

VALENTINA CICILIOT  
THE EVANGELICALS  
*A New Christianity for the Third Millennium?*

*Introduction*

Despite the numerous theories on the secularization and de-Christianization of the Western world, «in the third millennium, like the first, the faith would once again be a truly transcontinental phenomenon», in particular «Christianity is doing very well indeed in the global South – not just surviving but expanding», as Philip Jenkins maintains in his book *The Next Christendom. The Coming of Global Christianity* (2007)<sup>1</sup>. Globalization, the interaction between different religious cultures through migratory flux and the formation of new world political and economic equilibria, have resulted in the blurring of traditional borders between Christian confessions and their relationship with contemporaneity. In fact, the increasingly rapid and widespread expression of the Protestant world over the past two centuries is what is intended here, in the broadest sense, by evangelicalism – the transversal re-awakening of the Protestant churches – and one could therefore also include Pentecostalism as well as the charismatic and neo-charismatic movements<sup>2</sup>. Its main features consist of conversion or being “born again”, witnessing the faith through a range of evangelistic activities, with a particular focus on Bible readings, often accompanied by very literal interpretations.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the evangelical world in general, however its main focus is to analyze the factors behind its dissemination and global success. Understanding the flexibility of the evangelical message and

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<sup>1</sup> P. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom. The Coming of Global Christianity*, OUP, Oxford 2007, chapter one.

<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless the inclusion of the Pentecostals and charismatics and neo-charismatics in the evangelical world is not unanimously accepted by the scientific community. In his overview, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism. Global Charismatic Christianity*, Allan Anderson takes what he calls a “multicultural” rather than an “historical” approach to the subject. Rather than tracing all Pentecostalism back to the American movement in Azusa Street in 1906, he assumes that Pentecostalism had multiple points of origin. This multicultural approach allows him to include many of the indigenous churches that emerged in the twentieth century – whether or not they call themselves Pentecostal – in his definition of Pentecostalism, based on theology and worship styles that focus on the experience of the Holy Spirit. According to this theory, in less than a hundred years Pentecostal, charismatic and associated movements have become the largest numerical force in world Christianity after the Roman Catholic Church and represent a quarter of all Christians. Anderson’s definitions double the number of Pentecostals counted by D. Martin in *Pentecostalism. The World Their Parish*, Blackwell, Malden 2002. See A. Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism. Global Charismatic Christianity*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2004.

how it can be adapted to different historical and geographical contexts is the first step in attempting to answer the question posed in the title of this article, or if indeed the new Christianity will be evangelical. The partly methodological question of whether the definition “evangelicalism” is straining under the development of this ultimately too broad and all-encompassing movement is the theme of this paper.

In the second half of the twentieth century, evangelical Christianity underwent some profound changes in terms of geographical distribution and cultural and theological orientation, as opposed to its early eighteenth century origins. Its diffusion beyond the geographical boundaries in which it was born to North America, largely owing to its flexibility and trans-denominational and international nature, produced a diversification and a deepening lack of homogeneity within the movement itself which, as you will see in the paper, has led to the undermining of the root of its identity. As far back as the end of World War II, the common ground shared by North American and European evangelicalism had begun to fall away: the processes of secularization, indifference and privatization/individualization of the religious element sparked diverse reactions, essentially dividing the evangelical world into “liberal evangelicals”, who opted for a radical rethinking of Christian doctrine with an open and modern perspective, and “conservative evangelicals”, who instead continued to proclaim the traditional gospel message, through tried and tested biblical hermeneutics.

However, the diversification of evangelical Christianity did not take place in a clear, linear, chronological sequence. Over the course of its history there have been numerous debates concerning identity, terminology and ecclesiology, primarily between American and British evangelicals. In order to better understand the evolution of evangelicalism, it might be useful to mention some conspicuous facts regarding its story. According to historian Brian Stanley, English-speaking evangelicalism can be divided into three major phases starting around the end of WWII: the initial phase, from 1942 to 1957, in which the main evangelical leaders, wanted to differentiate themselves from the fundamentalists on the one hand and from the more liberal evangelicals on the other; the intermediate stage, from 1958 to 1974, in which the “new evangelicals” (in the US) or “conservative evangelicals” (in Britain, Canada and Australia) became more visible and prestigious; and the third phase, which brings us to the present, the period better analyzed in this paper, in which we are witness to a massive global numerical expansion of evangelicalism, particularly in the Southern Hemisphere, which has led to profound changes in identity, which in turn have become, at least among intellectuals and theologians in the Northern Hemisphere, the subject of reflection, controversy, and debates<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> B. Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism. The Age of Billy Graham and John Stott*, IVP Academic, Downers Grove 2013, pp. 27-28. For the history of the American evangelicals see K.J. Collins, *Power, Politics and the Fragmentation of Evangelicalism. From the Scopes Trial to the Obama Administration*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove 2012.

