

Pentecostals in Societal Engagement:

A Theology of Incarnational Transformation

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Why should we care for the society when we belong to another kingdom? I sometimes meet that kind of question from Pentecostal friends. My personal response to that is, because God cares. The whole creation belongs to God, and he loves the world. The Spirit is God's dynamic presence breathing life into every creature. Jesus became one of us in the incarnation, defeated death through his resurrection and he is sustaining all things by his powerful word. As his people our life and action should as much as possible be in line with God's identity.

For most people, hopefully especially Christians, it is a natural instinct to help people in need. I remember a discussion some years ago in my local church. At that time many refugees were coming to Sweden, among them a lot of young boys without parents. The situation was tense, and the social authorities did the best they could, but more help was needed. As a church we decided to open our facility to host some of the boys. This was more of a spontaneous reaction to the crisis. Along the line our motivations became clearer. We wanted to show love help the individuals in their exposed situation. We also wanted to be a constructive partner in building a good society alongside with the authorities. By the time we also realised that in this praxis we became a better version of our self, we were not only praying and confessing but also building the kingdom of God and by that we were forced to deeper think through our theology. It is my conviction that Christinas in general and Pentecostals in particular need to strengthen the theological foundation of the natural praxis of caring. This article is an attempt to do so.

The Christian faith is formed around Jesus. That is obvious when reading the apostolic creed where the second article is much more expanded than the others. Faith in the Pentecostal tradition is even more Christ-centric with the formulations around the full gospel as an example where Jesus is the centre of the theological understanding. The distinctive

¹ In relation to the definition of the full gospel we have the historical divisions among Pentecostals in different groups. Still the paradigm of the full gospel is used by leading Pentecostal theologians as Wolfgang Vondey in

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theological expression for the Pentecostal tradition is pneumatology and eschatology, both as doctrine and experience. The event of Pentecost can arguably be seen as the inauguration or the foretaste of the coming kingdom.² But when we peel the onion, layer by layer we find Jesus everywhere, of course as the foundation of statements but also as lived example and the core of experience. His incarnational presence is unique but can although have the function as theological paradigm for Christian life in this world. How can a thoroughly incarnational understanding a of Christian faith and life deepen the societal engagement?

Jesus' example also shows a radical transgressive presence of the divine in the midst of the world. Storms are calmed, water turns into wine, the sick and the dead are healed and resurrected. In the end, death itself is defeated, and man is invited through Jesus' transformative work into a new and more open reality. The same world and yet another, the same circumstances but with new possibilities. God's work through Jesus can be described as a transformation of reality, a transformation that man is invited to share, a transformation that man is challenged to live in and contribute to its realization. The Christian life is in this sense transformative and the Christian presence in society can therefore have a transformative effect. This is even more so in the Pentecostal tradition where the life of Jesus finds a continuation through the event of Pentecost in what Nimi Wariboko calls the Pentecostal principal (Wariboko 2012). How can the Pentecostal principal be lived in this world and the Pentecostal presence be understood and performed as truly transformational?

The aim of this paper is to investigate how Christian presence and engagement in the society can be understood as incarnational and transformative. The focus is on Pentecostalism and the case is mainly the Swedish Pentecostal movement. Pentecostalism is in many ways a practical and concrete type of religion. Some scholars have described it as entrepreneurial,

Pentecostal theology 2017, Amos Yong in In the Days of Caesar 2010, John Christopher Thomas in Toward a Pentecostal Ecclesiology 2010.

² See for example Augustine and Green 2023 when they talk about the event of Pentecost as the eschatological telos of all creation.

active or practical, or as Bretherton says, "embodied experience" (Bretherton 2019, 127). Faith is for Pentecostals not so much an idea but more of lived experience. In that sense it is faith taking concrete form or in other words incarnational. On the other hand, Pentecostals are eager to see radical change. Salvation, for Pentecostals, is to become a new creation, Spirit baptism is to be filled with new power, possibility and perspective, the Church is the redeemed alternative community. Eschatology is the dream of a kingdom of new heavens and new earth. The whole spirituality is about change, development or transformation. Taking this into the Pentecostals life in the society the main question here is: How can a Pentecostal theology of societal engagement looks like, and can it be described as incarnational transformation?

