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*Yannick Fer*

## THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE PENTECOSTAL HABITUS: ELEMENTS FOR A SOCIOLOGY OF INSTITUTION IN CLASSICAL PENTECOSTALISM

### *Abstract*

Classical Pentecostalism is placed in line with contemporary reshaping of institutional authority as it provides a subjective individualisation of religious experience («a personal relationship with God») while maintaining a close control of converts' lives. This article draws from field-work conducted within the French Polynesian Assemblies of God since 2000. The aim here is to show how the theoretical tools of Bourdieu's sociology can prove helpful in analysing this paradoxical institution that is both an «anti-structure» and a structuring authority which grants the biographical invention of conversion the status of a well-grounded illusion. It first analyses the structure in the Pentecostal field of minister's positions, then the distribution of lay «ministries» and the institutional apparatus of socialisation and training that give shape to a Pentecostal habitus. The «voice of the Holy Spirit» finally appears as the symbolical core of this specific habitus which lies on an «invisible» mediation between institutional apparatus of control and internalised dispositions.

Key words: Bourdieu, Pentecostalism, institution, habitus, Holy Spirit, conversion, individualisation, Polynesia

### The Holy Spirit and the Pentecostal habitus: Elements for a sociology of institution in classical Pentecostalism

Pentecostalism began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in a North American Protestant context, stemming from a revivalist tradition which rejects the principle of spiritual delegation – and thus the specific legitimacy of religious institution – and emphasises the subjective, personal dimension of conversion as an imperative condition of salvation (Séguy 1975). The experience of the «baptism in the Holy Spirit», aims to complete the «sanctification» of individual lives (the Holy Spirit is «in them») and to bring an additional strength to evangelism (the Holy Spirit is «with them»).

As the Pentecostal conversion claims the possibility of a biographical invention – a «new birth» – breaking away from the historical continuity of habitus, it may appear at first sight as a non-relevant topic for a Bourdieuan sociology dealing with relationships between lasting dispositions, social structures producing such dispositions, and fields in which they are invested. The central role attributed to the Holy Spirit in Pentecostal churches, through baptism and other related practices – focused on the manifestations of «charismas» (or «gifts of the Holy Spirit») – also drives many sociologists, inspired by Weber, to exclude Pentecostalism *de facto* from the sociology of religious institutions. Described as an «emotional» Protestantism (Willaime 1999) governed by the prophet's personal authority, Pentecostalism should be seen as a «charismatic associative» type of religion, lacking of a constant theological line and real institutional structures (Fath 2001:381). The Bourdieuan notion of embodiment, as Csordas has (2002) demonstrated, can help in deconstructing this illusion of an emotional immediacy by framing Charismatic corporeal experiences within a coherent system of religious beliefs and embodied dispositions. This article aims to adopt a similar perspective, insofar as its analysis of the various Holy Spirit «interventions» through the theoretical tools of Bourdieu's sociology aims at extracting Pentecostalism from the Weberian emotional-charismatic «residual category» (Favret-Saada 1994:104). However, it strays from Csordas' phenomenological approach by locating these embodied dispositions in the wider field of positions and symbolical struggles that structure Pentecostalism, in order to build a genuine sociology of Pentecostal institution.

The Pentecostal church can then be described, firstly, as a field of competition and classification struggles between two main categories of religious professionals: the pastor-shepherd and the evangelist, whose opposite and complementary «gifts» provide the balance (or the instability) of a paradoxical institution which serves as both a structuring structure and an «anti-structure» (Williams, quoted by Fath 2001:381). Secondly, the assignment of positions within the larger space of lay church members and the progressive adjustment between the «vocation» and the «mission» of each convert – through an «invisible» institutional work – show how Pentecostalism combines social continuities with a biographical break based on the accumulation of religious or «spiritual» capital (Verter 2003).

Finally, against all evidence, the concept of habitus seems to be relevant in describing the shaping of a Pentecostal «new identity» that follows conversion. Rather than a «conscience collective» (Lawson 1999), the Holy Spirit – or more precisely the «voice of the Holy Spirit», which «talks» to each convert in the individuated state – appears from this perspective as the symbolical core of dynamic inter-relationships between (on the one hand) the institutional apparatus of training, control, and mediation and (on the other) embodied dispositions, «supra-individual dispositions capable of functioning in an orchestrated or, one could say, collective way» (Bourdieu 1997:185). Thus the sociology of Pentecostalism throws light on the contemporary reshaping of institutional authority, describing how the institution itself can provide a subjective individualisation of religious experience.

## The Assemblies of God of French Polynesia: fieldwork and methods

These three steps for reflection will draw mainly on an extensive fieldwork conducted during 2000 - 2002, followed by further fieldwork in 2005, 2007 and 2009 in the Assemblies of God (AoG) of French Polynesia. The religious setting analysed here is therefore of the so-called classical or historical Pentecostalism, Assemblies of God being one of the very first Pentecostal churches founded in the United States at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Blumhofer 1993) and today boasting the largest Pentecostal denomination worldwide. It was established in French Polynesia during the 1970–80s by American and French missions and today makes up approximately 1 percent of French Polynesians, mainly in urban and semi-urban areas of Tahiti, where two thirds of the population are concentrated. Fieldwork gave priority to these Tahitian churches but also included small rural Assemblies in Moorea (Windward Islands) and in the Leeward Islands, thus covering practically all the thirteen local churches. It combined direct observation of church services and meetings with an extensive corpus of more than 150 in-depth semi-directive interviews focused on both the subjective experience of church members and on ministers' personal backgrounds and «ordinary» work.

## Habitus and religion: «Religious belief has a home»

The notion of habitus holds an eminent place among the theoretical tools of Bourdieu's sociology. According to Terry Rey (2007), scholars of religion «have found this notion the most serviceable because it represents perhaps the most convincing place to locate belief: it is as if, thanks to Bourdieu, we can finally say that religious belief has a home. This home is the habitus, which is as much bodily as mentally constituted» (2007:128).