In the United States there was a bitter clash between fundamentalists and modernists during the interwar period. In the 1940s, those who rejected modernist principles, or those who saw the need to bring Christianity to the modern world, defined themselves as fundamentalists<sup>4</sup>. The term “evangelical”, rarely used in the 1930s, began to appear over the ensuing decade and was used by those who wanted to differentiate themselves from fundamentalists. Leader of the evangelicals was Harold Ockenga (1905-1985), who in 1942 founded the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), which soon became the representative body of the US evangelicals, although its members originated from smaller, rather than mainline denominations (the most conspicuous absence was that of the Southern Baptist Convention). The second key American evangelical institution in this first stage is without a doubt the Fuller Theological Seminary which was founded in 1947 by Charles E. Fuller (1887-1968) in conjunction with President Ockenga, not only due to his role in the training of pastors, but also for having shifted evangelical attention towards a missionary rather than a theological agenda. The diffusion of this new vision was carried out via the publication *Christianity Today* (1956), which «was to be the voice of the ‘new evangelicalism’ uncompromisingly orthodox in theology, yet scholarly in intellectual foundations, irenic in tone, and all-embracing in its purview»<sup>5</sup>, aided by the charisma of a pastor by the name of Billy Graham (1918-). Spiritual adviser to several US presidents and global celebrities, Graham has been particularly successful in winning over the white, middle class conservative populace through a series of “crusades”, to be discussed later, that were amplified via the use of television and radio, and exported to other continents.

The second phase saw the International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne (1974), an event which proved to be of fundamental importance to the then worldwide evangelicalism, and would be compared to the Catholic Church’s Second Vatican Council. It was at this event that the evangelical community became aware of its having become a multicultural, global phenomenon one that, above all, was no longer only white and affluent. The Congress on World Evangelization was a conference of 2,473 evangelical Christian leaders held at the Palais de Beaulieu in Lausanne, Switzerland, on the progress, resources and methods of evangelizing the world. It was hosted by a committee headed by Billy Graham and brought together religious leaders from 150 different nations. Reports and papers regarding the conference illustrate the shift of Christianity’s center of gravity from Europe and North America to Africa, Asia and Latin America. The leaders of the South American communities were particularly critical, bringing up the issue of the relationship between social justice and Christian mission, which at that point had only been partially analyzed by the liberals. The final document, the Lausanne Covenant, drawn up thanks to the mediation of John Stott

<sup>4</sup> G.M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids 1981, p. 66 onwards.

<sup>5</sup> B. Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism*, p. 36.

(1921-2011), an English Anglican evangelical leader who was very active in spreading evangelicalism within the Church of England, not only marks the evangelical communities' recognition of geographical decentralization and evangelical cultural identity, but also the definitive inclusion of the theme of "social action" in evangelization discourse and its acceptance as more than just the prerogative of liberal evangelicals.

### 1. *The Evangelicals and Globalization*

As mentioned above, the evangelicals came to be in North America in the early twentieth century and they have roots in wealthy white culture. Their diffusion within economically disadvantaged and politically oppressed settings such as Africa, Latin America and Asia, is a recent phenomenon which historians have only partly looked into. This expansion can be understood at first within the American continent and then, as of the end of the Second World War, on a global level, if one takes into<sup>6</sup> consideration the many tools that became available to evangelicalism: new communication strategies, the spread of the English language and Anglophone education, internationalism, and the possibility of easy hybridization in the global South.

The US evangelicals headed up a real revolution in the way that their religious messages could be communicated, not only by taking advantage of new resources brought about by modernity, but by rethinking their missionary and missiological approach. The decisive factor was the development of air travel and its role in not only reducing physical space, but also how it facilitated cultural accessibility between the Western and non-Western worlds. Modern air transport allowed, for example, the emergence of figures like the already mentioned Billy Graham, who as of the 1960s has been able to impose himself as a leading evangelical on a global level via his missions to different continents, and John Stott who had a profound influence in the United States, in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in academia. Intercontinental flights were and remain expensive, so the direction of missionary action necessarily flows from the North (US and Europe) to the rest of the world – however there is also the phenomenon of "reverse influence", which will be discussed later. Another important tool is satellite TV, which allows images of evangelical leaders and events to be broadcast all over the globe. Its use in communicating the message is exemplified by the word "televangelism". Televangelists are ministers, official or self-proclaimed, who devote a large portion of their ministry to television broadcasting. Starting out as a uniquely American phenomenon – a result of a largely deregulated media where access to television networks and cable TV is open to virtually anyone who can afford it – televangelism has subsequently proved popular in other countries, Brazil in particular. Some televangelists are regular pastors or mini-

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<sup>6</sup> See the recent C.G. Brown - M. Silk (eds.), *The Future of Evangelicalism in America*, Columbia University Press, New York 2016.

sters who have their own places of worship (often a mega-church), but the majority of their followers are drawn from their TV and radio audiences. Others do not have a conventional congregation as such and work solely through television. The revolution that has been brought about by these new means of transport and the diffusion of the evangelical message is one aspect of a more modern, broader communication strategy that, starting with air travel, radio and television, has moved on to new digital tools such as CD, DVD, mp3 and the web (not to mention websites and blogs opened by pastors and institutions belonging to the evangelical world). However these tools, on the one hand, convey a capillary evangelical message, while on the other they fragment and break up the evangelical religious experience which is often linked to individual charismatic transitional figures.

The most radical rethink of evangelism occurred within what was perhaps the most influential school of thought regarding new evangelical missiology, the church growth theory, a movement aimed at developing methods to grow churches based on business marketing strategies first developed in the 1950s by the American Donald McGavran (1897-1990)<sup>7</sup>. One of its fundamental principles, namely that the faithful find it easier to join the Christian message if they do not have to overcome major cultural barriers, shaped different evangelical missionary strategic approaches, though a number of theologians have shown concern when confronted with a theory that minimizes the importance of “transcending ethnic and cultural divisions”<sup>8</sup>, at the expense of success in terms of numbers. Certainly the «present-day “seeker-service” [...] and all evangelistic strategies that pay particular attention to the need to express the gospel in terms of the prevalent cultural assumptions of the hearers can trace their origins to lessons learned outside Europe, usually through the medium of church growth theory»<sup>9</sup>. This approach, which focuses on the singular historical-geographical-cultural context, along with the aforementioned global opening up enhanced by the use of modern means and strategies, shows the flexibility of the gospel message, which in turn has determined its success.