SITUATING PENTECOSTALISM

Most scholars today agree that the root and beginnings of Pentecostalism are multifaceted. The events on Azuza street in 1906 played a crucial role in the image and spread of Pentecostalism (Robeck 2017). At the same time, it is obvious that Pentecostalism arose among theological ideas and revival-oriented practices, most of which preceded Pentecostalism itself (Dayton 1987). Many have tried to create a unified definition of the Pentecostal tradition (Hollenweger 1980; 2012). In recent years the multidimensional image of Pentecostalism formulated by Allan Andersson, has gained impact pointing at the differences within Pentecostalism (Anderson 2010). Sometimes Pentecostalism is either presented as a Spirituality more than a theological tradition or as a kind of "evangelical plus" but increasingly Pentecostalism is understood as a family of denominations, churches and expressions, and constitute a unified church family alongside Catholicism, Orthodoxy and

³ A similar picture can also be found in, for example, Harvey Cox in the book *Fire from Heaven*, Cox 1995. From a more theological standpoint Christopher Stephenson shows in *Types of Pentecostal Theology*, 2013 a variety of Pentecostal theology.

Protestantism (Jacobsen 2021). Among Pentecostal scholars today it is more natural to understand Pentecostalism as a Christian tradition in its own rights, despite the variations, and from that point engage in a wider theological dialogue.⁴ In this article I will draw on the wide expression of Pentecostalism but the main material and examples will be taken from the Swedish Pentecostal movement.

In this article societal engagement is discussed and we need to remember the variety and differences within Pentecostalism even in this case. In the book Global Pentecostalism, the authors, Miller and Yamarori show that Pentecostalism, not all groups but still a significant proportion, show strong participation and a clear impact on society and its development. This is not a result of development projects or political agitation, but by the way the church is operating; through faith in the transformative power of the gospel, through the empowerment of the people involved, through worship, experiences and fellowship (Miller & Yamamori 2007). We find a similar reflection by Martina Björkander shoving that the transformative nature of Pentecostalism includes a wholistic understanding of the gospel (Björkander 2024, kap 8). The engagement for societal development and common good turns out to be rooted in the way they look at faith and the Christian life. The economic anthropologist Dena Freeman has shown that Pentecostal groups, in her case in Ethiopia, were able to demonstrate more far-reaching and lasting social change precisely because the change was rooted in the theological ideas, in the common morality carried by the community, and that both leaders and participants shared beliefs, experiences and common life (Freeman 2012, 26ff). The conclusion is therefore the need to develop a thick ecclesiology and a theology for societal engagement.

The Swedish Pentecostal Movement has from its beginning been characterized by a missionary zeal with strong social pathos. Allan Anderson says that the movement "has made

⁴ One example of this is Daniel Castelo in *Pentecostalism as a Christian mystical tradition* 2017. Another example is Pentecostal Manifesto where leading Pentecostal Scholars write in a wider theological conversation.

a remarkable contribution [...] far beyond its numbers" and that an "important contribution is its holistic approach to missions", which involved both preaching and contributing to the creation of social institutions such as schools and health centres (Anderson 2022, 13f). Agnes Abuom, leader of the World Council of Churches, similarly emphasizes the Swedish Pentecostal movement's holistic approach to mission. She points to "the importance of such a holistic approach rather than isolating boundaries. The gospel we proclaim needs to touch the whole of life. That is what Swedish Pentecostal Mission is all about" (Abuom 2022, 18). Diakonia, social activities and integral mission has been highly integrated in the gospel in the Swedish Pentecostal movement.

I want to conclude this section by specify the aim and structure of the article. The purpose is to study how Christian presence and engagement in the society can be understood as incarnational and transformative. The focus is on Pentecostalism and in particular the Swedish Pentecostal Movement and its international ramifications. I have described the theological identity of the Swedish Pentecostal movement as experience-based practical Christianity through Jesus-centred missionality. Within this definition, the emphasis on experience and missionality can be characterized by a transformative dimension, while the practically oriented Jesus-centeredness have incarnation features. But before I deepen the discussion about these different dimensions of the Swedish Pentecostal movement's theological basis for societal engagement, the terminology of engagement will be briefly discussed.

SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT AND POLITICAL THEOLOGY

I remember a conversation on the board of WAPTE (World Alliance for Pentecostal Theological Education). We discussed the theme and terminology for the next issue of the journal *Pentecostal Education*. What are we talking about when the gospel, faith and the

church meet the world, society and social needs? Should we use the terms social, societal or community. The concepts overlap but also have different meanings. Then came the question of whether we should talk about awareness, responsibility, engagement or transformation. It looked like the theme would be "Community transformation", but in the end the discussion ended up in the formulation "Pentecostal Social engagement". In this article, I have chosen the concepts of societal engagement. I chose societal because I don't want to risk ending up in an overly introverted or individual discussion. I chose engagement to make room for the passion, based on convictions, while emphasizing personal agency.

The question of whether and how the church should relate to its surroundings and its challenges is as old as the church itself. In the second century, Tertulian asked himself what Athens has to do with Jerusalem in an attempt to show the distance between faith and the world. But for long periods in history, faith, church, state, and power have almost completely merged.

Within classical Pentecostalism, there has been periods when almost a sectarian attitude has been cultivated. The first academic work in modern time on Swedish Pentecostalism has the title *From Apocalyptic Sect to Christian Society* [my transl.] showing the journey from a sectarian mentality to the ambition to protect what they perceived as a Christian society (Sahlberg 1999). Amos Yong discusses different ways in which Pentecostals have related to the surrounding society. He talks about three types of Pentecostal relationship to society.

- Pentecostal sectarianism that stays out of the way and does not want to be contaminated by the surrounding society (Yong 2009, 27ff).
- Pentecostal conservatism, which according to Yong is more confrontational and arguing for theological, moral and political positions (Yong 2009, 31ff).

⁵ The process ended up with a issue in the journal *Pentecostal Education*, vol 6 nr 2, 2021.

- Pentecostal progressivism which is more socially activist and, in Yong's terminology, more prophetic in its relationship with society (Yong 2009, 34ff).

Earlier in the same text Yong identifies some Pentecostal groups as apolitical (Yong 2009, 4ff). Maybe that dimension could be added as a fourth group characterised by disinterest for the society and more focused on evangelism and mission.

In the choice of terminology to discuss the church's role in and relationship to society, the term political theology has become increasingly common over the past decade. Many classical Pentecostal groups has strived to be apolitical. As a missionary kid in South America, I remember how that position as the prominent. We were in Bolivia to build churches and help needy people and we should not be political. The reason for this was twofold. Politics were perceived as worldly and corrupting, and at a strategic level mission should not offend those in power in order to remain in the country.

The Belgian sociologist Chantale Mouffe distinguishes political from politics. The latter is about engaging in political parties, elections and the political system when the former is to work and act in the public sphere for the common good (Mouffe 2005). Using this terminology most Pentecostals have avoided to enter into politics but almost all have in different degree and different matters been political, some unintentionally others based on a thoughtfully theological position. During the last ten to fifteen years several books have been published dealing with public or political Pentecostalism.⁶

To conclude this section, we can state that almost all Pentecostals are political in the sense of action in the public sphere. We also see a growing reflection of what it means to be Pentecostal and political even if this interest not yet has been fully adopted outside the more academic circles. Now I will turn to unpack the case of the Swedish Pentecostal Movement.

⁶ Here are just a small sample. Amos Yong, *In the days of Caesar* from 2010; Mark Cartledge et al., *Mega Churches and social engagement* from 2016; Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the common life* from 2019; Kyama Mugambi, *A Spirit of Revitalization* from 2020; *Pentecostal Education* (special issue on Pentecostal social engagement) 2021; Daniela Augustine and Chris Green, *The politics of the Spirit* from 2022.

SWEDISH PENTECOSTALISM AS CASE

I have previously described the Swedish Pentecostal movement as experience-based practical Christianity through Jesus-centred missionality. In line with several of the cited researchers, not least Dena Freeman, it is my conviction that if the church's practices and commitment to build a better society are to be sustainable and effective, they must be anchored in and integrated with theological convictions (Freeman 2012). I therefore want to unpack the condensed description of the theological identity of the Swedish Pentecostal movement in the light of societal engagement. In doing so I will end in a reflection on the two terms incarnational and transformation.