Understood as a «system of perduring dispositions which is the unconscious, collectively inculcated principle for the generation and structuring of practices and representations» (Csordas 2002:62–63), habitus first contributed, in early reflections by Bourdieu, to the development of the concept of «practical sense»: an embodied sense and practical knowledge of the social world which determine agents' actions (Durand and Weil 1997: 268). Habitus overcomes the opposition of objectivism and subjectivism by considering individual conduct as an «intentionless invention of regulated improvisation» (Bourdieu 1980:95) produced by the dynamic relationship between dispositions and social structures. Thus individual experiences with «the Holy Spirit» in Charismatic Christianity can be described as spontaneous manifestations of a religious habitus in ritual behaviour, through the mediation of «incorporated images» (Csordas 2002:72).

The theory of fields, devised later by Bourdieu, gave further sophistication to the notion of habitus, which became more strongly encompassed in the description of distinct social spaces structured by a set of relative positions and by struggles associated with the possession of different types of social resources or capital. Individuals who invest themselves in these struggles are endowed with a habitus that implies know-

ledge and recognition of the specific stakes of a particular field, and they therefore develop a distinctive *illusio*, a disposition to «play the game» which points out «the relationship of ontological complicity» between the habitus (i.e. mental structures) and the field (i.e. the objective structures of the social space) (Bourdieu 1994:151–154). The reflections here presented will adopt this global theoretical perspective –which associates habitus, field, and capital– rather than a more selective approach that treats «Bourdieu’s theory like a toolbox, picking up one or two ‘thinking tools’ as appropriate for the interpretative task at hand» (Rey 2007:136). So the «home of belief» will be located at the intersection between individual internalised dispositions, the Pentecostal church seen as a field of distinctive positions, and the specific types of stakes and capital informing symbolical struggles within this social space.

### «Are all apostles?» Pentecostal ministries as a field of positions

The ideal-type figure of the prophet prevails in anthropological and sociological descriptions of Pentecostalism. Emilio Willems (1967) writes, for example, that Pentecostalism ignores professional training or degrees and rejects social criteria for the validation of authority. Only the «powers of the Spirit» can validate the legitimacy of a holder of authority: «This implies that authority attaches to the individual rather than to the office, and it adheres to the individual *only to the extent and as long as* he provides evidence of being a recipient of an extraordinary share of supernatural power» (1967:255). While underlining the diversity of contemporary Pentecostalism, Bastian (2001) also sees this prophetic pattern as a common feature of all Pentecostal expression, characterising the Pentecostal leader by a «capacity to break with others forms of religious domination, a lay origin, and the exclusivity of the gift he carries» (2001:193). According to Weber (1995/1925), the prophet indeed differs from the priest, who «serves in a sacred tradition» held by the institution; the prophet breaks away from this institution and bases his claim to authority on a «call» to action and on «personal charismas» (1995/1925:190).

The first difficulty posed by this typology for the understanding of classical Pentecostalism is the ahistoricity into which Pentecostalism is implicitly confined when primarily defined through its origins and founders. All Pentecostal ministers are not founders («apostles» in the «indigenous» lexicon). The «routinisation of charisma» (*Veralltäglicung*), a concept generally used to reinsert Pentecostalism into a chronological perspective and unravel this contradiction, is described in Weber’s analysis as the way in which disciples of the founding prophet strive to maintain «the permanent existence of their preaching and the continuity of the distribution of grace», while at the same time maintaining the «*economical* existence of this distribution and its managers» (1995/1925: 204). This leads to an institutionalisation that once again gives rise to new prophetic reactions. This conceptual scheme fits with many features of the Pentecostal field, as well as with the dispersion generated by frequent splits, led by lay people and subaltern leaders (local ministers, assistant ministers, elders). But it excludes the possibility of a Pentecostal institution which can rely on a relatively stable and coherent

type of religious sociability: institutionalisation is always considered as a process of loss, fomenting a paradoxical necessity whereby Pentecostalism perpetuates itself only through denaturing.

However, observation of French Polynesian Assemblies of God suggests that the Pentecostal institution should be considered as a field of positions structured by the competition between religious professionals endowed with more varied and distinctive types of capital than mere Weberian prophetic charisma. The distribution of charisma follows the logic of distinction and relationships of (social and cultural) domination, leading to statutory negotiations and classification struggles. The institutional authority is both determined by – and a determinant protagonist of – this process, notably through the formalisation of «personal calls» claimed by applicants for the ministry. In a church which preaches that «the church doesn't matter», but only the convert's personal relationship with God, the legitimacy of such an institutional intervention must be based on its demonstrated capacity to «discern» God's will. In fact, such «will» closely depends on the given state of power struggles, so that, as Bourdieu (1971) pointed out in *Genèse et structure du champ religieux* (Genesis and structure of the religious field), there is no «personal» authority without correspondence between the disposition of the person laying claim to it, the structures of the field where that claim is made, and the expectations of those most likely to recognise the legitimacy of such a claim (1971:332).

From their official founding in 1982 through the early 1990s, French Polynesian Assemblies of God were exclusively led by French missionaries, with the assistance of only one Polynesian probationer minister: a former deacon of the historical Protestant church who was about 50 when he entered the ministry and died a few years later. The profiles of the six ministers locally appointed over the course of the next decade were significantly different. And what they claim about the emergence of their «calls» throws light on the institutional mechanisms and domination relationships involved in the appointing process. Only men can legitimately claim this «call», as the Assemblies of God do not allow women to be ordained as ministers and therefore encourage them to restrain their «personal call» to lay responsibilities. The «call» to ordained ministry is primarily built within the local church through a «faithfulness» that is progressively rewarded by accession to several positions, most notably the subaltern access to speech – short preaching of French/Tahitian simultaneous interpretation. These signs of appreciation from the institution encourage them to enter into intimate conversation with God («God speaks to their heart») – a conversation whose conclusion and schedule depend entirely on initiatives of the institutional authority, for probation as well as for ordination.