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<sup>7</sup> The church growth movement began with the publication of Donald McGavran’s book *The Bridges of God*. McGavran was a third-generation Christian missionary to India, where his observations of how churches grow went beyond typical theological discussion aimed at identifying the sociological factors that affected receptivity to the Christian gospel among non-Christian peoples. In 1965, he organized the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, which was the institutional headquarters for church growth studies until after his death. The most famous key point is the “seeker-sensitive” approach, which aims to make churches more accessible to the needs of spiritual seekers. The “seeker sensitive” label is associated with some mega-churches in the United States where Christian messages are often imparted by means of elaborate creative elements emphasizing secular popular culture, such as popular music styles. Such churches often also develop a wide range of activities to draw in families at different stages in their lives. Even if written by the founder of the movement, see D.A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids 1990.

<sup>8</sup> B. Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism*, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

What's more, evangelicalism's broad geographical and cultural perspective cannot be explained without taking into account the globalization of the English language, and the consequent diffusion of Anglophone education in the twentieth century. The widespread use of English is not only due to English colonialism which occurred between 1880 and 1930, but also to the fact that it has remained the language of politics and education from secondary level upwards in the post-colonialism era. In the first half of the twentieth century within the British Empire, English was not only the language of the colonial administration and legal system, but it was also spoken by local politicians, business people and intellectuals. As of 1945, the British encouraged the construction of university campuses in colonial territories and the acceptance of students from the colonies at British universities. Under British colonial rule, knowing how to speak and write English correctly were prerequisites in aspiring to the position of pastoral leadership in the churches, especially within the Anglican community. This situation has remained almost unchanged and even today many ex-colonies maintain close ties with the motherland. Although the British role in some areas such as Africa was short-lived, the linguistic heritage of English or English-speaking education has remained. India is a prime example: it is the second-largest English-speaking and English-reading country in the world (after the United States) and the English language is the official government and business language. Therefore, English was chosen as the official language of the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Lausanne movement, and the World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF, later renamed the World Evangelical Alliance, WEA). It was only in the 1990s that the vast amounts of US religious institution funds made available for the training of evangelical leaders in the Southern Hemisphere eclipsed those of its British counterpart. North American televangelists have also had an impact in spreading the evangelical message in English in the Southern Hemisphere.

In the wake of the increasingly global diffusion of evangelicalism, the multidirectional nature of its internationalism diversified, gradually incorporating the continents in which it was spreading. This is most evident in the world mission and evangelism spheres as well as the promotion of spiritual renewal or revival. Evangelical internationalism began to take on a new dimension as early as 1945, especially in its missionary zeal toward Europe, which had all but been destroyed in World War II. The Youth for Christ movement for example, developed an international ministry via campaigns associated with US military chaplaincies based not only in Europe, but also in Latin America and Asia, and was particularly active in West Germany. Another effective means of spreading the evangelical message in Europe, which was soon extended to other economically poor realities, was agencies established to help refugees, asylum-seekers and immigrants. For example, after the war Lutheran World Relief in Canada and the United States set up an aid program for Lutherans in Germany and Scandinavia, while in Britain, Christian Reconstruction in Europe

(subsequently the Department of Interchurch Aid and Refugee Service, today Christian Aid) was established. *Ad hoc* funds were set up specifically intended for this purpose such as TEAR (The Evangelical Alliance Relief Fund) which was linked to the Evangelical Alliance. Following internationalism, evangelicalism underwent something of a bifurcation: on one side, the mainline Protestant denominational missions, accused of imperialism in Africa and Asia, focused primarily on the medical and educational fields or on the new agencies involved in the reconstruction of Europe, leaving evangelistic initiatives to emerging national churches, and on the other, world evangelization that was consequently left to the fundamentalists and non-denominational evangelicals.

However global evangelicalism's real breakthrough was due the work of Billy Graham. A strong and charismatic personality, Graham was able to take advantage of different tools and not only used radio and television extensively – Graham had his own radio show *The Hour of Decision* (1950) and subsequent TV series (1951) –, but his personal friendships with several American presidents, from Dwight Eisenhower to George W. Bush, as well as his missions around the world. Through the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA), he was able to organize worldwide mass crusades: a forty-six day tour of Britain and Europe in 1946; another European tour taking in Scandinavia, Germany and the Netherlands in 1955; Japan and Korea in 1952; India, Taiwan, Hawaii, Hong Kong and the Philippines (and Japan and Korea once more) in 1956; the Caribbean, Mexico and Guatemala in 1958; Australia and New Zealand in 1959; Africa and Brazil in 1960 (as well as a number of other visits in the decades that followed). Graham's international ministry covered the globe, but its significance to the history of evangelicalism is not simply a matter of geographical diffusion. Although Graham began to wind down the BGEA in 1986, «the Association had by then played its part in making evangelicalism arguably as comprehensive in its global networks as was the official ecumenical movement represented by the World Council of Churches»<sup>10</sup>. The World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF), a sort of evangelical WCC counterpart that was founded in 1951, was another promotional tool set up by the founders of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in response to the need for renewal and coordination within the evangelical world. Its purpose was to promote the furtherance, defense and confirmation, as well as fellowship of the gospel. Despite its good intentions, from the outset the WEF was hindered by three basic constraints: a lack of consistency between the American members' theological and ecclesial perspectives – they did not take kindly to those belonging to historically and theologically “mixed” denominations and the fact that a large segment of the members came precisely from said denominations; a chronic lack of funds; and being labeled as a fellowship that represented American conservative evangelicalism.

