passé, conceptualise le présent, et génère une image autonome d'elle-même sur le marché religieux hautement compétitif dans un espace urbain Érythréen. L'article aborde les questions du comment et du pourquoi ce mouvement favorise de plus en plus la lecture de la bible et les réseaux de rassemblements religieux comme moyens principaux de transmission de ses enseignements et de l'expansion de sa réputation, se détachant délibérément des églises chrétiennes traditionnelles et utilisant des pouvoirs et ressources locaux.

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Introduction

Pentecostal Protestantism in Asmara, as elsewhere, is often known as the “born-again” (*dagam zatāwāldā/t*) movement.¹ For an individual, being “born again” is a process of religious conversion that involves a drifting away from, and eventual repudiation of, past activities and associations and their replacement with the beliefs, practices, and personal relationships nurtured by the movement. Pentecostalism stresses human wickedness and the fallen nature of the world (Anderson 1979:43). It emphasizes personal morality and also modernity by marginalizing past Christian religious traditions and distracting attention from the contradictory lives of so many youths and adults (Hackett 1993:385). For some individuals, Pentecostalist doctrines have engendered social mobility (Gifford 1994:243). For others, they have provided a code of conduct that guards them from falling into poverty and despair (Van Dijk 1992:168). While Pentecostalism’s emphasis on the sacred scripture and transcendent experience places it in opposition to certain modern values, its repudiation of traditional hierarchies and sources of authority also positions it squarely in the modern world (Meyer 1995:265). Indeed, whereas the Catholic Church, the Protestant mission churches, and the Orthodox Tāwahdo church all accommodate long-standing local traditions, Pentecostalists explicitly reject this cultural valuation and stress instead the need to break away from past practices of community, family, and friends (Marshall 1991:29). During a period of socio-cultural transition, therefore, Pentecostalists have been able to create a rift between the traditional and the modern through a discourse of missionization and constant renewal in the uncertain present (Boon 1996:131).²

In some of the recent anthropological literature on conversion in Africa, many scholars focus on the processes of representation (Horton 1971:88–89; Aguilar 1995:533), while others (for example, Gifford 1987, Marshall 1993, Van Dijk 1993, Meyer 1995, Maxwell 1997) discuss how certain communities of faith arise as a result of socioeconomic transformation and in response to modern processes of state formation (see also Ranger 1993:80; Toulis 1997:51; Donham 1999:123). Since socioeconomic conditions in Africa in general and in Eritrea in particular have been changing in the last few decades, so too has religious language changed in order to accommodate and facilitate new processes of identity formation (Clifford 1994:306–8; Keane 1997:49). The issue, then, is the ways in which forms and concepts of religious conversion address the predicaments of socioeconomic change, and how they offer the individual the means and the techniques to create a personal identity that fits the condition of an urban environment (Hackett 1993:388).

The linkage between Pentecostal conversion and identity formation seems to have a great appeal for many young Eritreans who once belonged to traditional Christian denominations and have come to Asmara from different regions of the country aspiring to upward mobility in the city. This

relation between identity formation and religious conversion is bound up with internal and external sources of self-representation and with the social and economic transformations of the past three decades. This article discusses the processes by which religious conversion contributes to identity formation in Asmara in particular and in the larger Eritrean society in general, and examines how present-day Eritrean Pentecostalism creates relations across social, cultural, and religious boundaries. A brief examination of the origin of the Pentecostalist movement and its role in the formation of individual and collective identity within the context of socioeconomic transformation in Asmara helps explain its present influence and institutional complexity.

Pentecostalism and Proselytizing

I became aware of the Pentecostalists (or *pānté*, or *mānfāsawāyan*, as they are popularly known) and their movement through an active and respected female member who converted from evangelical Protestantism to Pentecostalism in the late 1970s. After my first encounter with Pentecostalism, I had ample opportunity to attend Pentecostalist meetings and to talk to various members of this particular denomination from the 1990s to the present and to browse through Pentecostalist preachings in tapes, videos, and printouts circulating throughout Asmara. The earliest Pentecostal church grew out of missions that have operated in Eritrea since the second half of the nineteenth century (Aren 1978:168–84, 309–70; Eide 2000:21) and others that developed during the numerous waves of Protestant activity, including those of the Evangelicals, Lutherans, Seventh Day Adventists, and the Faith Mission (Hollenweger 1972:31). As Donham (1999:131) has shown for Ethiopia, many Eritreans think that it is the Protestant churches' emphasis on personal salvation, modernity, and strict Bible-oriented morality that laid the foundations for Pentecostalism in Asmara. Its most recent origin in Eritrea, however, goes back to the *Dārg* times in the late 1970s and early 1980s when Ethiopian Pentecostal pastors came to Asmara in order to preach and proselytize among Eritreans. In time, Eritrean converts themselves were able to spread the movement in Asmara and in other towns and cities in Eritrea.