Pastor Lemaire of Raiatea (Leeward Islands) who entered probation in 1993 and was ordained seven years later explains how he felt the call:

I spent five years in the church as a simple Christian. From time to time, Pastor Louis asked me to give a five-minute preaching. I totally devoted myself to God, even if I had a job: I was a carpenter, I was quite polyvalent, I also did gardening. In the church, I led the songs, I taught at the kids' club. When I got the call, I was at work. I sometimes got visions, I realised people were

dying every day without knowing the Lord. I felt I was urged to spread the good news, to talk about God, often I felt that. Meanwhile, I asked the Lord: «Lord, is that really your will?» But I felt this call, more and more. I said: «Lord, if it's really that, put this call on the heart of the ministers, so that they feel what is occurring». I really wanted to let God act. Little by little, I got to know all the ministers, as I worked at the church holiday camps (...). After that, one Sunday, Pastor Vicedo – a missionary – preached on the call and then, I felt I was really touched by the message. On the afternoon, I went to see him, he told me: «Go on praying». That's what I did. A few months later, I still felt this call, I went back to him. He gave me some documents (...). One year later, [Pastor] Eric Barber staid here, he came to Raiatea for three months, standing in for [Pastor] Albert Richardson during his missionary leave. And Eric told me: «You know, Kuku [his nickname], you have to response to God's call». When Albert went back, they talked about me at the Pastoral council and he came to me, he said: «All the ministers feel a call».<sup>1</sup>

Another minister interviewed in December 2000, six months after he entered probation, described very clearly the «invisible» intervention of church leaders in what is subjectively experienced as a conversation with God, and the statutory uncertainty it generates – at least until the ordination:

It's God who chooses (...). God looks at the flock and looks at the heart first, the temperament. Pastoral ministry is something that emerges in relation to faithfulness in the church, the ministers see who is faithful, who prays, then we talk and it's the Lord who puts this burden on your heart. I was faithful, the minister talked to me about that, I said: «I haven't heard God's call». And then I prayed and He told me: «Why not trying?» I talked to my wife, she had the same idea, we agreed. And we entered probation, which means trying and seeing if it's really God's call, otherwise I would tell the minister: «I don't feel this is my place» and I would remain a simple Christian. But if it's really God's plan, then God is going to confirm, He is going to bless this ministry. It's those who saw me living in the church who supported me, [Pastors] Louis Levant, Richardson and Pastor Roger, Gary, Eric.<sup>2</sup>

The role played by many different ministers in these two accounts underlines the need for a collective confirmation of the call, so that it can become more than what it is at the outset: an interpersonal relationship between a minister and a lay person whom he has chosen as his assistant. In French Polynesian Assemblies of God, this necessity of a collective confirmation submits *ipso facto* the applicants' career to the power struggle taking place among ministers and within the pastoral council. In 1999, a split within the Assembly of Raiatea was thus facilitated by an applicant for ministry who joined the dissident group. He was a former interpreter and «right hand man» of the successive local ministers, but three years before his call had been dismissed by the pastoral council.

Classical Pentecostalism is indeed structurally influenced by competition between the holders of the different «ministries» or the officially recognised charismas, particularly those of evangelist and pastor-shepherd. Controlling the selection process of new ministers is one of the main stakes in this competition, as the young ministers – due to their dominated position – tend to support one of the senior ministers following a double principle of recognition: while they feel grateful to those who supported their

accession to ministry, they also identify with senior ministers endowed with the same type of charisma as the one they claim for themselves.

In fact, the distinction between evangelists and pastors-shepherds is at the core of a fundamental – and impassable – contradiction which characterises classical Pentecostalism. The evangelist's mission is to gain new converts. This takes place mainly outside the church walls and focuses on the «miraculous» individual encounter with God. «The one who one day transformed my life is not a church, it's not a minister, it's not my mother: Jesus is the one who transformed my life», says one Polynesian evangelist<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, the church and the pastor-shepherd actually produce in their personal existence the visible and lasting changes attributed to conversion, through patient institutional work and the incorporation of new dispositions. So the permanent tension between these two poles symbolically expresses the constitutive ambiguity of a religious movement in which «autonomy depends on dependence» (Martin 2002: 13): a movement trying to be both an «anti-structure» – in line with what Hervieu-Léger (1993) describes as a «shift in the repository of the truth of belief from the institution to the believer» (1993:245) – and a structuring institution able to care for the individual needs of converts. This tension also underlines two distinct temporalities that Pentecostalism strives to reconcile: the intensity of enthusiastic moments and what Weber (1996/1922) labelled as «milder forms of euphoria» associated with an ethical rationalisation of life (1996/1922:185).

Pentecostal ministers (much more than believers) find interest in mentioning and emphasising this evangelist/pastor-shepherd opposition. This specific interest and their strong investment in the classification struggles that determine the balance of legitimacy between these two ministries can be explained thus: what is at stake in this internal definition of two positions – or postures – in regard to the institution is also the religious conversion of significant social/cultural differences into a kind of religious capital.

