

Chasing Religion in the Caribbean

Peter Marina

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Ethnographic Journeys from Antigua to Trinidad

palgrave
macmillan

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ISBN 978-1-137-56099-5 ISBN 978-1-137-56100-8 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-56100-8

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016949584

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Printed on acid-free paper

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To Mom and Pop, respectively, Elena Perez Lopez Marina and Pedro Carlos Marina, and is written in loving memory of Silvia Lopez Ventura de Perez, aka Gagi.

“FOREWORD TO THE CHASE”

Allan Anderson¹ has categorized the growth of Pentecostalism in Latin America and the Caribbean as “one of the most remarkable stories in the history of Christianity.” More recently, Anderson noted that while it is difficult to attribute a single place of origin to Pentecostalism, it is clear that Pentecostalism has become global in outlook. By 2010, over 600 million people from all over the world identified themselves as Pentecostal, which amounts to over a quarter of all Christians.² Most studies of Pentecostalism in the Caribbean were conducted by anthropologists, historians, and Religious Studies scholars. Marina’s study offers a most welcome sociological perspective on Pentecostal leadership and organizations in the English-speaking Caribbean and Haiti.

Peter Marina does high-quality research. I say this because I reviewed his last book *Getting the Holy Ghost* and because our research interests are much the same. In this “Foreword,” I will contextualize Marina’s contributions to the study of Pentecostalism with attention to the research of Allan Anderson, Felicitas D. Goodman, Simon Coleman, Margaret Poloma, Stephen D. Glazier, Maurice Godelier, and Maarit Forde.

In some respects, *Chasing Religion in the Caribbean* follows Margaret M. Poloma’s sociological study of the largest Pentecostal denomination in America—Assemblies of God—but with a distinct Caribbean slant.³ Like Poloma, Marina addresses problems faced by leaders of Pentecostal congregations and explores the tensions between Charismatic authority and bureaucratic authority as played out in multiple Pentecostal settings. Both Poloma and Marina underscore the pitfalls of Pentecostal leadership

and myriad ways in which charisma-based practices—such as glossolalia, healing, and demon exorcism—have fostered and hindered denominational growth.

Of Max Weber’s formulations, “charisma”⁴ is perhaps his most slippery. When compared to his more rigorous categorizations (“ideal type”) of organizational principles like bureaucracy, “charisma” lacks precision, but Weber’s formulation of “charisma” makes up for it with its universal applicability. If Weber had not proposed the idea of charisma, social scientists would have had to invent something else like it in order to fully encompass religious experiences.⁵

When I began my research in Trinidad, it would not have been feasible to look at Spiritual Baptist leadership in terms of the “institutionalization of charisma” as Marina has done. The Spiritual Baptists had not yet attained a sufficient level of bureaucratic organization. There were, as now, numerous competing Spiritual Baptist denominations, but membership in these organizations was entirely voluntary and compliance almost non-existent. At that time, no Spiritual Baptist denominations were effective in influencing church policy. Instead of utilizing the Weberian concept of charisma, I opted—following Fredrick Barth’s⁶ approach to Swat Pathan politics—to focus on individual leaders and leadership decisions as they impacted church growth and decline. Things changed rapidly. By the 1990s, a focus on the institutionalization of Charismatic leadership among Spiritual Baptists would have been more fruitful.

Today, it is appropriate to focus on Pentecostal leadership because Caribbean Pentecostals themselves see their organizations in terms of leadership. Pastors are strongly identified with their churches, and all members are assigned church duties. Most Pentecostals aspire to leadership roles within their churches.