In the 1970s, the movement mushroomed despite harsh measures on the part of the Ethiopian government aimed at closing its churches. In the 1980s it continued to penetrate urban and suburban Asmara and in the process expanded its popular base. In many ways the Pentecostalist movement offered answers to the predicament of Eritreans living in these Asmara communities who were confronted with political upheaval and socioeconomic constraints. It boldly attacked the Ethiopian state and its institutionalized injustice by providing the spiritual basis for political opposition that other religions did not. More important, Pentecostalists of those

years presented a challenge to the state because they never had a fixed or defined sense of place. Whenever the Ethiopian government closed down their churches or waged war against them in the national press, they worked around such constraints through delocalized forms of community networks and private prayer meetings extending beyond a neighborhood church or specific physical site. Hence the Ethiopian government had a difficult time monitoring their activities. This in turn triggered more intolerance of the Pentecostals and led to the incarceration of many of its leaders and lay members, who were suspected of breeding dissent and spreading discontent within the larger Eritrean society.

The population of Eritrea is essentially rural, with about 80 percent of the people living in the countryside. The urban population is characterized by rapid growth, partly caused by returning refugees and deportees from neighboring countries, and partly due to high rural-urban migration. Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, is a multiethnic city with nine different ethnic groups speaking nine different languages and professing two major religions, namely Christianity and Islam. According to municipal records of the city and data from the National Statistics and Evaluation Office, Asmara, including the outskirts of Addi Abéto, Bét Mākha'e, Addi Sogdo, Qušāt, Qāhawta, Ziban Sinqāy, and Mihram Ćira, has an estimated population of about 410,000, out of which about a quarter of a million are Christians. About 75 percent of this Christian population belongs to the Orthodox Tāwahdo Church, while 15 percent is Catholic and the rest is Protestant.

In the early years of independence, Pentecostals evangelized and proselytized Asmara residents by the hundreds, and by the middle years of the first decade the movement was flourishing, claiming some eight thousand to ten thousand committed members in Asmara alone.³ By the late 1990s it had created a form of community that spoke to the anxiety and uncertainty marking social relations in Asmara during the difficult times of the deportation from Ethiopia of thousands of Ethiopians of Eritrean origin, many of whom were Pentecostals themselves, and the subsequent Eritrean-Ethiopian border war. Its atmosphere of religious tolerance and provision of spiritual and material networks extending beyond ethnic and class considerations gave young Eritreans in Asmara a certain amount of freedom from such pressures. Today there are around twelve thousand active participants, another two to three thousand Sunday service worshippers, and some two thousand Otābā (Orthodox Tāwahdo Bétākər-əstiyan) church members who take part in Pentecostal services occasionally. At present the Pentecostal church in Eritrea consists of some six different branches operating in different zones of the city: Mulu'ə Wāngél, Qalā Həywāt, Māsārātā Kərəstos, Rhéma, Charisma, and Halléluya. The last three have been established the most recently. All of these branches have increased their membership dramatically by emphasizing radical religious cleansing, by distancing themselves from Muslims and the traditional

Christian churches, and by preaching conversion to so-called true Christianity.

In Eritrea, Pentecostalism is predominantly an urban revivalist movement that belongs to the “non-recognized religions” (Bruce 1990:48) and focuses on proselytizing, healing, and the centrality of the Holy Spirit (*mānfās qəddus*) in all church affairs. Although the term *charismatic* tends to describe renewal (*tāhaddaso*) movements within the Orthodox Tāwahdo and Catholic churches, it is gaining wider currency as a description of Pentecostal religious activity as well, at least within the branch church known as Charisma. Although the traditional Christian churches are mostly hostile to the Pentecostalists, many observers believe that the latter’s lively, convivial, fraternal, spirit-filled, and empowering worship has actually revitalized and to some extent revolutionized Christianity in Asmara. As Van Dijk (1992:152) shows in his study of this church in Malawi, Pentecostalism fosters and promotes a religious identity in adherents and nonadherents alike by cultivating an interest in Christian revivalism and fundamentalism more generally.

