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The Many Faces of Canadian Pentecostalism

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The myth of Azusa Street is one that asserts that people from all over the world, of different races, ethnicities, genders, languages, cultures and classes came together in unity in the outpouring of the Spirit where everyone has a voice in glossolalic utterance. Myth is a powerful cultural symbol for affording Pentecostals a sense of place and equality in religious and social contexts, but a myth nonetheless; not because the multicultural context of the early days of Pentecost was untrue—the historical records show that Azusa Street was multiracial and multiethnic with William Seymour, the son of emancipated African-American slaves taking a prominent role in the revival's leadership and evidence of Latino/a inclusion in the revival; but myth because the ideal of equality and racial reconciliation quickly collapsed in the early history of Pentecostalism. Despite the diverse cultural representation of Azusa, where marginalized voices could be heard and allowed to participate in the revival, Pentecostal institutions quickly accommodated to the dominate culture, segregated blacks and whites, assert a patriarchal power structure that denied women ministerial status, marginalized the voices of other ethnicities and cultural groups, and placed white Anglo-Saxon males in authority.

In Canada, Pentecostals looked to Azusa Street as the origins of their movement, despite the fact that one can look to other sources flowing from the Keswick conventions in England. The most prominent was the Hebden Mission in Toronto. Ellen Hebden was born and raised in England and lived with Elizabeth Baxter for a period of time, a woman who prominent in the “higher Christian life” and healing networks throughout England, Europe and North America. The influence of Herbert Randall, another early Pentecostal and Canadian Methodist from rural Ontario, who was connected to the Holiness movement in Eastern Canada, the Keswick conventions in England, and a missionary to Africa, has been little understood. However, Randall was an important figure in early Canadian Pentecostalism through his connections to the Hebden Mission and other figures such as A.H. Argue, R.E. McAlister and George Chambers. The dual focus where Canadian Pentecostals look to the Azusa Street Revival in the US and the British developments of Keswick and other higher Christian life advocates is perhaps truly Canadian. Influences on Canada in the early twentieth century are neither wholly British nor wholly American. Pentecostalism is something of a hybrid shaped by influences across the Atlantic and in the United States. Transnational networks of an emerging Pentecostal movement carry a common message of Holy Spirit baptism with fire and power. Nonetheless, the multicultural composition of Azusa has played an important role in the myth of Pentecostal diversity and provides a resource for current scholarly discussions of Pentecostal diversity.

From the 1920s until the 1960s, Canadian Pentecostals swiftly organized with the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada becoming the largest Pentecostal denomination. The PAOC was predominately “British” in its ethnic origins. French, German, Slavic, and Finnish groups were able to organize according to ethnicity as opposed to geographical districts. However, by the 1970s, with new changes in international migration law and shifting patterns of immigration, Canada was open to increasing numbers of people from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Canada now had an official policy of multiculturalism that recognized the unique French-English founding of the Dominion, but has since come to recognize the contribution of diverse races and ethnicities to the social make-up of the country. However, scholars of religion are slow to catch up. The Pentecostal story is still told from the dominant voice of white Anglo Saxon males, who prize a European view of Christian history defined in terms of dogma and behavioural norms over other ethnic histories and cultures. Italian, Latino/a, Native and Black Pentecostals, to name just a few, have an important voice that needs to be heard, but for whatever reason has not been heard. One could also point to Asian, continental Indian, continental African, and Middle Eastern contributions to Canadian history and religious identity generally. What, if any, are their voices and contributions to Pentecostal-Charismatic religious identity?

Multiculturalism has taken on ideological status in Canada and the following articles grapple with the unheard voices. Ironically, although officially multicultural,

our understanding of religion in Canada is shaped mostly by Roman Catholic, Anglican and the United Church traditions. Little scholarly work has gone into the place of ethnic or other cultural religions, and this problem is reflected in the study of Pentecostalism in Canada. Thus the different authors grapple with the marginalized stories in Canadian Pentecostalism—the stories that are overshadowed by the dominant Anglo-Saxon and American story—whether African-American, Native, Italian or Latino/a. The effort of these authors is to provide a clearer picture of Pentecostalism in Canada and the role that diverse cultures have in the shaping of the Pentecostal story.