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<sup>10</sup> B. Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism*, p. 68.

Finally, the global spread of evangelicalism also owes much to the various revivals that took place pretty much all over the world, revitalizing the spirit. One of the most famous, the East African Revival, consisted of a series of tours undertaken in Africa and elsewhere in the world between 1944 and the late 1970s by missionaries and African leaders, and was later the inspiration for the books *The Calvary Road* (1950) by Roy & Revel Hession and Norman P. Grubb's *Continuous Revival* (1952).

As already mentioned, the flexibility and elasticity of the evangelical message has enabled it to rapidly advance beyond its original borders to different continents. In particular, the Southern Hemisphere evangelicals – Africans, Latin Americans and Asians – have reshaped and hybridized evangelical Christianity: while retaining some traits acquired from the Northern Hemisphere model, it has become an authentic and distinctive part of their culture<sup>11</sup>, so much so that recent commentators have emphasized, as a result of massive population migration from South to North and from East to West, the role of southern Christianity as a new missionary movement for the North. This is what has come to be called the “reverse mission” paradigm, a phenomenon that has affected a large part of the evangelical world as well as other Christian confessions. The socio-anthropological concept of reverse mission has its supporters in the academic world, but also its detractors. The south-north exporting of Christian forms, mainly Protestant, occurs both through churches frequented by immigrants and direct missionary work (diasporic reverse mission). According to scholar Paul Freston's established definition:

«The idea of reverse mission differs from that expressed in the 1974 Lausanne Covenant (a “Vatican II” of evangelical Christianity) that “missionaries should flow ever more freely from and to all six continents.” Instead of this from-everywhere-to-everywhere world, reverse mission envisages an inversion of the from-to world of the late fifteenth to late twentieth centuries. As Ojo puts it, “reverse mission refers to the sending of missionaries to Europe and North America by churches and Christians from the non-Western world, particularly Africa, Asia and Latin America.” But this is more than a geographical inversion. “Reverse mission” is also *from below*. Along with the changed direction of arrows on the map go inverted social positions, resembling the expansion of Christianity in its first centuries»<sup>12</sup>.

It means that within the dominant contemporary idea of “reverse mission” there are two main elements: reversing the direction of missionary-sending and reversing the direction of colonization. However, there is also another form of “reverse mission”, the non-diasporic – considered by P. Freston as the only viable form – which expresses itself in different ways: one way is of traditional northern agencies becoming recruiters of southern

<sup>11</sup> A case study in D. Maxwell, *African Gifts of the Spirit: Pentecostalism and the Rise of a Zimbabwean Transnational Religious Movement*, James Currey, Oxford 2006.

<sup>12</sup> After having studied the case of Sunday Adelaja (or God's Embassy) in the Ukraine, according to the academic, the emerging form of reverse mission is the non-diasporic form. See P. Freston, *Reverse Mission: a Discourse in Search of Reality?*, in «PentecoStudies» IX, 2(2010), pp. 153-174, quote on pg. 155.



missionaries for the northern context. An example is the Church Mission Society, which brought Anglicans from Uganda, Pakistan, India and elsewhere to “challenge and encourage” British Christians; another modality is through southern ministers working in traditional northern denominations. The Uganda born Archbishop of York, John Sentamu is the most obvious example, however there are many more cases at congregational level: Ugandan priests in the Church of Wales; Tanzanian Lutheran clergy in Germany; Brazilian Presbyterian ministers in the Church of Scotland<sup>13</sup>. The definition of non-diasporic reverse mission allows one to overcome the criticisms of the paradigm: it should not be forgotten that diaspora churches almost always remain churches established for and attended by migrants – they remain settler churches –, which do not attract followers in the context in which are rooted. If the traditional “missions fields” have now become the mission bases of renewed efforts to re-evangelize the fast secularizing societies of Europe and North America, it is a short step towards a true rhetoric, when not apology, regarding the reverse mission paradigm:

«While migrations continued to provide missionary mobilization, African churches [*African churches are just an example - Ed.*] were able to realize their strength within world Christianity, and achieved global perspectives to their missionary activities. In this way, they moved from the periphery to the centre once dominated by Western missions. For the Western Church, reverse missions brought a major shift in mission understanding, and provided better sensibilities to, and appreciation of the multi-cultural nature of Christianity in the twentieth century. Furthermore, missions changed to become multi-lateral rather than unilateral, itinerant missionaries grew, while missions moved from cultural transplantation to contextualization. Lastly, this reverse trend in missions offered the old heartlands of Christianity a model for renewal, and called for a structural reform of the Church to grapple with the challenges of migration»<sup>14</sup>.

The *Narratives of Representation - The Illusion of a Christian Europe* contains the keywords “the dark continent of Europe”, “dead Europe”, “secularized Europe”, “prodigal continent”, “devil’s stronghold”, etc.<sup>15</sup>.

In conclusion, and in short, the network of evangelical and internationalism missions has certainly become more complex over time. The number

<sup>13</sup> *Ibi*, p. 162.