Many look to the Pentecostal movement for protection from malevolent spirits and in search of individual salvation. Others join in order to find help with problems related to health, money, marriage, or loneliness and to become involved in Pentecostal congregational activities. How extensive, then, is the Pentecostal movement in Asmara? I would argue that there is no Christian church in this city that has not been affected by or lost members to these Pentecostal revivalist trends of the last few decades. This is most evident in the yearly increase in the rate of Pentecostal marriages and various Tāwahdo, Catholic, and Wāngélawit Bétākərəstīyan parental reports noting defections to Pentecostalism of family members. This religious activity is particularly a threat to the long-established Christian churches because it takes place in the context of a conscious break with traditional religion. The movement—which like most sects started as a collection of young zealots rebelling against what they perceived to be spiritually dead religious establishments—has thus not only grown into an active and vibrant urban denomination attractive to residents of Asmara, but also is gradually gaining ground in various rapidly growing towns in Eritrea by linking the different Pentecostal communities and by promoting an extensive exchange of ideas and flow of persons and materials.⁴

Over the years, then, the increase in membership in the Pentecostal church in Asmara has been phenomenal, due principally to the youthful leadership and membership and to its strong appeal to members of all classes, particularly young, unmarried, educated men and women experiencing a gap between their dreams and actual future possibilities. Hence Pentecostalism in this city exerts a magnetic attraction to individuals who seek social and economic mobility and wish to be independent and successful.⁵ Its appeal to the young, at least in Asmara, was and still is largely based on its messages of self-empowerment and personal success and on

the urban network of professional contacts and sources of financial assistance. It is in these socioeconomic contexts that some Eritrean Christian traditionalists have pointed fingers at the money-making activities of the movement and the conspicuous salvation and consumption displayed by some of its more flamboyant leaders.

Even if Pentecostalism's gospel of prosperity is an obvious draw in hard times, the benefits of the organizational skills it imparts, the individualistic orientation of the movement, and the group networks it offers are powerful tools for conversion. Pentecostalism presents itself in particular as an alternative to the hierarchical divisions and moral strictures of the Eritrean traditional Christian churches. In the context of frustration over the socioeconomic trajectory of the country, it has attracted a large number of youth members disillusioned by the traditional religious beliefs of their elders and family members (see the case studies of Blumhofer [1993:39] and Kaplan [2003:794]). Indeed, as Horton (1971:91), Comaroff (1985:103), and Waller (1999:97) have observed, religious movements have always provided outlets for personal expression and social action. Hence the common Pentecostal refrain in Asmara, "only God can save us" (Horton 1975a:228). The Pentecostal church has become successful by providing space and a place to express these tensions and by responding to the everyday realities of the city.

The wave of conversions to Pentecostalism and its rejection of established Christian traditions in Eritrea in general, and in Asmara in particular, have brought about a number of cultural transformations in the country. Certainly among Pentecostalists the old social connections have been severed in favor of the new bonds of the "brother or sister in Christ" (*bə Goyta hawwəna* or *haftəna*). Conversion to Pentecostalism in Asmara has meant the creation of new social ties and identities among people who may have no shared pasts but who define themselves in this way across age groups, ethnic groups, and social class.⁶ Involving "personal salvation and social rebirth" (Marshall 1993:215), the movement begins with the remaking of the individual and later progresses to the family.⁷ Once born again, the Pentecostalist convert is brought into a "community of believers or the saved" (*amānti*), where he or she strives to maintain a state of inner purity necessary to receive sustenance from the Holy Spirit through prayer and baptism. The born-again experience involves displacing the relationship one had with the world, the former self, and the person of flesh, that is, with a fundamentally immoral world at odds with the will of God. The identification of "flesh" with "world" is constituted not by the nature of the world itself, but by the devil (*sāyṭan*), who is in control of this world. The change from being "of the flesh" to being "of the spirit" is the meaning of the "born-again" experience. The newly proselytized person is captured and remade in two ways: first, through continuous involvement in Bible reading and personal contacts with other Pentecostalists; and second through focus on the "Word of God" (*qal amlak*), participation in born-again Christian activities, and

abstinence from popular traditional rituals (which are seen as sources of idol worship or occult practices).

In several ways, this process of indoctrination and resocialization makes born-again persons more industrious and more socially mobile than many of their “unsaved” (*nə Goyta* or *nə Yāsus zāytāqābālu*) friends, neighbors, or kin. A good Asmara Pentecostalist knows the Bible well and can engage in discourse on key Pentecostalist teachings such as prayer, healing, and spiritual warfare. The newly proselytized person is immediately initiated into a fellowship group and progresses from Christian scriptural readings to Bible schooling and proselytizing to nonconverts. Their substantial religious knowledge gives them moral authority as well as power and privilege as enculturators. Many Asmara Pentecostalists thus attest that Bible reading and group networking are weapons for Christ’s army (*sārawitā kərastos*) in the battle against the devil, useful for their own expansion but also part of a calculated attempt to transform and Christianize popular Eritrean culture so that it is safe for consumption by born-again Christians.