The pastor-shepherd is usually endowed with stronger cultural capital and therefore approaches institutional authority in a more familiar way than does the evangelist, an autodidact of lower social condition who tends to identify more spontaneously with the role of maverick operating at the institution's borders. Louis Levant was the president of the French Polynesian Assemblies of God until 2006 and is recognised as a pastor-shepherd. He comes from a modest family of Vietnamese shopkeepers settled in New Caledonia, who encouraged their children to seek achievement in school as an inroad for social inclusion («They told their children: Be serious at school, you're in a country which is not yours»<sup>4</sup>). He was studying at the Law Faculty in Montpellier (France) and had decided on a magistrate career when he converted to Pentecostalism in 1970. By contrast, Pastor Barber, an evangelist who succeeded to Louis Levant as president, grew up in France with a mother of Polynesian descent who worked as an employee at luxury hotels on the Riviera. He entered probation after a ten-year wait, during which he worked as nursing auxiliary in a hospital («I know what working means», he says), then learnt on the job:

I had the choice. Albert Leblanc, my minister in Cannes, told me: «You can study three years at a biblical school or learn on the job». I don't like to be locked up, community life. I am an undis-



ciplined person. I said: «I am married, I have one child to feed and I already have to pay for my three-year studies! I prefer to learn on the job». And I did right, I have learnt a lot, much more than at a biblical school, where it's rather theoretical. I know studies are important, but I emphasise practical skills.<sup>5</sup>

The elaboration of differential gaps («écarts»), and the classification struggle between the evangelist and the pastor, partly rely on the classical opposition between the fighting strength (which dominated populations ascribe to themselves) and the reduction of this strength by dominant classes to mere «brute strength», a relative weakness; the dominant meanwhile attribute to themselves «a self-control that predisposes them to control others» (Bourdieu 1979: 558). Pastor Levant explains:

Evangelists feel very comfortable, for example, doing evangelism under the rain, in the mud. They are really happy. Then, if you ask them: «Would you like to come to this youth camp?», «Oh, no, it's too difficult for me». It's an example.<sup>6</sup>

But the religious field does not simply reproduce social relationships of domination: the fighting strength fostered by his aggressive missionary undertaking and its visible impact enables the evangelist to reverse the perspective. The pastor-shepherd role then appears as secondary: after all, he is «just a manager» who provides only short-term stability for the church (without bringing new converts). «The evangelist moves on, he opens new doors, people get converted. And then, a pastor is appointed, who is going to manage the flock, to provide stability and teachings»<sup>7</sup>.

In fact, however, the distinction between these two roles is not as clear-cut as the ministries' struggle suggests. Pastor-shepherds and evangelists are involved, along with church members, in a continuum of missionary activities requiring – in sometimes counterintuitive proportions – a combination of institutional resources and personal initiatives (Fer 2006). The mobilisation of the institution's technical and human resources is never stronger than during the evangelistic campaigns, when the evangelist stands alone on stage, taking on the role of a church «star»<sup>8</sup>. Conversely, the less-institutionalised end of missionary activities relies on the contribution of the pastor-shepherd, through the incorporation of one's duty to be exemplary and one's individual disposition, transforming the convert into an agent of interpersonal evangelism (among his/her family, colleagues, and friends). This individualisation/mobilisation double-dynamic requires, in the institutional management of convert's personal commitment, a fine-tuning to find the right adjustment between the «call» from God which individuals believe to have received and the «mission» which the institution chooses to attribute to each. Analysing this distribution of positions among the church members helps to understand how classical Pentecostalism can both convert pre-existing social and cultural capital into «spiritual gifts» and subvert social hierarchies through the constitution of a specifically religious capital.

## «To each his own gift»: the distribution of lay «ministries»

Classical Pentecostalism emphasises the necessary involvement of each church member in the «Great Mission» rather than «the opposition between the holders of the monopoly over the administration of the sacred and the lay people» (Bourdieu 1971:308). An extensive understanding of universal priesthood and «ministries» – identified through the manifestation of personal charismas – leads to a distribution of positions which, as Bouter (1999) stated in the Assemblies of God of Reunion, «allows each one to gain some importance by becoming useful to the Assembly depending on his/her capacities and competences»(1999:145). As Pentecostalism attempts to base an individual's value not on ethnic origins or social status, but on what «he/she does with his/her life», it has been described as a «religious meritocracy predisposing individuals to enter social meritocracy» (Willaime 1999:23). Some evidence of this reversed relationship – between positions and dispositions gained in the religious field, and the converts' social itinerary (the idea that social position gained may be determined by the religious factor rather than determining religious itineraries) – can easily be found in the upward social mobility documented in many regions of converts from disadvantaged groups. But to achieve an in-depth understanding of the Pentecostal management of social/cultural differences, we need to examine more closely the conditions (and limitations) of this apparent reversal, and to extend the analysis to all the dispositions that converts of varied social origin invest in the religious field.

The most obvious aspect of the «changed lives» mentioned in all Pentecostal predications (as proof of conversion and salvation) consists in an ethical rationalisation of individual behaviour. The renunciation of «worldly passions» – alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, and gambling – which significantly influence the physical appearance and financial resources of the convert also implies the distancing of oneself from «bad company». A member of the Assembly of God of Faa'a (Tahiti) and small builder explains:

For me, it was difficult with the workers; I was tempted as they continued to smoke in front of [me]. It was a spiritual warfare, they knew I went to church, but they said to me «You're silly, drink with us».<sup>9</sup>

Pentecostal banning of «bad language» – traditionally associated with such habits and the kind of social intimacy that they foster – underlines even more clearly the dissociation that Pentecostalism aims to establish between the convert and his/her environment. Despite the immediate social disqualification that the convert must undergo – notably in contexts where the performance of masculine identity implies the use of this kind of language (Orson 2001:23) – these efforts still draw from the principles of vision and division prescribed by dominant social norms in order to produce, very quickly and conspicuously, signs of social respectability.

Differences associated with different positions, that is, goods, practices, and especially *manners*, function, in each society in the same way as differences which constitute symbolic systems, such as the set of phonemes of a language or the set of distinctive features and of differential «écarts» that constitute a mythical system, that is, as *distinctive signs* (Bourdieu 1994:24).

Bodies change, and manners evolve. These distinctive signs no longer reflect the social positions of the converts, but rather the positions they can now rightfully expect to reach, as if the inversion between the signified and the signifier should precede, announce, or even produce the transformation of reality itself: «be what you want to become» could be a Pentecostal motto.