Marina’s chase began several years ago. My chase began in 1976. Unlike Marina, I did not go to the Caribbean in pursuit of Pentecostalism. Pentecostalism, it would seem, pursued me. I traveled to Trinidad to begin research for my PhD dissertation focusing on leadership and decision-making among Trinidad’s Spiritual Baptists.⁷ I rented a small room on Harris Street in Curepe, a suburb off the Eastern Main Road and near the University of the West Indies. On the way to interview my first Spiritual Baptist leader, I crossed McDonnel Street, which is the location of Curepe’s Pentecostal Church, then, as now, one of the largest buildings in Curepe. It was a Wednesday afternoon and the church was bustling with activity. Levi Duncan (who served as pastor of the Curepe church since

1962 and would remain pastor there until 1986) and his five assistants were conducting four exorcisms simultaneously. Another six victims of demon attack had been confined to the back of the Church. Needless to say, this drama caught my attention. I began taking notes on the proceedings, and extensive quotes from my 1976 field notes on Pentecostal exorcism were included in Felicitas D. Goodman’s book *How About Demons?*⁸

“The services are performed twice a week. Wednesday exorcisms begin at nine o’clock in the morning and last most of the day, while Friday service begins in the evening and goes well into the night. During the first two hours of service, recorded music is played and those who desire to receive the Holy Spirit are organized into one long line to pass before the altar. The pastor blesses each person practicing the laying on of hands. At this time, those possessed by demons began to quake and shout; they must be restrained and returned to their seats. Of the hundreds who pass before the altar only a few (five or six) are found to be victims of obeah attack. [The rest are understood to have medical problems and are encouraged to consult the nurse of the congregation or a physician]. Rites of exorcism are not performed until the final hours of the service. ... [The pastor] turns to the congregation and tells them that they must praise the Lord for what they have heard here today [during testimonies]. The congregation responds by standing, raising their hands in the air, and chanting “Praise the Lord ... Jesus ... Jesus ... Praise the Lord ... Jesus ... Jesus!” The emotion builds as the pastor reminds the congregation that demons cannot bear to hear the holy name of Jesus. ... The possessed jump from their seats screaming. Church helpers rush to wherever they are and carry them to the front of the church. Usually one or two new victims are discovered at this time.

The pastor approaches each victim individually. He brings the hand microphone down from the altar so that all may hear the possessed. This adds considerably to the dramatic impact of exorcism. He asks four questions of each victim: (1) Who sent you? (2) How many are you? (3) Why are you in him/her? (4) How long have you been in him/her? The response is a series of shrieks and curses.

After five or ten minutes of banter with the demons, the pastor grabs the victim by the throat and commands the demon to leave “In the name of Jesus!” The victim gags; this is taken as a sign of the demon’s departure. Some victims are found to be possessed by twenty demons or more.⁹

As Keith E. McNeal¹⁰ points out, the vitality of possession arises from intensified uses of both mind and body. He posits that ritualized

possession (and other trance forms as well) should be understood as alter-culture practices reflecting a deeply playful relationship to experience and existence. Play is paramount in Pentecostal ritual. In *How About Demons*, Goodman¹¹ contrasted what she interpreted as “positive” Pentecostal possession and what she saw as “negative” possession by African spirits in Haitian *vodu*. But as Marina (who includes a vivid description of voodoo ceremonies in this book) emphasizes, members of these religions would not accept Goodman’s categorization. Pentecostal possession and possession by African spirits can be seen as both positive and negative. While many Spiritual Baptists are also devotees of African spirits (Orisa), Orisa possession in the midst of Baptist worship is considered demonic as is possession by any spirit excepting the Holy Ghost. “One man’s demon is another man’s god.” Context determines the interpretation.

Demonic possession differs dramatically from Caribbean island to Caribbean island, with the greatest variation occurring in Trinidad, which also serves as headquarters of the Pentecostal Assembly of the West Indies (PAWI). Demons in Trinidad might be African Orisa, Hindu deities, Obeah duppies, and/or Kali Mai. Perhaps this is why so much attention is paid to the origins of demons in Trinidad exorcisms and why so little attention is paid to identifying the origins of demons on other Caribbean islands. Another consideration may be that a majority of PAWI pastors were trained in Trinidad. On the other hand, demon possession is rare even in some Trinidad churches, and in these churches, pastors must be brought in from other villages to perform exorcisms.