Although the nature of Asmara Pentecostal public space is increasingly defined by Bible reading and group networking on a mass scale, Pentecostal evangelism in Asmara is also navigated increasingly through audio and videotapes as well as printed tracts. Crusader songs and revivalist inspirational literature entice the needy, promising miracles, healing, and financial success. This means that Asmara Pentecostalist pastors or preachers do not just preach in prayer houses and tents or heal the masses at crusades; they also engage in human encounters both privately and in public places such as markets, shops, taxicabs, offices, and schools. The media, both print and electronic, and usually in the Təgrāñña language, play a central role in this new wave of Pentecostal proselytization or evangelization, in the consolidation of the congregation, and in the creation of a distinct group of the born-again who are different from all others. Pentecostal sermons and gospel music tapes are in heavy demand among the young and are two of the most important means by which the Pentecostal movement in Asmara constructs its identity and invades the territory of traditional Christian denominations.⁸ Pentecostal gospel singers have become celebrities, with their songs appealing to a wider Christian audience than that delimited by the Pentecostal movement itself.⁹ Lyrics of romantic love have been displaced by those of divine love (*mānfāsawi* or *mālākkotawi fəqri*) and new life (*haddəs həywāt*). These amplified and persuasive evangelist messages and images are consumed by many in the privacy of their homes in the form of gospel preachings recorded in Təgrāñña or clandestine Amharic audio and videocassettes. As these are shared among friends and family members and circulated among the Pentecostal community, printed, audio, and video materials have become virtually an extension of the Pentecostal movement.¹⁰ This type of praxis is strengthening the Pentecostalist religious landscape, cultivating a different and wider audience, and creating more and more boundaries between the Pentecostalists and the tra-

ditional Eritrean Christian churches.

In Pentecostal religious services, liturgical form and congregational life are organized along more or less the same patterns. This is evident in the weekly and biweekly Bible studies and Thursday congregational meetings. The former are smaller and have regular participants, while the latter attract a larger audience. Some meetings take place in public venues (such as one meeting I attended in the former Finland Mission villa in Gāza Banda Təlayān), while others take place in private residences whose walls typically are embellished with framed biblical quotations. Both types of meetings are from one to two hours long and consist of prayer and conversation devoted to applying theological concepts from the Bible to everyday events. In the smaller sessions, the leader first reads the biblical lesson with little interruption. Members then take turns reading verses from a particular biblical text with attention to detail and interpretation. Then there is discussion, followed by a short prayer spoken by each person. The remaining time is devoted to questions and general comments, which typically lead to conversation only partially related to the lesson. The Thursday meetings have a different dynamic. In these sessions a number of pastors cover diverse religious topics and participants tell their personal stories. Some pastors are more vocal than others, and some remain silent. But all of them have received their Christian education in local community congregations, rather than from divinity schools or seminaries.

Pentecostal discourse on satanic and demonic manifestations, or specifically an exorcist practice called deliverance (*männagaf*), takes place either in weekly prayer meetings or during public crusades or conferences.¹¹ According to many Asmara Pentecostals, spirits roam about in families and seek to bring all members under their control. Thus there is the need to continuously confront the devil by means of public prayer sessions and deliverance meetings. In these meetings, the pastor exorcist calls upon all converts and nonconverts with physical, mental, or spiritual problems to step forward. The pastor then lays his hand on the forehead of the troubled person as a representative of Christ working on earth to liberate individuals from evil spirits. Through observation I learned that a person who is calm under the exorcist's hand is considered to be filled with God's spirit, whereas a person who moves or shakes is considered to be manifesting the conflict between evil spirits and the power of the Holy Spirit appearing through the preacher's mediation. The person may fall down in ecstasy or in a frenzy, or act aggressively toward the preacher, whose only response is a smile or even laughter, thereby making it clear to the audience that men of God have a power superior to evil entities.¹²