Experiences and affections have played and still play an important role in forming theology and spirituality among Swedish Pentecostals (Josefsson 2005, 365f; Wärnelid 2025). This is in line with the wider description of Pentecostalism but does not necessarily mean that thought or theology is diluted, but the theological method is different from the classical academic more rationalistic method. A Pentecostal epistemology must include practices, experiences, and affections (Johns and Johns 1992; Josefsson and Novachek 2022). Steven Land goes so far as to believe that affections take precedence in the formation of a Pentecostal spirituality (Land 1993, 47f). Current research shows a clear connection between the experience-based understanding of faith and life and the societal engagement among Swedish Pentecostals. The encounter with God, the world and the others become for the Pentecostals a way of integrating faith and life, heaven and earth, spiritual and material. In this integrative process, experiential theology plays a significant role both in the formation of one's own faith and in the encounter with the surrounding society (Josefsson and Wenell 2025).

⁷ See for example James K.A. *Smith Thinking in tongues* 2010; Simo Frestadius, *Pentecostal Rationality* 2020.

Action oriented practical Christianity is the second dimension we need to deal with. The experience-based emphasis could lead to a look inward for affections and emotions. This is balanced within Pentecostal spirituality with an activist and action-oriented trait (Josefsson 2005, 323ff). The Swedish Pentecostal pioneer Lewi Pethrus repeatedly spoke about the need for faith to be given concrete expression and he used the term practical Christianity in this context and an analysis of the Swedish Pentecostal preaching of recent decades shows that the emphasis on practical Christianity remains very strong (Josefsson 2019). The emphasis on action, activity and practical Christianity was already present during the revival at Azuza street with a strong and radical pathos and norm-breaking practices regarding both gender, race and tradition (Alexander 2023). One of the leaders urged people after a highly emotional service to "do not go from here and talk about the tongues but go and try to get people saved" (McClung 1999, 35). Within the Swedish Pentecostal Movement, there are many forms of the inherent entrepreneurship, but perhaps the clearest expression is found in the diaconal and social field. Caring for the vulnerable has been and is a prominent expression of the faith. This has not been perceived by the Pentecostals as political commitment and when the movement's leaders started a political party, the agenda was rather conservative with the ambition to protect Christian values in society. Nevertheless, it is obvious that for Swedish Pentecostals the emphasis on practical Christianity mostly has been expressed in concern for the vulnerable and a far-reaching social commitment (Josefsson and Wahlström 2017).

The *Christ-centric theology* dimension of Swedish Pentecostalism is not undermined by the experience-based practical Christianity. Jesus is the centre of Pentecostal spirituality in a way that interacts with the two preceding traits. The primary experience in this revival-oriented Christianity is conversion. Atonement is usually understood in Pentecostalism as an objective reality rooted in Jesus' vicarious sacrifice on the cross. However, the reception of this objective reality in salvation has strong and important subjective dimensions. One of

these is the intertwined process of conversion, confession and surrender in which man is expected to be an active participant not in the conditions or reality of salvation but in its reception and appropriation. As a result, there is also an expectation of the personal experience of assurance of salvation, expressed in the famous song "Blessed Assurance". Jesus is thus the centre of the crucial Pentecostal experience, but also the centre of the tapestry of theological convictions that has come to be called the full gospel. Here Jesus is at the centre as saviour, sanctifier, healer, spirit baptizer and coming king. But in relation to the issues of societal engagement, Jesus appears rather as an example. The early Swedish Pentecostals read the Jesus-story through the lens of practical Christianity. Jesus descended, and so should his followers. Jesus went out, met people in the middle of their everyday lives and not infrequently in their vulnerability, and this forms an example that further strengthens the incentives for societal engagement. At the same time, we need to see that Pentecostal Christ-centric societal engagement often ends in the compassion and action for the needy and rarely take the next step into a work for more of structural changes (Josefsson and Wahlström 2017; Agustine and Green 2023).