The Curepe church I first studied now calls itself “The Curepe Pentecostal Empowerment Ministries International.” The current pastor (since 2014) is Rev. Dr. Melch A. Pope, originally from Chaguanas, Trinidad, who graduated from the West Indies School of Theology in 1980. Pope was assigned to the Cedros, Trinidad, Pentecostal Church where he served as Pastor/Evangelist. He also served as a pastor on the island of St. Vincent. The PAWI is very much an international organization and its pastors are routinely assigned to different Caribbean islands during the course of their religious careers.

The major differences between Pentecostal Trinidad services in 1976 and those attended by Marina are: (1) exorcisms are now conducted on Wednesday mornings only; (2) many exorcisms are performed privately (Rev. Pope’s preference); and (3) Rev. Pope seldom engages demons in conversations as did Levi Duncan, so exorcisms are far less entertaining. In Curepe, questions for demons remain much the same (Who sent you?

How many are you? How long have you been in him/her? Why are you in him/her?), but the pastor rarely waits for a response before grabbing the victim by the throat. Exorcisms have been greatly abbreviated and are no longer the main church event. And in many Trinidad churches, services do not include exorcisms at all.

Meanwhile exorcism is taking on greater significance in churches throughout the Caribbean and in other religions around the world. For example, the Vatican has begun training a new generation of exorcists. A team of practicing exorcists was convened by the Vatican in 2015 to equip doctors, psychologists, and teachers with the skills needed to recognize and deal with demonic possession. Like Pentecostal pastors in the Caribbean, Vatican spokespersons cited a need to distinguish demonic possession from psychological and medical illnesses. And like the Caribbean Pentecostal pastors studied by Marina, Vatican spokespersons—including Pope Francis—assert that the devil exists. In 2015, the Pope performed an exorcism of a wheelchair-bound male who is said to have shaken violently when Pope Francis laid hands on him and issued a blessing.

In addition to a focus on exorcism, Pentecostal leaders worldwide have gained attention for their stance against gay marriage and for their condemnations of homosexuality. In the Caribbean, the PAWI has criticized the recent decision by the US Supreme Court to legalize same-sex marriages, saying it endangers the belief of the church and violates the law of God. PAWI pamphlets make it clear that Pentecostal opposition to same-sex marriage in no way shows resentment or hatred for individuals who are in support of gay marriage and homosexuality, “as this will be in stark contradiction to the very word of God which we uphold as the supreme authority governing our lives.” While—like Marina—I find Pentecostal teachings on homosexuality inconsistent and cruel, Pentecostals claim that their teachings are biblically based and consistent with select Old Testament teachings.

Pentecostal positions on gay marriage have been consistent over time; for example, in 1985, Felicitas D. Goodman¹² attended the opening session at the “Christian Center for Information about the Occult” in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where a Pentecostal minister advocated exorcism as a cure for gays. This pastor’s explanation is nearly identical to the explanation given to Professor Marina more than 30 years later.

Marina also examines gender inequality and the place of women within Pentecostal churches. Women perform valuable church duties and constitute the overwhelming majority of Pentecostal church members, but they

are not well represented in church hierarchies. Marina gives an example of the eminent historian, PAWI executive officer, and sometimes Acting Governor of Monserrat, Sir Howard Fergus OBE, who advocates higher status for Pentecostal women, but has been ineffective in implementing change. Fergus's opinions are shared by almost every Pentecostal I have met, but gender inequality remains an issue. By contrast, the status of women in Spiritual Baptist churches, Orisa gatherings, and Rastafarian communities has changed dramatically. This is largely because women own many religious buildings outright. Males attend ceremonies by invitation.

Marina underscores special difficulties in conducting research with pastors, particularly in establishing rapport while at the same time maintaining distance. As Simon Coleman¹³ observed, prolonged proximity can foster ambivalence, and geographical distances are often much easier to transcend than social distances. Isolation, Marina notes, is a common plight for both religious leaders and for those who would study them.