Deliverance is a long-term process; there is no short cut to spiritual wholeness or cleanliness (Kwami 1993:11; Csordas 1994:69). Many Pentecostals in Asmara believe that deliverance is not an immediate outcome of being born again or of renouncing demonic entities during conversion, but rather a matter of continuous prayer and struggle in the life of the con-

vert. Even veteran born-again search for the possible presence of evil in their souls and believe that such forces may continue to haunt even those who have undergone profound spiritual transformation. Obedience to the Holy Spirit, and attendance at Christian fellowship meetings are crucial, because renouncement of evil forces requires time, effort, faith, and perseverance (Csordas 1992:16). Converts may seize the chance to come forward for public deliverance during an assembly, or they may be inspired to do so by a pastor's sermonic intensity. At the former Finland Mission villa in Gāza Banda Ṭəḷəyan I heard the well-known pastor Habtā deliver a sermon to a standing crowd of some seven hundred members. Reciting the phrases *məharāt bə Yāsus səm, bə Goyta səm, bə Yāsus dām* (deliverance in the name of Jesus . . . , blood of Jesus . . .), he mesmerized the converts with simple touches to their foreheads. Some of the delivered returned quietly to their seats. Others struggled with him, manifesting, or so the members believed, the unwillingness of the evil spirits to leave their bodies. Still others lay on the floor overwhelmed by the power of deliverance and of the experience. Some women wept; others looked after children who had been brought for deliverance from evil spirits scourging households and neighborhoods.

In sum, prospective converts in Asmara—including those who are unhappy, ill, or possessed—turn to pastors and flock to fellow Pentecostals for spiritual support, protection, and personal attention on a daily basis. In extended prayer meetings, they engage with Pentecostal leaders and their assistants in lengthy healing and deliverance meetings devoted to casting out the evil forces and invoking the superior power of the Holy Spirit.¹³ Those who become born again, and cured, express their gratitude in phrases such as “praise the Lord” (*Goyta yəmmāsgān*) or “blessed be the Lord” (*Goyta yəbbarāḳ*). The friends and relatives of those whose well-being remains disturbed are prompted to appeal to the heavenly powers more rigorously and continue to search for solutions through prayer and the rituals of deliverance.

Cosmologies in Collision

Pentecostalism considers the immediate and distant past as the source of all personal disturbance. Remembrance is the process that reveals the occult origins of present problems (Werbner 1989:48), and individuals seeking deliverance from spiritual or bodily problems are thus expected to engage in thorough soul-searching and introspection regarding possible involvement in past or present evil. Sinful attitudes and wrongdoings and participation in traditional rituals of all sorts (even, for example, weddings and funerals) are all signs of demonic presence, cultic influences, or family covenants with satanic forces that must be cast out through prayer (Peel 1974:128; Boon 1996:134). Thus in Eritrea, even the most well-established

traditional Christian churches have become subject to Pentecostal challenge and contestation. Well-organized Pentecostal prayer-group networks are not only placing increased emphasis on an evangelical and scripture-based Christianity, but, in a major drift from traditional Christian practices, they have also shifted attention from the text of the Bible alone to the active processes through which biblical meanings are engaged, interpreted, and applied. In other words, they give the Bible what Bowen (1992:495) calls a “social life.” In fact, what distinguishes the Pentecostalist movement in Asmara is not its denominational label, but rather its commitment to the Word of God (*qal amlak*). This gospel-centered religious orientation leads to the creation of a new moral universe and separates those who subscribe to the born-again worldview from those who do not. Such exclusion, Anderson (1979:113) argues, leads to the demonization of the unsaved Christians, Muslims, and pagans.¹⁴

There is also a particular urgency to Pentecostalist evangelism, which calls upon one and all to be agents of God’s work in these “end times” (Freston 1995:16). In such a religious environment, charismatic figures rise up to provide the necessary leadership and mediation of power (Gifford 1994:250; Maxwell 1997:23). Finding their authority in their ability to publicize and disseminate powerful spiritual messages efficiently and attractively, manifesting powers of organization heretofore unknown to the long-standing Christian denominations, and assembling record-breaking crowds at their well-planned revivals, these preachers represent a serious challenge to the other Eritrean Christian churches, which are criticized fiercely for compromising true Christianity.¹⁵ As Marshall has shown for Nigeria (1991:31), Pentecostalism’s strong rejection of all forms of traditional cultural and religious practices not only expresses individual agency, but also reinforces its resolutely modern character. In Asmara, the agency is chiefly local, the goals and connections are regional and national, and the source is perceived as nothing short of the cosmic and transcendental.