While proclaiming that converts are freed from social determinations and «worldly» values, Pentecostalism thus engages them in a game mainly regulated by dominant rules, a game in which everyone hopes to be «more than winner» thanks to the recognition that God (i.e. the society) accords to individual merit. The effort they make, the *illusio* which leads them to accept the rules and stakes of this game by investing in their personal development, is very similar to the docility required at school – to the point that converts end up confined in the role of «good pupil», too diligent and «bookish» to attain the ease of «bright» pupils. A member of the Assembly of God in Papeete remembers the taunting of his co-workers each time he left the engineering factory to attend the «Christian life training» courses:

At the Bonne Nouvelle Church, I got a small degree. I told the factory chief, that's how everything began: «Hey you, tonight, take your exercise book and your school bag and go to be taught by the Pentecostals!»<sup>10</sup>

The belief in education as a key factor to (spiritual and social) salvation contributes, beyond the religious field, to widen the horizon of legitimate expectations by denying laws of social reproduction while encouraging confident investment in school. Hippolyte, who converted at the age of 33, is a plumber. «In school, I didn't manage to succeed,» he says. «I reached the 6<sup>th</sup> class [first year of secondary school] but I didn't have enough grey matter, it's better to go working». But his children, «they have got the baccalaureate, certificates; my daughter is going to France for a health career. I said: I can't bring them anything, but God did»<sup>11</sup>. The same dispositions that enable the daughter to access a slightly higher social position through a strong school investment haven't brought similar development to Hippolyte, who confesses some occasional disappointment («Sometimes, I am disappointed; we would like to get rich...»). But this disposition has contributed to his achieving the position of elder – a position which primarily rewards faithfulness to the church – and has encouraged him to invest in church training programs, within the limits prescribed by what he believes to be his intellectual capacities. After the Christian life training courses, he abstained from attending the Esdras biblical school (open to elders and applicants for pastoral ministry). «I stopped there, otherwise fuses may blow, I was afraid to hurt myself».

The case of Hippolyte provides a first insight into the orientation process which progressively determines the «mission» of each church member, through a constant interaction between (on the one hand) social distinctions «enchanted» by the religious discourse on equal dignity of all «gifts and talents» and (on the other) a relative liberation from social determinations based on the accumulation of religious capital (rewarding faithfulness to the institution) and/or spiritual capital (the strength of a personal «testimony»). Observation of this process helps to specify the functioning and limits

of the Pentecostal «meritocracy». Emile explains: «The ministry God gives, you strive to look for your own place, where you feel at ease. I tried the radio station, the cleaning, little by little, that's how you find it.»<sup>12</sup>

Emile works as an insurance and investments advisor. He has been trained in «explosive evangelism»<sup>13</sup> and participates in evangelistic campaigns as an advisor for people who feel «touched» by the evangelist's predication.

Connections are often less obvious, but cultural and social capital strongly determine the orientation of converts seeking their «place» within the church. In the Assembly of God in Papeete, the capital city of French Polynesia, an Assembly where civil servants and senior executives are more numerous than in rural settings, the highest institutional responsibilities (heads of departments, association presidencies, church committee) are mostly held by converts endowed with strong social, cultural, and/or economic capital. Eliane is one of those exemplifying the easy conversion of a dominant social position into an equivalent religious position. She is married to the president of a sport federation and enjoys a privileged lifestyle and strong social capital. At the time of the interview (that is, six years after she entered the church), she held numerous high responsibilities. Her «gifts» for charities and for the supervision of popular enthusiasm («Mamao's mamas») perfectly match the social dispositions of a «kind-hearted» woman who never neglects her duty towards the poor:

I am in charge of the Mamao hospital chapel, I am the intermediary between the CHT [Mamao Territorial Hospital Centre] and [Pastor] Louis Levant. I supervise while letting the mamas doing explosive evangelism within the hospital. (...) I participate in all the services, I am an INSTE mentor [in charge of a Christian life training group] and I chose to enter Esdras because I am also... I am in the church committee in Papeete (...). I have opened – we have opened – a social relief service.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, but at the other end of the social scale, converts of humble social condition will «naturally» return to the same tasks they knew in their humble social life; they won't feel the situation as exploitative, but rather as proof of a «gift» that enables them to serve God (Bourdieu 1994: 206). Ferdinand lives in Moorea, Windward Islands, on the island where he was born. He lives on fishing, subsistence agriculture, and small masonry works. Several years ago, he and his wife were invited to a meeting of the local Assembly by his wife's employer, and they decided to convert. In January 2000, Ferdinand explained on the AoG radio station how he is now «working for God»:

*Pastor Barber.* So what you do, your job in fact, you've received from the Lord the gift and the capacity to do everything in terms of organisation, practical tasks...

*Ferdinand.* Yes, that's true, the Lord, he gave me a lot so that I can organise things in the church and work, for meals or something else (...).

*Pastor Barber.* That's it and I am convinced that really, you've received this gift and this talent, because everything you do, you do it very, very well and there is no use to supervise to see if it has been done, you know.

*Ferdinand.* Yes, that's true. From my heart, I thank the Lord very much, he gave me this gift, you know, to work for the Lord in the church, you know.<sup>15</sup>

The high proportion of socially and culturally dominated groups among Pentecostal converts has led many scholars to emphasise its dimensions of social and religious protest, focusing on the collective claim for a new dignity associated with the «sanctification» of personal lives, and on the remarkable liberation of self-expression fostered by Pentecostalism. From this perspective, the practice of «speaking in tongues» or *glossolalia* – which enables the convert to freely express himself through an elementary and incomprehensible language «inspired by the Holy Spirit» – has thus been understood as a paradigmatic experience, «a free experience which requires no authorisation, no status» (Corten 1995:65). Corten notices:

In Brazil, it's often women and men from working classes who are encouraged to «speak in tongues». According to surveys, the «speaking in tongues» experience is only made by one fifth of the believers but it «fills» particularly the poorest, the humblest ones. There is no need to be educated or to belong to a clergy grade to «speak in tongues» (1995: 65–66).