In her now-famous 1987 essay, Susan Harding¹⁴ describes how scholars of the 1980s often categorized American Pentecostals and fundamentalists as "repugnant cultural others." Harding ultimately committed herself as an anthropologist to the project of designing effective strategies to oppose the positions and policies advocated by conservative Christians; yet, at the same time, she recognized that social scientists needed to develop more nuanced, local, and partial accounts to describe who they are, thus "deconstructing the totalizing opposition between us and them." In 2000, Vincent Crapanzano¹⁵ recounted an equally disconcerting encounter with an evangelical in Los Angeles who relentlessly questioned him about his personal religious beliefs for over four hours.

Simon Coleman asserts that there are two routes of ethical practice for anthropologists in relation to conservative and evangelical Christianity, although these routes do not necessarily lead in the same direction. One route is an ethic of overt political action, a hardening of attitudes, and a fight for what is perceived as the morally good beyond the academic world—a kind of engagement as opposition as espoused by Harding. A second route advocates a disciplinary stance that is a form of academic self-cultivation constituted precisely by seeing aspects of the self in the conventionally "repugnant Other." Elaine Lawless¹⁶ talks of how the language of conversion nearly catches her in its narrative hooks. One question is: How might acceptance of the need for politically articulated opposition relate to the ethnographic project of self-deconstruction on behalf of the other? Is the Other repugnant in the first modality but not the second? Another

question not addressed by Coleman: Who is the repugnant Other? Is it the informant or the social scientist?

As one who has spent the past 30-plus years interviewing Trinidad religious leaders—Pentecostal, Spiritual Baptist, Orisa, and Rastafarians—I have never found Caribbean religious leaders to be repugnant—or at least as they were encountered by Harding and Crapanzano. A number of factors account for this. The primary factor is that Caribbean religious leaders lack the resource base to engage in the large-scale corruption that Margaret Poloma recorded in her study of the Assemblies of God in the USA. The Caribbean has not yet produced a Jimmy Swaggart or a Jim Bakker. As Gordon K. Lewis¹⁷ pointed out, Jim Jones may have taken his followers to Guyana, but Guyana could never produce a Jim Jones. Another factor is that Caribbean people are more respectful of the religious beliefs of others and assume that everyone is a believer of some sort. Caribbean people take belief statements seriously. They believe that people really believe what they profess to believe; for example, Caribbean Pentecostals assume (perhaps incorrectly) that all who attend their worship services are religious seekers. This is because they too first entered the Pentecostal religion as skeptics.¹⁸

Wilfred Cantwell Smith¹⁹ cogently argued that statements of personal belief are strong statements and are almost impossible to refute. There are few avowed atheists in the Caribbean, and nonbelievers generally keep their antireligious opinions to themselves. As Spiritual Baptist Leader Albert DeBique told me 20 years ago, “Trinis don’t believe in atheism.”

Marina correctly contends that the Caribbean is an area where secularization has not yet taken hold. And unlike American politicians and academics, Caribbean leaders gain legitimacy through their religious ties. People expect politicians to act in support of religion. Religious leaders of all persuasions were shocked when Trinidad’s Prime Minister (herself a Hindu and a Spiritual Baptist) did not stop the demolition of a Spiritual Baptist Church that stood in the way of a real estate development.

The status of Caribbean scholars and political leaders is greatly enhanced by their religious affiliations; for example, when Marina interviewed Sir Howard Fergus OBE, Fergus stated that his status as a Pentecostal believer enhanced his political and academic reputation in the Caribbean, while Marina contended that a believer/scholar would experience a lesser status in the USA. In his book *Tongues on Fire*, Fergus contends that “there are more Pentecostal Christians from Monserrat or of Montserratian parentage living abroad than living at home. ... Monserrat can boast a significant

Pentecostal diaspora. Echoing the apostles in the book of Acts, as they went, they spread the word."²⁰ But he also acknowledges that Pentecostal believers in Montserrat are accorded lesser status than Montserrat-born Pentecostals living abroad.