Unlike the traditional Christian churches in Eritrea, which are peopled by and large by relatively disadvantaged social groups, the Pentecostal movement in Asmara typically is made up of young educated men and women, secondary school students and teachers, university students and professors, and health-care professionals. At the Pentecostal crusades and conferences I attended, about 80 percent of the participants were in the 17 to 35 age bracket, and the large majority of them had secondary school or postsecondary education. Pentecostalist Eritreans believe that the gospel of prosperity offers a doctrine of morally controlled materialism, in which personal wealth and success are evidence of God’s blessing on those who lead a “true life in Christ” (Van Dijk 1993:53; George 1994:19). In Asmara, prayer fellowships provide not only a sense of belonging and common purpose, but also material benefits such as employment opportunities and the exchange of goods and services. In place of the authoritarian hierarchy and bureaucracy of the traditional Christian churches, the Pentecostal

movement offers its powerful messages of renewal, change, and salvation (*dahamāt*) by means of a loose and relaxed ritual structure that has wide-spread appeal.

Pentecostals challenge the traditionalist Christians' perception of evil and the way to act against evil spirits, while Orthodox Tāwahdo Christians, Catholics, and the various Protestant churches (Lutherans, Evangelicals, Seventh Day Adventists, as well as Faith Mission followers) refuse to accommodate or absorb Pentecostal cosmological views and reject the focus on occult forces. Pentecostals encourage members to place themselves in God's hands in order to receive healing or spiritual power. Shouting the phrase *bə Yāsus səm* (in the name of Jesus), for example, is considered an effective deterrent against the devil. Unlike other Christians of Eritrea whose geographical focal point is mostly Jerusalem, Pentecostal Christian worshippers in Asmara tend to focus on their local religious communities. This means that Pentecostal preaching legitimates its authority through locally recognized practices grounded in local ritual and local space. In addition, gospel music cassettes, crusades, conferences, inspirational seminars, counseling sessions, and camp meetings also provide a sense of locality, community, and family that symbolically reconstitutes Pentecostal followers in terms of their born-again identity.

Whereas in the old Eritrean Christian tradition the fight against evil is to a large extent focused on the restoration of bonds among people, Pentecostal deliverance basically separates the nonsaved from the saved (Meyer 1992:116; Ranger 1993:71–72). The key evidence of the latter is the invocation of the Holy Spirit through speaking in tongues. Prayer sessions are attended not only by converts but also sometimes by nonmembers who often have failed to find answers for their problems in the traditional Orthodox Tāwahdo, Catholic, and Protestant churches of Asmara. The spirits dwelling in the convert or nonconvert express themselves when the Holy Spirit enters the person seeking deliverance; this is the moment of the struggle not only between the Holy Spirit and the evil entities, but also between tradition and modernization, or between the extended family and individual identity (Conway 1980:15; Synan 1997:39).

Pentecostals in Asmara also reject all forms of non-Christian traditional beliefs and practices such as magic, witchcraft, and sorcery. Similarly, they will not participate in family and communal rituals such as traditional marriage and funerary rites, or in customary commensal practices.¹⁶ Visually, they distinguish themselves by their dress and appearance, which often are criticized as flashy and flaunting of material success. Pentecostal preachers frequently dress in Western-style suits rather than traditional Eritrean clothing, often looking more like religious entrepreneurs than local pastors. Their followers dress up fancily and conspicuously for church attendance. In a sense, the Pentecostal church becomes the convert's extended family at the expense of ties with kin networks, and the church's moral code and strictures replace those of the larger community. Domestic

and extrafamilial violence are condemned, marital fidelity and premarital chastity are fundamental, and alcohol and tobacco are viewed as sinful. Wrongdoers are sometimes hauled up before the assembly in public disgrace, while failed pastors or aberrant deacons are marginalized, suspended, purged, or sacked. The cinema, satellite television, and musical concerts are rejected as forms of secular entertainment and replaced by Christianized Pentecostal popular music and videos. The life of a born-again, convert, and believer, then, consists of daily submission and commitment to the movement and an endless round of biblical study sessions, prayer meetings, choir practices, revivals, and evangelistic conferences. But along with the spiritual rewards comes release from the exactions of kin and community and, significantly, the freedom to embrace aspects of modernization that support professional advancement and material accumulation.¹⁷

In some ways, converts also benefit from the direct material support of the Pentecostal community in the form of informal fraternal networks that function as small-scale welfare systems within and among local assemblies and fellowship groups. Following the Old Testament tradition of *tieth* (ἑσσηρ), members contribute cash in order to finance the bereaved, cover the cost of burials and weddings, care for the sick, orphans, and widows, and provide shelter for those who find themselves homeless in an urban environment where housing is scarce and expensive.¹⁸ In this way, money and material resources are invested by Pentecostals with moral significance and the social values of trust and intimacy within the cultural matrix of the movement. Rather than viewing money as a satanic force eating away at the fabric of society, Pentecostals seek to transform it for the benefit of their church.¹⁹ In every crusade and conference the emphasis is on temperance, thriftiness, industriousness, and intolerance of corruption, values that also resonate with ideas of self-reliance, self-empowerment, and material prosperity.