<sup>14</sup> A. Adogame, *The Rhetoric of Reverse Mission: African Christianity and the changing dynamics of religious expansion in Europe*, an outline of the lecture presented at the Conference *South moving North: revised mission and its implications*, Protestant Landelijk Dienstencentrum, Utrecht, 26th September 2007, p. 3. See also R. Catto, *Has mission been reversed? Reflections on sociological research with non-western Christian missionaries in England*, in *Migration and Mission*. Papers read at the biennial conference of the British and Irish Association for Mission Studies at Westminster College, Cambridge, 2nd-5th July 2007, Cliff College Publishing, Sheffield 2008, pp. 109-118.

<sup>15</sup> A. Adogame, *The Rhetoric of Reverse Mission*, p. 3. See also Id. (ed.), *Who Is Afraid of the Holy Ghost? Pentecostalism and Globalization in Africa and Beyond*, Africa World, Trenton 2011; J. Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transforming of the West*, Orbis Book, Maryknoll 2008.

of missionaries from continents such as Asia, Africa and Latin America has grown, reaching the quantities of those of Europe and North America. The global movement of populations, generally from the South to the North has also led to a steady rise of evangelicals who are not of European or North American origin. The institutions continue to play their part, but many denominational missionary societies in the North of the world, that have been dominant since 1945, are becoming less influential, leaving space for entities like Youth with a Mission (YWAM), an inter-denominational association founded in 1960 that has captured the imaginations of young evangelicals. In Asia, Africa and Latin America, key missionary roles are played by young people and women. Finally, as will be seen below, a new form of evangelicalism is spreading like wildfire, one that could be labeled as Pentecostal – a Western category.

## 2. *Charismatics and Pentecostals*

According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life held in 2011, there were as many as 279 million Pentecostals and 305 million charismatics – which has its origins from Pentecostalism – worldwide, or 26.7% of the world's Christian population, the highest concentration of which could be found in Sub Saharan Africa (44%) and the Americas (37%). From a geographical point of view, Pentecostalism and the experiences that derive from it, as we will see below, are booming in the South of the world, in Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia. If Spanish-speaking Pentecostalism, especially in the Caribbean and Latin America, is that which has grown most quickly, second only to North America, Brazil is currently the leading country in terms of growth, with Pentecostals accounting for over 60% of Brazilian evangelicals, more than 25% of the entire population in 2010<sup>16</sup>. Africa however shows the most interesting trends. In fact numerous AICs, African Independent/Initiated/Indigenous churches, many of which have taken up pentecostalization processes in order to be assured of more followers, have flourished alongside the traditional Pentecostal churches.

Although the “traditional” Pentecostal movements that were established at the beginning of the twentieth century have continued to grow, two new realities have emerged: new networks of Pentecostal churches, and the infil-

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<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/> (February 2016). On Pentecostals: A. Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism. Global Charismatic Christianity*; M. Introvigne, *I pentecostali*, LDC, Leumann 2004; D. Miller - T. Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism. The New Face of Christian Social Engagement*, University of California, Berkeley-Los Angeles 2007; E. Pace - A. Buttici, *Le religioni pentecostali*, Carocci, Roma 2010; P.L. Trombetta (ed.), *Cristianesimi senza frontiere: le chiese pentecostali nel mondo*, Borla, Roma 2013. On charismatics and neo-charismatics: A. Anderson, *The Pentecostal and Charismatic movements*, in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 9, *World Christianities c.1914-c.2000*, CUP, Cambridge 2006, pp. 89-106; S.M. Burgess - E.M. van der Maas (eds.), *New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids 2002; S. Coleman, *The Globalization of Charismatic Christianity. Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity*, CUP, Cambridge 2003.

tration of the role of the Holy Spirit in non-Pentecostal denominations. The Pentecostal doctrine is made up of certain key elements, such as baptism in the Holy Spirit – an entirely separate experience to conversion – that is the conferring of the believer’s power that manifests itself through the use of spiritual gifts, which includes speaking in tongues (the ability to speak several languages without having learned them), divine healing, prophecy; the universal mandate to preach the gospel to every man; the second coming of Christ who will bring all believers with him, both living and dead. Basically, salvation comes through being reborn, being received by the grace of God through faith in Christ, on condition that, together with the repentance of sins, one concedes to being baptized in the Holy Spirit. The Pentecostal religion also emphasizes certain elements to which it owes its amazingly fast and broad diffusion: valorization of the individual experience, its oral tradition, spontaneity, asceticism and literal reading of the scriptures. Pentecostalism, and the religious and spiritual movements that followed, differ from traditional Christianity, which requires an act of voluntary and intellectual faith, since it is set up as an experience that is legitimized by its very capacity to transform the life of the believer. It can be distinguished from the Christianity of European origin in that it proposes the “re-enchantment of the world”, and that it does not divide “the world” into distinct sectors, something which is typical of Western Christianity and that has to an extent validated secularization, consigning aspects such as work, health, sexuality etc. to secular areas, leading to helping the faithful in moments of personal and social crisis, physical healing, and the involvement of pastors and charismatic leaders in politics and government. Pentecostalism’s remarkable success is due to several characteristics: firstly, it is highly adaptable to different contexts, an element that has been weakened in traditional churches that are particularly aware of the need to maintain doctrinal and institutional continuity. Its “self-forming”, derived from an impetus from below, ensures independence from tradition and openness to the emerging needs of believers; secondly its essential belief is in contrast to the dogmatic system of traditional churches that are engaged in defending orthodoxy. Still, the constitutive missionary vocation – the Holy Spirit of the Pentecost is the evangelizer – pushes the Pentecostal churches to branch out, to broaden the community, and towards renewal: in this world Pentecostalism is diffused not only in its place of origin, but also to the countries of immigration and those of missionaries from the former colonial churches who return to evangelize «the descendants of their now secularized evangelizers», proposing an alternative Christianity, a spontaneous religion that is not intellectualized. Pentecostalism can be seen, in some ways, as a process of emancipation of the people from European colonial rule, and those same people’s desire to continue to believe in the way taught by the Europeans, to continue to be Christians yet in “their own way”, a post-colonial Christianity that is proud of its indigenous characteristics, that relates to its own cultural categories and is organized in a more flexible way than the complex ecclesiastical structures of Western Christianity, a faith