Marina is not shy about expressing his opinions, but he exercises considerable skill and diplomacy in expressing his own ideas without giving rise to acrimonious debate. This is never an easy task. As noted previously, Susan Harding's encounter with a Baptist pastor, Rev. Cantrell, in his church office very quickly turned into an unsettling denouncement of her and her research objectives.²¹

Marina's access to pastors varied from place to place—even on the same island. Generally, I find that when informants are unwilling to talk with researchers, it indicates that they may have little to offer. Like Marina, I found the most prominent Caribbean religious leaders to be the most generous with their time. Perhaps they associated researchers with seminary faculty they had known (many of whom hold doctorates). Marina enjoyed unprecedented access to many of the most powerful Pentecostal leaders. At the same time, lesser, rural pastors did not have as much direct access to the most powerful leaders of PAWI. Of course, a number of leaders refused to talk with Marina at all. This is true for ethnographic research in general.

Theological education has a considerable impact on denominational politics. Most high profile PAWI Pentecostals enroll in continuing education classes at the West Indies School of Theology in Trinidad in order to build and maintain support networks. Marina depicts the confidence and theological sophistication of "Bishop" and "Apostle" of Trinidad who engaged Marina in academic (abstract) discussions about religious leadership while having breakfast at the Trinidad Hilton, an elite setting that also reflects the elevated social and economic standing of these religious leaders. Education is highly valued in the Caribbean. For an entire generation of Caribbean people, "Dr. Politics" was the norm (e.g. Dr. Eric Williams, Dr. Edward Seaga, "Papa Doc" Duvalier—who studied folklore and ethnography in addition to medicine).

George Marcus²² has suggested that the agency and organizing power of the researcher is made explicit through strategic decisions to "follow" people, things, and metaphors. Marcus mediates between images of fixity and flow, openness and closure, accepting the contingency of the research subject while retaining emphasis on the need to explore the everyday

consciousness of informants, including their “system awareness” and their knowledge of other sites and agents.

As Marina emphasizes, Pentecostal leaders act within an extensive network of other pastors and other churches. In many respects, Marina experienced the Pentecostal religion like an itinerant pastor—he traveled from island to island. This is the same way Pentecostal pastors experience their religion. Prominent pastors travel extensively. Clifford Geertz once asserted that ethnographic authority comes from “being there,” but in Caribbean islands there is also considerable prestige in “being away.” Pentecostal leaders illustrate Maurice Godelier’s²³ astute observation that power is not centered in any one group but is accumulated as one moves from one group to another. Social power, according to Godelier, exists primarily between groups—not within a single group. Marina’s multi-site research agenda conforms to local expectations for leadership. Religious travel (pilgrimage) is an important component of Caribbean religious leadership.²⁴ Leaders, too, chase their religion from one island to the next. Movement gave Marina an insider’s perspective on leadership and also afforded him a degree of prestige unavailable to previous generations of researchers—like myself—who were encouraged to stay in one place.

To reiterate, Marina has done compelling research. This book constitutes a welcome blend of theoretical sophistication and sensitive participant-observation. As noted, the author’s focus on leadership is entirely appropriate because a large percentage of Pentecostals seek leadership positions themselves. And Max Weber’s ideas concerning the “institutionalization of charisma” are apt because Weber’s ideas about charisma—while less amenable to empirical measurement—are easily grasped by believers and social scientists. Moreover, many of Marina’s informants would appear to articulate their leadership problems in Weberian terms. Additionally, Marina provides insight into his methodology and candidly recounts some of his difficulties in establishing rapport with Caribbean religious leaders well as some of the difficulties in establishing and maintaining distance.

