

Introduction

Pentecostal Cultural Change

This book is about religion, identity, and culture. Through an ethnographic account of Pentecostal Christianity, I explore the dynamic intersection of these domains as they are lived in the context of urban poverty in the Dominican Republic. Based on over two years of anthropological fieldwork in a barrio of Villa Altagracia, I examine the everyday practices of Pentecostal community members and the complex ways in which they negotiate legitimacy, recognition, and spiritual authority within the constraints of religious pluralism and Catholic cultural supremacy. By focusing on the cultural politics of belief and the role religious identity plays in poor urban communities, this book looks to provide new insight into the social dynamics of Pentecostal culture and offer a fresh perspective on religious pluralism and the ever-evolving contours of contemporary religious and cultural change.

In order to highlight the cultural transformations attending Pentecostal entrenchment locally and to probe the character and social force of evangelical identity for believers and their communities, I ground my study in the demanding and uncertain environment of the urban barrio and with those who call it their home. In particular, I consider in detail the determinative role of the church in the lives of young male residents and the nuanced ways in which gender and masculinity are both remade and affirmed through charismatic conversion. Exploring the relationship between the church and competing social institutions like youth gangs and Dominican *vodú*,

I lay bare the significant and multiplex ways in which Pentecostal Christianity has become a meaningful feature of social and moral life in Dominican neighborhoods.

Today studies of Pentecostalism are on the rise following the veritable explosion of evangelical faith over the past fifty years (Martin 1990; Stoll 1990; Poewe 1994; Cox 1995; Jenkins 2002). Pentecostal charismatic forms of Christianity appear to be spreading the fastest, dramatically developing among the poor and popular classes of the global South (Jenkins 2002; Martin 2002). In Latin America, where Pentecostal growth began in earnest in the 1950s, it accounts for 80 to 90 percent of all Protestant growth (Jenkins 2002:80), making Pentecostalism the most popular version of Protestantism in Latin America (Stoll 1990).¹ Up from a smattering of followers in the United States just a hundred years ago, according to some generous estimates today there are close to 500 million adherents worldwide (Cleary 1997:1; Anderson 2004:1).² The exponential success of global Pentecostalism has prompted at least one observer to ask whether this is not the most successful social movement of the past century (Jenkins 2002:10). If not, by winning converts in seemingly every populated corner of the planet, Pentecostalism is arguably the single most wide-ranging religious movement in the world today. Few other religions can claim the same spectacular success across continents as diverse as North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America.

The growing social scientific literature focusing on the movement attests to the profound ways in which Pentecostal culture has transformed communities where it has become a prominent feature. Joel Robbins, in a review essay on the anthropology of Pentecostalism, refers to it as a “powerful driver of radical cultural change” and characterizes its effects among converts as “most akin, say, not to rearranging the cultural furniture but to moving that furniture to an altogether new house, one where even old familiar pieces look different than they did before” (2010:156). Pentecostalism is a unique cultural formation in that while it shares a variety of similarities and recognizable characteristics wherever it takes root, the ways in which it has been appropriated and put to use in local settings demonstrate dramatic variability. How people grapple and come to terms with Pentecostal charismatic Christian culture, especially when it seems apart from the traditional, taken-for-granted, and dominant culture of the times, is an ongoing con-

cern of studies emerging within the anthropology of Christianity (Robbins 2004b:326).

My ethnographic concern to understand Pentecostal Christian culture and its effect on social relationships beyond the church positions this project's contribution within a new wave of anthropological scholarship on Christianity (see Robbins 2003a; Cannell 2006; Engelke and Tomlinson 2006; Bialecki, Haynes, and Robbins 2008; Haynes 2012). Haynes has noted that while plenty of studies to date have connected Pentecostalism to wider social contexts—such as those that link Pentecostal expansion to the rise of neoliberalism in the global South—there has been a “lack of detailed ethnographic engagement with the lives of local believers as they unfold outside the church” (2012:123). This may require putting aside for the time being the important question of “why people convert” in order to ask equally compelling and perhaps more revealing questions about the social and cultural implications of conversion, not solely for individual converts to the church but for their communities of origin as well.

Despite a few historical studies on the development of Protestantism in the Dominican Republic, meager scholarship exists on popular non-Catholic faith in the country, to say nothing of studies that trace the impact of Pentecostal Christianity on local culture and religion. I take this as my starting point by asking not just what evangelical Christian identity means to believers (in terms of their gender and social status, for instance), but asking what the “Pentecostalization” of Dominican society means at the local level and querying how this cultural transformation has informed the ways in which Dominicans negotiate religious difference and authority locally. I am hence less concerned here with *why* people convert and more concerned with the *consequences* of conversion or, as Cannell (2006:1) asks to open her introduction to *The Anthropology of Christianity*, with “what difference does Christianity make” for believers and the social worlds they inhabit. What does the existence of Pentecostal churches, their leaders, their congregations, their conventional rituals and beliefs, mean to everyday quotidian and spiritual life in the barrio? What social role does this unique form of Christianity play in poor urban contexts? By examining how converts manage prestige, gender, and authority (both spiritual and moral), my investigation centers on the strategic negotiations of churchgoers over power and identity in the community, showing how conversion shapes and is shaped

by the social norms and values governing moral and religious life in Villa Altigracia.

This book is not about the origins of Pentecostalism or Protestantism in the Dominican Republic, its missionary history, or its historical expansion. That work has largely been done (see Wipfler 1966; Platt 1981; Lockward 1982; Vega 1996). This is also not specifically a study about why Pentecostalism is popular or why people convert. This book *is* about Pentecostal cultural change, meaning making among evangelical converts, and the role of religious identity in shaping social realities for Dominican barrio residents. It is also therefore more generally about popular religion and how average Dominicans put (Protestant) religion to work in the twenty-first century.

The growth of Pentecostal religion in Latin America and the Caribbean over the past fifty years has been particularly acute despite having to contend with and find space beside established and powerful state churches like Roman Catholicism. The Dominican Republic is a case in point, as it has long been considered a staunch supporter of Catholic supremacy. However, despite having inhabited the margins of popular culture for years, today Pentecostal Christianity constitutes a common and in some cases inseparable feature of everyday culture and society in the country. Just fifty years ago Protestantism in the Dominican Republic was claimed by a mere 1.6 percent of the population (Damboriena 1963:153; Gonzalez 1969:82; Hurbon 2001b:126); today it has likely surpassed 15 percent, having grown at least tenfold since 1960.³

In centering my research on religious life at the local level with ordinary residents in a typical neighborhood, I offer evidence to dispel the myth that the Dominican Republic is somehow simply, or matter-of-factly, a Catholic country. In fact, to describe it as such is to ignore the distinct ways that evangelical culture has permeated important domains of meaning making for society's members, to say nothing about the actual cultural organization of social life in many if not most parts of the country. Even while the most conservative estimates suppose that only 10 percent of the population is Protestant, the influence of evangelical conversion is undeniably felt by nearly everyone. In the following pages I marshal evidence to suggest that evangelical forms of Christianity are deeply entrenched in the everyday social and symbolic worlds of Dominicans in complex ways, most profoundly so for the popular classes, and set out to explain its specific expressions and principal social correlates in a poor urban setting.