that believes in the gifts of the spirit not in the abstract, but in tangible acts (the spirit that speaks in tongues, heals, reveals the devil, etc.)<sup>17</sup>.

Even if, as already mentioned, the charismatic movement is included in Pentecostalism, and generally in evangelicalism – due to its similar use of spiritual gifts –, it was not born purely within Protestant evangelicalism and it often claims to be estranged from the traditional Pentecostal churches. Charismatics also tend to accept a wider range of supernatural experiences as evidence of the Holy Spirit, and cut across the various Christian communities. Certain characteristics could be summarized as follows: openness to the healing power and kingdom of Christ; renewal of the spiritual life of the church in local congregations; renewed interest in the Bible; a more profound experience of reality, holiness and transcendence of God; renewal of the task of healing the sick; lay leadership; incentives for evangelism, missionary work and testimony of the power of the holy spirit. At the outset, the charismatic renewal, at times referred to as the neo-Pentecostal movement, had the biggest impact on the traditional denominations (e.g. the Anglo-Catholics, American Lutherans, Catholics), while the conservative evangelicals regarded it with suspicion. It was only later that it also started to influence evangelicals, pervasively winning them over. Even though the movement seemed to run out of steam in North America in the 1980s, there had been something of a transformation with its internationalization and spread to developing countries. As early as the end of the 1970s the charismatic renewal began to penetrate the more traditional evangelical world, influencing the Anglican community in particular. In 1978 for example, SOMA (Sharing of Ministries Abroad), in an attempt to spread the Anglican charismatic renewal beyond the western world, was established. The results were not long in coming: charismatic and Pentecostal churches flourished in India, South Africa, Nigeria, etc.<sup>18</sup>. The spread of the charismatic message, especially from the United States to Great Britain, between British Anglicans and Baptists and other denominations, was amplified by the media. Three particular publications come to mind: *Trinity*, a Californian quarterly that, despite its small scale distribution in Britain, influenced numerous evangelicals in their perceptions of the charismatic movement; the *Church of England Newspaper*, a British publication that as of the 1960s dedicated ample space to the Pentecostal phenomenon; and certain articles published in the Anglican evangelical journal *The Churchman*. Printed books were also an extremely important channel of propagation, especially when one considers works like Dennis J. Bennett's *Nine O'clock in the Morning*, John L. Sherrill's *They Speak with Other Tongues* (1964) and even more so, Pennsylvania Assemblies of God pastor David Wilkerson's, *The Cross and the Switchblade* (1963), a bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic. The 1980s saw the transformation of Pentecostalism and the charismatic movement with the arrival of what is referred to as the third wave, a movement

<sup>17</sup> See V. Ciciliot, *Le chiese nell'età della globalizzazione*, in *Storia del cristianesimo*. Vol. 4. G. Vian (ed.), *L'età contemporanea (secoli XIX-XXI)*, Carocci, Roma 2015, pp. 409-455.

<sup>18</sup> B. Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism*, pp. 200-204.

characterized by neo-charismatic churches, classified as part of the New Apostolic Reformation, which originated from the activities of Charles Peter Wagner (1930-) and John Wimber (1934-1998), teachers at the Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. Wimber also founded the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, a church born from the ashes of a congregation inspired by Kenn Gulliksen (a Calvary Chapel pastor known to have converted, even if only temporarily, the singer Bob Dylan in 1979) that is today based in Anaheim, California. The original Vineyard Anaheim spawned hundreds of sister communities in the United States and around the world, with tens of thousands of faithful. Today Vineyard seems to be an autonomous denomination – even if it rejects this label – representing a new form of Pentecostalism. In the 1990s, some of the Vineyard movement's local communities began to distinguish themselves through the use of new charismatic expressions such as “holy laughter”, a much criticized practice consisting of an uncontrollable manifestation of immense joy and excitement amongst certain members of the faithful, whose receiving of the Holy Spirit leads to bouts of uncontrollable laughter, tears, ecstasy and trances, the emission of animal sounds, and wandering off often followed by collapsing and fainting – something partly already known to the Pentecostal tradition. In 1993-1994 the experience of holy laughter centered on Airport Vineyard, the Vineyard congregation located at Toronto airport where the faithful – of all churches and denominations including Catholics, and not just those linked to Vineyard – flock from all over the world before returning to their countries of origin with the blessing of Toronto<sup>19</sup>. One of the most influential men of the neo-charismatic Toronto blessing movement, and one of the staunchest supporters of the holy laughter practice is the South African preacher Rodney Morgan Howard-Browne (1961-). Controversy surrounding the Toronto congregation led to him leaving Vineyard to set up the independent Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship. It has since evolved into the international network Partners in Harvest, which today is present in twenty countries worldwide and is promoted as a family of churches with its own organization and profession of faith. Some features of this experience can also be found in Pensacola, Florida's revival movement, which since 1997 has attracted a half million faithful with its services based on repentance and forgiveness.