The fact that only a fifth of the believers manifest access to this experience, although it is described as so elementary, leads one to question the rules that govern the distribution of strictly religious or spiritual capital within the church. The personal itineraries of elders (like Hippolyte) and local ministers in French Polynesia have already shown that constant faithfulness to the church can enable converts who lack of social and cultural capital to accumulate a religious capital formalised by their accession to subaltern leadership positions. While pointing out the «widely spread occurrence of [glossolalia], cross-cutting sex, age, socio-economic group and personality type», Samarin also remarked in his referential study (*Tongues of Men and Angels. The Religious Language of Pentecostalism*) that «for most people, glossolalia does not come easily, and improves greatly with practice» (Samarin, quoted by Wolfram 1974). A careful analysis of «speaking in tongues» indeed highlights a distribution of individual statuses much more complex than the simple equality of church members. All of the details of such analysis can't be mentioned here (Fer 2005a:309–318, 2005b), but we need to bear in mind that, in classical Pentecostalism, the capacity to «pray in tongues» (surrendering to the Holy Spirit when one can't find the words to express the intensity of his/her personal relationship with God – is theoretically accessible only to those who have been «baptised in the Holy Spirit». This personal experience, whose authenticity must however be recognised by an institutional authority, marks the acquisition of a spiritual maturity that enables baptised converts to aspire to leadership positions in the church. Such baptism offers to the poorest converts a first level of religious virtuosity which can give them access to certain high positions specifically defined as «spiritual»: praying groups, intercession, evangelism, praise leaders, etc. In this category, much as with the evangelist, verified effectiveness or the strength of a «personal testimony» are sufficient to acquire legitimacy. Hinano, working in Moorea hotels as a housekeeper, owes her position within the AoG missionary apparatus to an episode of «healing» attributed to the Holy Spirit – she stopped taking pills that were prescribed for life against the effects of serious obesity – and also to a «vision» she received during a heart attack. During the surgical operation, her heart «gave up» and she «found herself

upstairs», walking in a garden along with «an angel aged about 30, he wore a white tunic, I know it was Jesus». She explains:

The mission consists of interceding for lost souls. Sometimes, I wake up in the night and I pray, I pray and then a name gets out of my mouth. He puts names and figures in front of me, I just intercede. (...) Now I know that, when there is an evangelistic campaign, it's my duty to go with God's servants and to pray for lost souls, I have to go with them and it's my greater pleasure, my greater joy.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, this possibility of asserting spiritual merits which are capable of reversing social hierarchies is contained within the limits set by the institutional control of supernatural manifestations, as exemplified by a second type of «speaking in tongues»: «messages» delivered during services and followed by an «interpretation» in intelligible language. If all converts baptised in the Holy Spirit can speak in tongues, only a few of them feel allowed to receive such messages, and the number of interpreters is even smaller. Interpretation is not only a matter of inspiration: to interpret requires a specific qualification, knowledge, and preparation. «You need to consistently read the word of God – an interpreter explains – so that you will not talk nonsense, so that you can be affected by God's thoughts».<sup>17</sup>

Efforts made by socially modest converts to acquire religious education, and to progressively accumulate religious capital, can lead them, after several years in the church, to the point where they feel capable of making God speak, pronouncing on God's behalf the reprimands and encouragements that make up most such «messages». But many of them, like Claire – who even grew up in the church – never reach this level of self-confidence, but modestly remain in the place ascribed by their social position:

I don't have the gift of interpretation, neither did I ask for, I know you have to ask, to yearn for the different gifts. I am not ready, maybe it's not for me. There is no obligation to get all the different gifts; to each his own gift. To interpret or to speak in tongues is something strong. It's about edifying the church.<sup>18</sup>

While the distribution of lay «ministries» in French Polynesian AoG does not simply reproduce – in «enchanted» form – relationships of domination already extant in ordinary social life, differences in capital and disposition do not vanish at the doorstep of the church. And yet, this is what the Pentecostal discourse on conversion promises, offering the hope of biographical invention.

## Pentecostal habitus and the institutional mechanisms of biographical invention

If we want to build a sociological account for the conditions under which this biographical invention can be granted the status of a well-grounded illusion, we first need to move beyond the false alternative defined by two of the most common interpretations. The first considers that Pentecostal conversion can easily ignore biographical and

social realities, because the new «identity in Christ» that conversion offers has neither legitimacy nor relevance outside the religious field in which it is proclaimed. From this perspective, conversion produces a split habitus, and the new dispositions incorporated into the religious field are very slightly imported into the social field. Pentecostal discourse itself seems to admit this disjunction when it describes – as a tension rather than as a peaceful coexistence – the relationships persisting long after conversion between the «new person» and the «old nature» associated with the convert's former life «in the world».

On the other hand, a second interpretation considers that what makes the reshaping of individual identity plausible is the small amount of readjustment that conversion concretely requires, the transformation of lives remaining within the limits of the habitus adjusting to new and unpredicted circumstances (Bourdieu 1984:135). As Hefner (1993) has pointed out, rather than a «deeply systematic reorganization of personal meanings», conversion may indeed merely require «an adjustment in self-identification through the at least nominal acceptance of religious actions or beliefs deemed more fitting, useful, or true » (1993:17). In French Polynesia, this is exemplified by families converting from the Protestant historical church to Pentecostalism and claiming at the same time – with some reason – that they «have not changed their religion». Considering classical Pentecostalism as a way back to the «Good Old Time» of Protestant missions, these families maintain their unity through the «personal» but concerted conversions of all their members, reinvesting in their new church most of the same dispositions they had incorporated in the previous one (Fer 2009:158–162).

It seems possible to understand Pentecostal conversion without reducing it to one of these two alternative approaches – that is, without denying the possibility of an actual biographical break. This break is symbolically proclaimed at a moment when conversion is still only a religious fiction (the convert «gets Jesus in his/her heart»). But it becomes deeper as lives and behaviours are progressively restructured by the institutional apparatus for training, control, and mediation, and as converts finally acquire the capacity to hear by themselves – at an individuated state or through «invisible» mediations – the «voice of the Holy Spirit», which is nothing other than the very expression of the Pentecostal habitus.