Conclusion

Although this is neither the location nor the occasion to narrate the entire history of the influence of Christianity on Eritrean society, it is very clear that for at least the last three decades Pentecostalism has rapidly Eritreanized and popularized itself at a much faster pace than, for example, the Bahai religion or the Jehovah's Witnesses. Today the Pentecostal movement extends throughout the metropolitan area of Asmara and its outskirts. Its active members, already numbering around twelve thousand, meet in church (*bét šālot*) or tent revivals several times a week for formal services, afternoon and evening prayer meetings, choir and music rehearsals, religious education, and other church activities, all of which are conducted in the Təgrəñña language. Pentecostalism's popularity in Asmara is thus a

synthesis of the struggle between past tradition—from which the converts, as part of their struggle for deliverance, seek to disconnect themselves—and the construction of a born-again identity in the present.

The growing attraction and even domination of Pentecostalism among the youth, the working and middle classes, and the professional and educated elites are resented by the traditional Eritrean Christian churches, which publicly denounce and excommunicate those who participate in Pentecostal activities or have any Pentecostal connections in the city. The majority of traditional Christians in Asmara and in other parts of the country consider Pentecostalism a foreign and dangerous presence and an unwanted competitor to the orthodox Tāwahdo and Catholic churches. Many Eritreans of these denominations have encountered converts in crowds spilling onto the streets from Pentecostal churches, prayer houses, and tent revivals. These are common scenes in many communities and neighborhoods in Asmara, and they reinforce the impression of Pentecostals as intrusive.

It is precisely the widespread appeal of the Pentecostal programs, sermons, printed tracts, audio and video messages, and, in general, their growing proselytizing capacities that the Eritrean traditional Christian churches find particularly threatening and alarming. In some of these churches, there has been a definite effort to limit and even curtail Pentecostal influences, but to no avail. The personal attention and care that are the hallmark of Pentecostalism give strength to a movement in which the private lives of converts from different cultural backgrounds and religious orientations are linked by ties that break the bonds of kinship. New converts are initiated into a Pentecostal family in which individuals are bonded through Bible reading and conversion in strong networks of personal relations and professional collaboration.²⁰

That is perhaps why, not infrequently, Asmara Pentecostalist preachers are observed in front of hundreds of excited and emotion-laden worshippers. It is also one of the reasons that criticism of the Eritrean Pentecostal movement coming from, especially, the Orthodox Tāwahdo and Catholic churches focuses not only on Christian doctrine and theology but also on the financial underpinnings of the Pentecostal church and the material flamboyance of some of its leaders. There may not be a direct correlation between the Pentecostal movement and economic advancement in Asmara, but the two certainly do go together. This characteristic of the Pentecostal movement, as well as its continuously increasing membership and self-conception as an army of Christ (*sārawitā kərastos*) confronting all others, accentuates the tension between Pentecostals and the Eritrean traditional Christian churches.

To the Pentecostals themselves, what is most compelling about their beliefs and worship is the omnipresence of the Holy Spirit, which establishes the identity of born-again and leads to a distinction between those in the traditional churches who see themselves (merely) as sinners saved by

grace, and those in the Pentecostal movement who see themselves as saints reaching for the higher calling in Christ. There is no doubt that the current popularity of Pentecostalism in Asmara is due to the problem-solving orientation of the prayer sessions, the accessibility of daily prayer services to the general public, and the greater attention given to private problems in a religious environment that is both convivial and fraternal. Eritrean Pentecostal evangelists express bewilderment about the criticism they receive from “soft and smooth” Christianity. What distinguishes Pentecostalism, they emphasize, is its social outreach, focus on the gospel, and emphasis not on success, but rather on suffering as a necessary part of life. Indeed, many or even most Pentecostalists in Eritrea are not motivated by material ambitions but are instead attracted by the fundamental Christian concerns of charity and generosity toward the poor and the needy. In this way Pentecostalism or conversion to a fundamentalist Protestantism allows followers both to advance their condition, establish their identity, embrace modernity, and pursue established Christian virtue, all in the context of explicitly opposing the historic Christian churches. Pentecostalism continues to have great appeal in Asmara not only because it does seem to provide a framework for facing and understanding the pains and pressures of socioeconomic transition, but also because for the Pentecostalists the problem lies not so much with socioeconomic transformations and their repercussions, but with the world and the devil (Meyer 1996:226).