According to the World Christian Encyclopedia, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the numbers of neo-charismatics worldwide would have exceeded the total number of Pentecostals and charismatics. In fact it appears that it boasts as many as 295 million members, with extremely high concentrations in just seven countries: China (53.6 million faithful), United States (50.7 million), India (27.2 million), Nigeria (23.1 million), Brazil (21.2 million), South Africa (17.1 million) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (14.9 million)<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> M.M. Poloma, *Main Street Mystics. The Toronto Blessing and Reviving Pentecostalism*, Altamira Press, Walnut Creek 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Even if the figures are somewhat dated: *World Christian Encyclopedia. A Comparative*

In these new evangelical forms, the traditional focus on the Bible has been supplanted by the revelation of the Holy Spirit. Within the evangelical world, the critics' response to the charismatic and neo-charismatic experiences has been to analyze the movements as a cultural response, the adaptation of the evangelical tradition to postmodern philosophy and culture, which places experience before dogma, fluidity before structure, and self-expression before decorum<sup>21</sup>. In some ways mid-twentieth century evangelicalism reacted to liberal Protestantism with a scholastic defense of the scriptures, leaving little room for individual freedom and the role of the Holy Spirit and divine healing, thus leading to the birth of the charismatic revivalists and neo-charismatics and from a global perspective, a weakening of the cohesion within the evangelical world.

### 3. *The Challenges of Gender*

Like many Christian denominations, the evangelicals too have had to take on the challenge of modernity, i.e. deal with issues of women's lib and LGBT rights. Regarding women, what is clearly visible in the evangelical world, especially in Pentecostal and charismatic churches, is how frequently women have, on the one hand, taken on public roles of some importance within different communities – the Holy Spirit descends regardless of gender – while on the other hand, the literal interpretation of the biblical text relegates them to marginal social positions, establishing a deeply rooted patriarchal authority that rejects exegetical readings and alternative theologies<sup>22</sup>.

According to various sociological studies, global Christianity is mostly made up of women. Recent empirical research on new Christian movements in Latin America and Africa suggests that there are three gender-linked factors in female church participation. Firstly, women join churches because it is there that they find female solidarity and support for their roles in family and community life, often in order to mitigate the pressures of patriarchal societies. Secondly, women are attracted to new Christian movements because they embody the hope of healing, improved well-being, and reconciliation with others in their communities. Thirdly, church-based community support for women, and for healing and wholeness, can create new avenues for women's leadership in patriarchal societies, as well as provide a context in which female education is valued – even if only in the church-based instruction of its members. Since much female leadership is directed back into

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*Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World (2001)*. Vol. 2. *The World by Segments: Religions, People, Languages, Cities, Topics*, OUP, Oxford-New York 2001.

<sup>21</sup> B. Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism*, pp. 209-210.

<sup>22</sup> A case study in Missouri, E.J. Lawless, *Handmaidens of the Lord. Pentecostal Women Preachers and Traditional Religion*, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia 1988. See also J. Soothill, *Gender, Social Change and Spiritual Power. Charismatic Christianity in Ghana*, Brill, Leiden 2007, and B.M. Sackey, *New Directions in Gender and Religion. The Changing Status of Women in African Independent Churches*, Lexington Books, Lanham 2006.

the church, a cycle of female activism works to recruit other women and girls into church membership. Over generations, this cycle of female church participation can become a spiral propelling women into leadership roles in the larger society. In the twentieth century, it was Christian women who became the first female doctors, college presidents, social workers, community organizers, and politicians in many countries of the non-Western world<sup>23</sup>.

Despite the fact that women's participation in Southern Hemisphere Christian communities suggested, from a historical point of view, a real and practical if somewhat slow emancipation when compared to other Protestant denominations, the evangelical churches took on the issue of a female pastorate relatively late, mainly due to its strict interpretation of the scriptures. Its opening up regarding the issue is seen as a major turning point in the hermeneutics of the Bible within the evangelical world. In the 1980s the issue concerning the role of women in Christian ministry drew attention to the profound differences in the evangelicals' application of the teaching of the biblical text to the contemporary context. Two trends emerged: the egalitarians, or those who claim that equality between men and women is intrinsic to the scriptures and who established Christians for Biblical Equality; and the complementarians, who believed in distinct roles for men and women, with leadership roles in the family, church and society reserved for men, making up the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. While in North America, for example, complementarian were successful, the Anglican evangelicals of the Church of England accepted women ordination. Despite new hermeneutics influenced by evangelical feminism opening the doors to female priesthood, the evangelical denominations that actually allow it remain a minority<sup>24</sup>.

The new frontier is the acceptance or non acceptance of homosexuality, one of the thorniest issues that evangelical Christianity has had to confront, especially for its more conservative components. The issue was brought to the attention of the evangelical community by different figures: in the United States, particularly in the west coast, Lonnie Frisbee (1949-1993) of the Jesus Movement, a close acquaintance of Chuck Smith of the Calvary Chapel, and later of John Wimber of the Vineyard movement, springs to mind; as well as Britain's Gay and Lesbian Christian Movement and the Courage network. The latter, precisely because of its affirmation of the legitimacy of loving same-sex relationships, broke its affiliation with the Evangelical Alliance in 2002. These and other individual cases however, are not of such significance as to assume that there is some sort of change underway within the evangelical world. For example, according to a 1996 study in Britain, 96% of Church of England evangelical conservatives consider homosexuality a practice in-

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<sup>23</sup> D.L. Robert, *World Christianity as a Women's Movement*, in «International Bulletin of Missionary Research» XXX, 4(2006), pp. 180-188.