Pentecostalism in general is a *missionally oriented type of Christianity*. The Swedish Pentecostal movement is very much so (Sahlberg 1999). In the introduction of the text, Allan Anderson was quoted as saying that the movement has made a global imprint far beyond its size (Andersson 2022). A similar analysis is made by the missiologist David Bundy, who speaks of disproportionate influence (Bundy 2009). For the Pentecostals, missionality is about an eagerness to spread the gospel, see people come to faith and form vibrant and self-sustained local churches. But it is also about having a mission and being in motion. In the missional identity, the desire to spread the gospel interacts with activism, Christocentrism and the desire to bear witness to one's own personal experiences. Missionality in general and missionary work in particular offer an arena and practices that connects several other

important theological fields. Mission has a strong intrinsic value, which is reinforced by an intertwining with the necessity of salvation, the experience of the Spirit as a power for witness, the anticipation of Jesus' return, and the dawn of the new age. All in all, this means that the Pentecostal missiology is strengthened as if by multiplication (Josefsson 2022). Another dimension of missionality is precisely to follow Jesus, the first missionary, and be led by the Spirit, God's dynamic presence in the world. A clear and wholistic soteriology can also be a driving force for societal engagement (Björkander 2022). Jesus-centred missionality is about following Jesus, led by the Spirit to the world where God is already present. Societal engagement is not about taking God into the world but to discover the God who is. In the encounter with other religions, it is not about winning theological discussions nor about toning down the message about Jesus, but about discovering how Jesus through the Spirit is already present (Björkander 2022). In the encounter with suffering and vulnerability, it is about, like Jesus, meeting people where they are and letting the gospel become the good news that meets real needs. In the encounter with unjust structures, it can be about contributing to liberation and redress for individuals and thus seeing a social change from below (Josefsson and Lindgren 2023).

We have discussed four aspects of the theological identity of the Swedish Pentecostal movement in the light of societal engagement. The overarching question for this article is if and if so in what way Pentecostal societal engagement can be understood as incarnational transformation. Let me first address the question on *if* before I end with a reflection on *how*.

SOCIETAL ENGAGEMENT AS INCARNATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

Pentecostal identity can, as I have shown, be described as Christ-centric, practical embodied experience. For most Pentecostals faith is a personal and inner reality that takes form in the real life. When a person is saved a visible change is expected. When the Spirit

moves it comes with concrete utterances like tongues, healing and miracles. When the church is working it is leaning forward, active and entrepreneurial. Pentecostal faith needs to be manifested, concrete and embodied.

Incarnation means that the divine becomes material, that God himself becomes human but without abolishing or erasing the original identity. The incarnation is blurring the division between God's transcendence and immanence. The exalted God becomes present, the invisible made visible, and the involvement of God in the human life is taking concrete form. In the modern study of religion, we can see a "material turn" where an increasing interest is put on the material expressions of faith. One of the major sociological perspectives here is the actor-network theory formulated by Bruno Latour where the actor is seen as imbedded in the context of networking factors. It is an emphasis on actorship in context (Morgan 2016).

In a Pentecostal context, this fits into the image of faith as manifested practical Christianity, where the personal experience is partly shaped in the community of other believers, partly portrayed in a given social context and so takes concrete form in the society in which the person and the congregation are situated. The incarnational dimension of Pentecostal faith is on one side founded in the theology and on the other in praxis. The theological dimension is the Christcentric spirituality and the immanent presence of Christ through the Spirit that forms the ambition to experience, proclaim and embody that presence. The more practical side of this is tendence among Pentecostals to measure Gods presence in visible and concrete utterances.

All this can be understood as incarnational in the meaning that the spiritual and otherworldly experience and presence is taking form in the concrete reality of everyday life of the church and the believer. Regarding the societal engagement this is seen as an offspring of the divine love experienced by the believer. God's love took form in the practical and concrete action of incarnation and in a similar way practical Christianity can be seen as the

incarnation of love and divine presence. This is both spiritual and material, both divine and human in the enchanted world of Pentecostal reality.

We have earlier in the text seen that Pentecostal expression is based in radical and personal experience. Experiences that do not stay as inner feeling of wellbeing but set the person in motion in what can be called missionality. God's grace is seen as an active element in the believer forming change and transforming heart and will not merely as a covering over sin and guilt. The Spirit is for Pentecostals not foremost the life-giver but the power-giver that transforms and gives power for life and witness. In the eschatological vision Pentecostals see the new world coming towards the existing world from the future to transform it into new heavens and earth. Pentecostalism has an imbedded transformative vision of life and existence.