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Notes

1. This article attempts to contribute to the debates that have been and still are going on in the works of earlier scholars and students of Pentecostalism. It is based on fieldwork conducted in Asmara during the summers of 1999 and 2000. Some of the ideas owe their genesis to valuable discussions I have had with Eritrean Pentecostals, who on different occasions over the years have been given the opportunity to read a nascent form of the article. It therefore constitutes only a preliminary investigation of a much underresearched topic in Eritrea in general and in Asmara in particular. In an effort to make the text uncumbersome to read, I have spelled Təgrəñña words following the transliteration system adopted by the African Studies Center of Michigan State University in East Lansing.
2. For a more general but lucid historical understanding of conversion patterns, rituals, and motivations in an African context, see Donham (1999) and Kaplan (2003). As Meyer (1996:214) has shown, conversion to Pentecostalism is one aspect of becoming modern in social, economic, and political terms.
3. Personal communications, *atoYoftahé Haylā* (Asmara, August 10, 1999) and *wāyžāro Sara Barnabas* (Asmara, July 28, 2000). According to pastors Abraham Zār'om and Marqos Bərhanā (interviewed in Asmara, August 15, 2000) membership in this church increased by about 30 percent, while average church attendance increased by about 40 percent between 1980 and 1995.
4. Pentecostalism in Asmara has a wide variety of international links with sister churches in Africa, Europe, and North America through Eritrean Pentecostals who made their way back into Asmara from the diaspora.
5. Pentecostal pastors reach out to new converts through friends, relatives, and other contacts. Many said that a friend had introduced them to it, or that it was here that they had been healed of physical ailments or helped with personal problems. Others found in it individualist ethics encouraging power and self-esteem irrespective of age, gender, and social background. See also Ojo [1988:183] on Nigeria and Peil [1994:211] on Ghana.
6. Asmara Pentecostals have ambivalent attitudes toward women members, who at one level may enjoy greater participation and leadership in "Christ's army" (*sārawitā kərastos*) of salvation but at another level are frequently stigmatized if they are perceived as feminist or "liberated."
7. In Pentecostalism, salvation is a personal matter (Hackett 1996:71).
8. Pentecostal Christians also listen to sermons and spiritual music on cassettes in order to avoid satanic temptations and demonic visitations during the day or night.
9. When well-known secular singers, medical professionals, university professors, intellectuals, civil servants, merchants, and bankers became converted Pentecostal Christians after the 1990s, the cause of Pentecostalism in Asmara received recognition and amplification.

10. It does, however, remain to be seen whether popular discourse on these media resources is stimulating or preempting the growth of Pentecostalism in the city.
11. Pentecostalist deliverance is a spiritual skirmish between God and Satan aimed at relieving the individual from all kinds of occultic, syncretic, and shamanistic influences and requiring the surrender of one's will.
12. My own personal observation during a *Rhéma* Pentecostal gathering in what used to be a food factory warehouse in Kambo Bollo (Asmara, October 22, 2000).
13. Interestingly enough, even the problem of failure in business is perceived as needing care or treatment, just as other types of spiritual, physical, or mental affliction and misfortune require healing and counseling.
14. The conversion of nominal Christians and pagans is far less dramatic and challenging than that of Muslims, whose religious beliefs are strongly resented and rejected by Pentecostalists who wish to subvert the "crescent" with the "cross." For a similar observation from a case study in Ethiopia, see Hamer (2002).
15. In Eritrea, the traditional Christian churches, as of late, pay for the upkeep of the clergy, while Pentecostalist pastors survive only if they succeed in converting enough members who in turn become a source of maintenance for them. For similar observations from case studies of Pentecostal preachers, see Okeke (1989:235) and Poewe (1994:140).
16. This means that the communal rituals associated with rites of passage and defense against illness, infertility, and misfortune are all shunned. For a similar observation, see Burke (1996:52–56).
17. For Marshall (1994:230), being born again creates "redemptive uplift."
18. Some Pentecostalists exhibit conspicuous consumption, but they do balance it with a "conspicuous charity," to use the phrase of Brodwin (2003:91). While some pastors compete to out-give each other (remembering that "God will provide for those who give"), there are others who clearly have enriched themselves at the expense of members. See Schoffeleers (1985:280) and Hefner (1993:103).
19. Pentecostalists do not believe that believers have to remain poor because of their spiritual condition. Instead, they stress that humans are responsible for realizing their own dreams. For similar analysis, see Weber (1990) and (Grassby 1995). Also see Van Dijk (1995:178–81), whose work I have used with great liberty.
20. It is in Bible schooling that the charismatic curing and healing practices are introduced and experienced by mostly young converts who may in the future become pastors in local Pentecostal church branches.