The first stage of this «new birth» relies on specific «dispositions to be and, above all, to become», thus achieving, as Bourdieu (1997) once put it, «the institutionalisation of a point of view in things and in habitus»:

In reality, what the new entrant must bring into the game is not the habitus that is tacitly or explicitly demanded there, but a habitus that is practically compatible, or sufficiently close, and above all malleable and capable of being converted into the required habitus, in short congruent and docile, amenable to restructuring (1997:120).

Pentecostal discourse claims to ignore practical conditions of this «convertibility» and prefers to focus on spectacular examples of «impossible» conversions (rather than on sociological regularities)<sup>19</sup>. This ignorance is reinforced by the fact that most of the congruence between the habitus of converts and the dispositions required is based on

a paradox. Individuals most inclined to convert are indeed those who, due to their spiritual capital<sup>20</sup>, or to specific circumstances (e.g. illness, divorce, migration), or to their social positions, have (progressively or suddenly) become convinced that salvation is a personal issue and that «religion does not save». So the tension highlighted by the evangelist/pastor-shepherd opposition is at work from the very first step of the conversion process: while converts seek to «change their lives» and escape church constraints through direct and personal communication with God, they will leave it to the Pentecostal institution to establish and maintain such communication. What makes this logical contradiction possible is «invisible» institutional work: interventions of institutional authority, subjectively experienced as elements of an intimate dialogue with God. Pentecostal socialisation thus produces a kind of «enchanted» individualism through a complex – and fragile – combination of subjective individualisation and institutional control. «God knows your situation», the evangelist says. «He wants to help you, to become your friend, your advisor – are you ready to respond to this call? All you have to do is to accept Jesus in your heart». The evangelistic rhetoric aims for personal appropriation of the message it delivers:

There is a woman among us who has always been rebellious, she wanted to make her own life: «When I will be 18» – sorry, I am using youth's words – «I will break away». Yeah, you broke so much that you're now broken. *Laughs*. You're broken, my friend, you are in a situation now, you're broken. And now, you need others. You wanted to make your own life, you have been rebellious, now you're picking up the pieces of your life. The Lord tells you tonight: would you like me to help you get back on your feet (Pastor Barber, evangelistic meeting in Faa'a, 8 May 2002)?

A presentation of the Bible focused on individual psychology<sup>21</sup> and a preacher who «allows the social background of his hearers to 'put him off'» (Hollenweger 1988:466) encourages believers to interpret even the best-known biblical episodes as personal messages:

On this day, the message was on the lost sheep. I felt as if he was recounting all my life and I cried. He talked about the shepherd looking for this sheep, I saw myself on His shoulder, it hurt, he was miming everything and I saw my life passing before my eyes.<sup>22</sup>

Advisors in charge of those who have responded to «the call» at the end of the meeting are tasked to confirm this intimate conviction that communication with God has really been established and to convince these believers that they need to maintain and deepen the connection by joining «brothers and sisters in Christ» who have experienced «the same thing». Such entry into the church therefore relies on a kind of concealment of its institutional dimension, so that it can be lived as a «form of community validation of belief» (Hervieu-Léger 1999:182), more relational and based on «sharing of experiences».

Within the church, community socialisation and, in a more systematic form, Christian life training courses<sup>23</sup> reinforce this initial enchantment, incorporating it into a «system of complementary interactions between the individual and God» which submits all rela-



tionships (including internal psychological conflicts) to the mediation of God (Boutter 1999:251–254). Converts are «never alone»: they learn to «share with Jesus» their intimate thoughts, projects, and hesitations. Through a reading of the Bible focused on «personal messages» and the incorporation of new ethical and practical dispositions, they acquire the capacity to hear «responses» and «advices» given by God in any circumstances. As long as the enchantment lasts, personal advice given by ministers, normative discourse delivered by predications, and mutual control ensured by the «brothers and sisters in Christ» are indeed always experienced as messages «from God».

What the institution strives to establish is a sufficiently constant and transparent «personal relationship» with God, so that the whole of individual behaviour is no more determined by «worldly» values or by dispositions incorporated before conversion, but by the Pentecostal credo alone. The «voice of the Holy Spirit» – the expression of the individuated incorporation of these norms – represents «more than conscience in a life», a convert says:

He is there and if you do something that does not conform to the word of God, he will show you, he will warn you: that's not the good way. It's more than conscience, the Holy Spirit in a life.<sup>24</sup>

Ideally, the convert who «stays online» can rely on a set of stable and systematic dispositions in order to transform his/her relationship to the world by introducing a «mediation of God» which can be described in the same terms as the habitus, as a «principle of real autonomy in relation to the immediate determinations of the 'situation'» (Bourdieu 1984:135)<sup>25</sup>. But this autonomy is somewhat weakened by the tensions of uncertainty and interrelations between competing dispositions (Coleman 2000:63). At least two types of tension impede the realisation of this Pentecostal ideal, of a «born again» habitus guided by the Holy Spirit and exclusively nurtured by the personal relationship of converts with God. The first difficulty consists in the limited and uncertain character of the «responses» this internal dialogue can provide in facing the various circumstances and needs of everyday life. More than on intimate communication with God, converts must therefore base their decisions on the «invisible» mediation of the institutional apparatus, church members, and ministers in order to receive more reliable responses «from God». Before he launched a soilless vanilla plantation, Daniel explains that he looked for clear indications from God:

And He responded, through messages, through the Bible, through prophecies and through the church – several times, people who said «do this, do that» – through the minister and through circumstances. I got these four responses: the Bible, the church, the ministers and circumstances. So I knew it was right, now I know that's what I am going to do.<sup>26</sup>

By contrast, this necessity to obtain the «four responses» throws light on the complications that may arise from conflicting responses. It also underlines the gap between, on one hand, the self-confidence experienced by converts endowed with strong cultural capital, who tend to live their «personal relationship» with God at some distance from institutional authority (in informal networks outside the church), and on the other hand the uncertainty affecting many converts from lower social condition, who rely more

strongly on institutional «invisible» interventions to maintain this «enchantment». These inequalities produce, in terms of belonging, a wide scope of dispositions, ranging from a total faithfulness to the church to radical forms of autonomy that contribute to splits and diversification of the Pentecostal movements.