The divine presence in the ordinary life can be described as transformational. The Spirit was hovering over chaos and turned it into cosmos (Gen 1). Christ entered into death and darkness and turned into resurrection (1 Cor 15). At the day of Pentecost ordinary disciples used their bodily organs to speak foreign languages that were familiar to other people present. The experiences of the disciples were transferred by the divine presence into understandable message to the listeners in Jerusalem (Act 2). This kind of Christian transformation combines several elements.

There is a connection between before and after of transformation in the sense that there is recognition between the two stages. In the transfiguration of Jesus, he is all new but still recognised. Transformation is both something new and at the same time the same.

The transformation is about divine presence and agency but not without human involvement. Transformation is not built hard work or human efforts but God's active and dynamic presence forming something new within and through the existing. Transformation is also something lasting and not just a moment of heavenly light. It brings forth a new dimension,

transcending the limitations of ordinary life and shapes the ordinary human life with extraordinary divine possibilities.

Pentecostal understanding of life and faith is in this regard transformational both in the personal life of the believer, the communal life of the community and in the life and service in society. When we here talk about societal engagement it is truly political in the sense that it is seen, visible and concrete. But for most Pentecostals the starting point for transformation is from within and from below and therefore societal transformation starts with personal transformation of the heart. From that personal transformation the rings on the water changes society from within.⁸

This inward focus is both the strength and the weakness of Pentecostal societal engagement. The strength is shown by scholars like Freeman and Brusco where the transformation is founded in personal identity, value systems and imbedded praxis. This leads to integration of different dimensions of life and a sustainability. The weakness is that unjust structures and political limitations are hard to change through the life of individuals even if they by the time become many. In recent years there are some examples of Pentecostals taking lead in political processes and channel the societal engagement into more of structural transformation in countries like Zambia (M'fundisi-Holloway 2022) or in the civil movement around Denis Mukwege in Congo (Alegre and Davidsson 2022). On the other hand we also see Pentecostal groups supporting leaders with dubious agendas in different parts of the world.

All together it is probably fair to say that the Pentecostal mentality is promoting a transformational aspect of Christian life at least that is the case of the Swedish Pentecostal movement. It is also obvious that incarnational and transformative dimensions fit together in

⁸ There is another stream in Pentecostalism forming a theology where the church though the power of the Spirit is expected to rule and dominate in what often is called Dominion theology. See for example *The Worldview of the Word of Faith movement*, Stenhammar 2021.

this understanding of Christian faith in that both focus on practical presence and radical transformative change in both the personal life and the societal engagement. From this I want to conclude this article with a short reflection on how this incarnational transformation can take place in the Pentecostal societal engagement.

As a junior doctoral student, I spent one semester at the Pentecostal Theological Seminary in Cleveland with scholars as Steven Land and Cheryl B Johns. I followed one course with Dr Land, and he often asked the students, "Is it this or is it that—and the answer is YES". He helped us to see how many things are meant to be hold together and integrated. In his book *Pentecostal Spirituality* he uses the terms fusion and fission discussing the tensions in Pentecostal spirituality and where fusion is when polarities are being hold together (Land 1993, 92ff). Luke Bretherton is using the term *dyatic* for the same tendency in Pentecostal life and thinking (Bretherton 2019, 130ff.) Pentecostals has in many cases tried to separate dimensions form each other but in forming the theological foundation for societal engagement I would advocate more of integration.

In our cosmology the spiritual and material dimensions are intertwined.

Soteriologically the wholistic salvation is a gospel for both soul and body. In our ecclesiology we can understand the church as God's presence in this world. The Spirit is enchanting every part of creation, and our experience of the Spirit can become an integrating centre. In our eschatological understanding we bring present and future together where the already informs the not yet and vice versa. In a pervasive wholistic theology we start to confess, pray and act for His kingdom to come. The way of doing this is the integrative combination of crisis-process where the ongoing work of practical Christianity is interrupted by the inbreaking of the divine presence. In this way the Pentecostal societal engagement can be understood and performed as a truly incarnational transformation.

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