<sup>24</sup> On evangelical feminism see: P.D.H. Cochran, *Evangelical Feminism. A History*, New York University Press, New York 2005.

compatible with the Christian profession<sup>25</sup>. One should bear in mind that these are minority debates that take place in the North of the world. Churches and evangelical groups in the global South are deeply conservative regarding this issue, or any other ethical issue. The topic has become, and will become even more so in the future, the dividing line between liberal and conservative evangelicals, once again preventing a possible cohesion.

### *Conclusions*

Evangelicalism has without doubt grown on a global level, and in particular Pentecostal evangelicalism, which is the form of Christianity and perhaps of all religions that is spreading fastest in the world. Will evangelicalism be the Christianity of the third millennium? The question that has lingered throughout this paper, and which is still central is whether its exponential growth in numbers and huge geographical spread have jeopardized evangelical identity itself: is there still unity, a possible common definition? Is evangelicalism still significant as an expression?

It often happens that evangelical communities in different parts of the world do not communicate with each other, or that there are different orientations within these communities themselves. The evangelicals in the Church of England, for example, are currently divided into three categories: the open evangelicals, characterized by progressive stances regarding biblical hermeneutics, female ministers and the relationship with non-evangelicals; the reformed evangelicals, who focus for the most part on biblical preaching, are opposed to an increased role for women within the church; the charismatic evangelicals who are more concerned with the gifts of the spirit rather than the scriptures and are similar to non-Anglican charismatics than non-charismatic Anglicans. In the United States a comparable trend can be seen. One could certainly say that at the end of the twenty-first century, evangelicalism partly as a result of its own success, appears at least theologically, «unstable and incapable of definition»<sup>26</sup>. However if talk of disintegration is perhaps premature – one has only to think of the differences and divisions that have occurred throughout the history of Christianity without undermining its existence –, the “secession” of the charismatic and neo-charismatic, as has been analyzed in detail, even if the minority, is not entirely negligible, like that of the centrifugal force of the post-evangelicals – the most well-known case in the United States is that of pastor Brian McLaren and his Cedar Ridge Community Church in Spencerville, Maryland. The distancing of these two groups has in some ways benefited the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church above all – a significant number of evangelicals in the North of the world have in fact converted to orthodoxy

<sup>25</sup> See S. Gill (ed.), *The Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement. Campaigning for Justice, Truth and Love*, Cassell, London 1998, p. 109.

<sup>26</sup> B. Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism*, p. 237.



in recent decades – by no coincidence two of the oldest, most hierarchical Christian churches with a centripetal ecclesiastical tradition that coexists with the scriptures. However, the feeling is of being confronted with the definition, “evangelicalism”, which at that point will be so widespread and inclusive that it will lose all meaning, as highlighted by the debate as to whether to include Pentecostalism and the charismatic movements in evangelicalism or not. The evangelical movement’s flexibility, once its strength and basis for success, could thus lead to the blurring of the boundaries of its identity and a lack of coherence in meaning. The very concept of Christianity will need new tools to define itself as its future development will not only depend on academic debates of the North of the world, but on its vitality and fortune in the global South.

## ABSTRACT

*Evangelical Christianity has represented for the past two centuries perhaps the most successfully diffused and popularized expression of Christianity at a global level. Indeed, the growth of evangelical Christianity continues unabated, especially in the global south. Evangelical Christianity’s principal feature consist in its understanding of conversion, its advocacy of the importance of being “born again”, understood as the witnessing of the faith through a range of evangelical activities, with a particular focus on Bible readings, literally interpreted. The purpose of this paper is to explore the evangelical world in general, and to analyze in particular the factors behind its growing dissemination and tremendous global success. Understanding the flexibility of the evangelical message and the ways in which it has adapted to different historical and geographical contexts is however pny the first step in attempting to answer the question posed in the title of this article, namely whether or not the future of Christianity is evangelical. Yet the investigation proposed must be accompanied and indeed is driven by the methodological problem of whether the very definition of “evangelical” current today is excessively strained by its ascription to a remarkably broad, all-encompassing, and indeed ever expanding, movement.*

*L’evangelicalismo è l’espressione del cristianesimo che si è maggiormente diffusa a livello globale negli ultimi due secoli, e che tuttora si sta diffondendo con più velocità, particolarmente nel sud del mondo. I suoi tratti principali, inseriti all’interno del protestantesimo, consistono nella conversione o “nuova nascita”, nella testimonianza della propria fede attraverso un’ampia opera di evangelizzazione e in una particolare attenzione verso la lettura della Bibbia, spesso accompagnata da una sua interpretazione molto letterale. Il saggio si propone di esplorare in termini generali il mondo evangelicale, concentrandosi soprattutto sull’analisi dei fattori che ne hanno permesso la sua diffusione mondiale e il suo successo. Comprenderne la flessibilità e l’adattabilità ai diversi contesti storici e geografici risulta*

*determinante nella comprensione dello sviluppo della cristianità globale contemporanea. La questione, solo in parte metodologica, se la definizione “evangelicalismo” si stia sgretolando sotto i colpi dell’espansione del movimento, apparendo, in definitiva, troppo ampia e onnicomprensiva, è il filo conduttore del presente saggio.*