Stephen D. Glazier

Stephen D. Glazier is a Graduate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He is general editor of *The Encyclopedia of African and African American Religions* (Routledge, 2001) and a founding member of the editorial board of the journal *PentecoStudies*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The conception of this book originated in New York's great borough of Brooklyn and became an ethnographic odyssey throughout the Caribbean region involving research in the countries of Antigua and Barbuda, Montserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, St. Martin, St. Lucia, Dominica, and Haiti. Antigua, especially, will always have a special place in my heart, especially the capital of St. John's and the delightful village of English Harbour.

The writing of this book took place at Fair Grinds coffee shop in my home city of New Orleans, Root Note Café in the small town of La Crosse along the Mississippi River, Nina's Café in St. Paul of the Twin Cities, Antigua's capital of St. John's, La Cafetera in the Dominican Republic capital of Santo Domingo, and ended in the Zócalo of Oaxaca and at Café La Habana in Mexico City, where it is believed Ché and Castro plotted their rebellion against imperialism in Cuba. Few things in life match the joy of writing and travel.

Thanks to the Research and Grants Committee for the Faculty Research Grant that provided financial support for this project as well as the Small Grants Committee in the College of Liberal Studies, the International Development Fund, and the Department of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin—La Crosse. I hope the university continues to fund projects from scholars conducting international research.

Special thanks to Margaret Poloma, Peter Althouse, Michael Wilkinson, and Stephen Glazier for all the great comments and suggestions to help make this book better. Your scholarship continues to influence my work and thinking.

This research would have been much more difficult without some of the most gracious and selfless hosts encountered during the research. Jackie from “Jackie’s Place” provided affordable accommodation in her beautiful house in English Harbour, Antigua. The great missionary Papa Johan Smooreburg selflessly provided me with full transportation and housing throughout my stay in Haiti. Smooreburg is another example of the capacity of humans to display altruism.

Reverend “Rev” Henry Nigel and his wonderful family offered their gracious hospitality with full accommodations in my trip to Barbuda. The Rev is a genuine man of outstanding character. I will never forget our time together and the conversations we shared.

The research for this book may not have been possible without Apostle Andrews and his secretary Colette Southwell of Antigua. Andrews is a man of integrity and honor. He allowed me to ask direct and, at times, pressing questions that he responded to candidly. Thanks for all your support and trust, and the connections that you provided throughout the Caribbean. Our time in Antigua and Trinidad will stay with me always.

Thanks to Heather Lynn Millett and the miracle story of her adopted son Taj. Although this testimony was beyond the scope of this book, may the world one day know that beautiful forces are at work in this world.

I thank Bishop Lester Bradford of Brooklyn for making all of this research possible. Bishop Bradford is a highly unique man, one of the most sincere and thoughtful men I have ever known. It is a great honor sharing this world with you.

It does not happen often, since friends are so difficult to find, but I consider Pastor Matthew Noyce as my close friend. We shared so many great conversations in Antigua, including Nash’s Place over lunch. Noyce is a rare gem in this world; thank you, Breda. May the memory of Brother Dean Tanner live on.

The folks at Palgrave did a wonderful job throughout the research and production process. Thank you to Mireille Yanow, Milan Vernikova, Mara Berkoff, and all the staff at Palgrave Macmillan who helped bring this book to fruition.

Finally, thanks to my immediate family and close friends for enduring with me and tolerating my incessant talk about this research.

Peter Marina
— New Orleans, 2016

NOTES

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3. Margaret M. Poloma, *The Assemblies of God at the Crossroads: Charisma and Institutional Dilemmas* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989).
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5. Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 115.
6. Fredrik Barth, *Political Leadership among Swat Pathans* (London: Athlone Press, 1959). I met Professor Barth on a plane and told him I had used his model for a dissertation on Trinidad religious leaders. There was a long pause. He asked me if it worked. I said “Yes.” He replied “Lucky man” and continued reading his newspaper. Later, as we were getting off the plane, he confided his concern that his interpretations of Swat Pathan political machinations might not be applicable in non-tribal settings.
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