The second structural tension of Pentecostal habitus comes from the duty to become exemplary – prescribed to converts as soon as they begin their «new life», even when they are not yet fully incorporated; to put it in Pentecostal terms, the «new person in Christ» has not yet overcome the «old nature». Converts must then attempt to become their «true» selves by demonstrating clear signs of an in-depth change – as proof to themselves, to other potential converts, and to other church members that the effects of conversion are both «real» and «miraculous». Converts themselves, as well as the institutional apparatus and the church community, constantly strive to distinguish the «new person» from opposed thoughts, feelings, or attitudes they attribute to the «old nature» – symbolising the inertia of inherited dispositions. Thus the same system of beliefs does explicitly recognise the historical continuity of habitus, while stating the possibility of a biographical invention based on a miraculous break. The «voice of the Holy Spirit» provides an exact measure of the distance separating these two features of the Pentecostal paradigm – a distance which varies depending on one's inclusion into the church, and on the capital and dispositions held by each convert.

## Conclusion

The church institution described here does not reflect all the diversity of contemporary Pentecostalism. In particular, it differs significantly from the kind of Pentecostalism spread by «Charismatic» movements (also labelled as «independent Charismatics») which have developed since the 1970s in international networks connecting missionary organisations, non-denominational churches, and a myriad of individual entrepreneurs claiming a «ministry» away from institutional systems of legitimisation. The development of such movements contributes to deepen the desinstitutionalisation and the individualisation of religious experience initiated by classical Pentecostalism. It also produces an elevation of individual spiritual capital, encouraging an increasing proportion of believers to escape the «invisible» guardianship of the institution.

The observation of authority and sociability patterns in classical Pentecostalism provides keys to understanding this recent evolution from a historical and sociological perspective, while throwing light on the ongoing reshaping of forms of commitment in contemporary societies. It shows how an institutional apparatus aiming to control individual lives can paradoxically build its legitimacy on a claim for personal autonomy and a mistrust of institutions. The «fluidities of today's spiritual marketplace», which Verter (2003) tries to address through the notion of spiritual capital, and by extending the use of Bourdieu's theoretical tools beyond the solely institutional frame (2003:151), do not absolutely condemn all forms of institutionality to decline. This unexpected conciliation opens possibilities for a re-legitimisation of social relations-

hips of domination – transformed by «enchantment» into free expression of personal will – as well as for a subversion of dominant norms.

## Notes

- 1 Interview with Pastor Lemaire, 2 June 2001, in Papeete (Tahiti).
- 2 Interview with Pastor Quincarez, 20 December 2000, in Moorea.
- 3 Pastor Barber, open-air evangelistic meeting at Faa'a (Tahiti), 6 May 2002.
- 4 Interview with Pastor Levant, 21 January 2001, in Papeete.
- 5 Interview with Pastor Barber, 12 July 2001, in Papeete.
- 6 Interview with Pastor Levant, 20 December 2001, in Papeete.
- 7 Interview with Pastor Barber, 12 July 2001, in Papeete.
- 8 Referring to the expression of Edgar Morin – the «star system is primarily a matter of fabrication».  
Analyzing Billy Graham's organisation, Fath points out: «without a team, without infra-structures dedicated to the 'fabrication' and (the broadcasting) of the star's image, nothing is possible» (Fath 2002: 166).
- 9 Interview with Daniel, 7 November 2000, in Faaa.
- 10 Interview with Alfred, 16 May 2001, in Papeete.
- 11 Interview with Hippolyte, 19 June 2001, in Tiarei (Tahiti).
- 12 Interview with Emile, 25 April 2001, in Papeete.
- 13 *Evangelism Explosion International* is an organisation founded in the USA by James Kennedy, a Presbyterian minister. Its training programmes aim to amplify the impact of interpersonal evangelism by equipping the converts with a set of arguments drawn from direct marketing methods.
- 14 Interview with Eliane, 7 May 2001, in Papeete.
- 15 «L'invité du jour», RTV, 19 January 2000.
- 16 Interview with Hinano, 24 December 2000, in Moorea.
- 17 Interview with Lucienne, 24 July 2001, in Paea (Tahiti).
- 18 Interview with Claire, 19 April 2001.
- 19 *The Cross and the Switchblade*, David Wilkerson's account of the conversion of Nicky Cruz, leader of a violent street gang in New York City, is a best-seller of Pentecostal literature worldwide and certainly the most popular version of this Pentecostal discursive figure.
- 20 Beyond confessional belonging which provides «an institutional state» of spiritual capital, individual religious dispositions are also determined by what Verter calls an embodied spiritual capital: «the knowledge, abilities, tastes and credentials an individual has amassed in the field of religion, and its outcome of explicit education or unconscious processes of socialization» (Verter 2003: 159).
- 21 This theological psychologisation is a common feature of contemporary Evangelical and Charismatic movements, primarily focused on personal change and projects (Willaime 1992: 52). It has notably produced a wide range of «Christian Psychology» best-sellers.
- 22 Interview with Alice, 18 April 2001, in Papeete.
- 23 The French Polynesian AoG uses the INSTE (Institute of Theology by Extension) programmes developed by the *Open Bible Standard Churches*, an American Evangelical association. Many other similar programmes exist, notably the ICI (International Correspondence Institute) courses produced by the missionary department of the American AoG.

- <sup>24</sup> Interview with Marthe in Papeete, 2 April 2001.
- <sup>25</sup> Martin uses quite similar terms when describing a Pentecostal «internalized conscientiousness and portable integrity at home and at work» (Martin 2002: 11).
- <sup>26</sup> Interview op. cit., 7 November 2000.

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