

NARRATING RELIGIOUS REALITIES CONVERSION AND TESTIMONIES IN CHILEAN PENTECOSTALISM

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ABSTRACT

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In this paper I explore the complex and constitutive role of narrative practice in Chilean Pentecostalism. I argue that it is in large part through different kinds of storytelling that Pentecostal self identities are produced, nourished and modified. Particular attention is focused on testimonies of salvation, and life stories as narrative practices through which converts engage in ongoing construction of biographic identities and provide themselves with symbolic schemes for present and future action. I further argue that Pentecostal story telling should be seen as a specific kind of social interaction, creating and unfolding religious realities to be inhabited by narrator and listener alike. I pursue this argument by examining different linguistic as well as non-linguistic strategies through which the listener is invited to project him or herself into the world of the story.
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*Introduction*¹

There are good reasons for paying attention to conversion in the study of Chilean Pentecostalism. Firstly, the growth of Protestantism in Chile from 1 percent of the total population in 1907 to 16 percent in 2001 should mainly be ascribed to the conversion of a good number of mostly Catholic and lower or lower-middle class Chileans to Pentecostalism. Secondly, the experience of conversion is foundational to Pentecostal religiosity and the subsequent narrating of that experience is constitutive of Pentecostal self identity.

Dwelling for a moment on the first observation, the first question that comes to mind is *why* have so many Chileans converted? Addressing this would require an exploration of the specific historical, cultural and social circumstances that have made a significant number of Chileans prone to conversion. And, equally importantly, we would have to ask what Pentecostalism has to offer. The existing literature on Chilean and Latin American Pentecostalism provides solid answers to such questions. Authors have demonstrated how participation in Pentecostal churches provides people with a variety of cultural strategies for coping with material and emotional hardships or deficits of meaning in contemporary Latin American societies. Some scholars have shed light on the contestatory cultural character of Pentecostalism, arguing that spiritual egalitarianism, high levels of lay participation and the opportunity for any male church member to occupy a leadership position regardless of income and level of education provide a marked contrast to secular and Catholic hierarchies (Willems 1967; Lalive d'Épinay 1969; Lehman 1996; Lindhardt 2004). Others have focused

on how Pentecostalism helps believers, especially women, in everyday life by redefining gender relationships and altering economic priorities (Brusco 1995; Bernice Martin 1995; Mariz 1994).

The existing literature has taken us far in understanding why large sectors of Latin American societies convert to Pentecostalism. But in this paper I adopt a different perspective, as I mainly focus on *how* people convert rather than *why*. The Japanese sociologist Shimazono Susumu has suggested that scholars of religious conversion should not limit their analytical focus to the moment when an individual chooses to join a religious movement and the preceding processes of tension and seekership. The study of conversion, he argues, should also be concerned with continuing growth in faith over time (1986: 158). Concurring wholeheartedly with this view I will address a couple of important questions: How—or through what processes—do people come to perceive themselves as born-again Pentecostals who were formerly misguided sinners? And how are religious self identities as born again Christians—whose lives are pervaded by divine presence, protection and planning—nourished, confirmed, reproduced and modified over time?

In the following I argue for the importance of narrative practice for the constitution of Pentecostal self identities and shared realities. Attention will in particular be focused on the narrating of personal testimonies of salvation as a cultural process through which converts reconstruct their autobiographic pasts by use of new rhetorical, conceptual resources while at the same time empowering themselves. I further focus on post-conversion life stories as a way of continuously renarrating the engagement of the Pentecostal subject with divine others. In addition to reorganizing the past I argue that Pentecostal narrative practice also provides converts with symbolic structure and a temporal schema for present and future action.

In the last part of the paper I suggest that the narrating of testimonies should also be seen as a specific kind of social interaction, creating religious realities to be shared by narrator and listener alike. I examine different rhetoric and non-linguistic strategies by use of which the listeners of testimonies are invited to inhabit or project themselves into the world of the story and live out its plots themselves. By embracing listeners the narrating of testimonies becomes an important strategy of converting others. And it is a means by use of which already converted Pentecostals repeatedly invite each other to relive the original conversion experience and to continue to inhabit and project themselves into a shared world, which is pervaded by the sacred.

Background

While present in Chile for more than a century, Pentecostalism only started growing and manifesting itself as a powerful alternative to Catholicism in the context of industrialization and urbanization after 1940. Early and pioneering scholarly works on Latin American Pentecostalism by the German sociologist Emilio Willems and the Swiss sociologist Christian Lalive d'Epinay (1969) were in fact based on research in Chile in the early 1960s. Both authors found that urban Pentecostalism mostly appealed to marginal, first-generation migrants by offering new intimate communities and new senses of dignity and self worth. The two authors did, however, have divergent views on the potential long term contributions

of Pentecostalism to processes of social and political change in Latin America. Lalive d'Épinay conceived of Pentecostalism as a social strike, arguing that church communities by virtue of being introverted, apolitical, authoritarian and spiritually focused did little to change the political status quo. Willems not only emphasized the functionality of Pentecostal aesthetics and discipline (e.g. abstinence from alcohol and tobacco, the virtues of honesty and responsibility, etc.) in terms of individual mobilization but further predicted that organizational and rhetorical skills acquired in Pentecostal communities may prepare people for future democratic participation. This debate was revived in the 1990s with scholars such as Jean Pierre Bastian (1993) and Pablo Deiros (1991) following Lalive d'Épinay's line of argument whereas David Martin (1990, 2001), Michael Dodson (1997) and several others have argued for Pentecostalism's potential as a democratizing force in Latin America. In Chile, Pentecostals have been more or less invisible in national politics since the return to democracy in 1990.

The military regime of Augusto Pinochet (1973–1989) radically shook the foundations of Chilean society by weakening civil society, eliminating or marginalizing social organizations and not least by implementing a neo-liberal model that resulted in increasing poverty and social despair (see Portales 2000). These developments provided a very fertile ground for the continued growth and proliferation of Pentecostal churches. After the return to democracy in 1990 the percentage of Chilean Evangelicals grew from 13 percent to 16 percent between 1992 and 2001 with estimates placing Pentecostals at about 85–90 percent of all Evangelicals.

The present paper draws on a total of 17 months of ethnographic field work in the Evangelical Pentecostal Church (EPC) in the city of Valparaíso in central Chile between 1999 and 2009. The EPC is the second largest and one of the most conservative Pentecostal denominations in the country. It can be distinguished from many other denominations by its reluctance to join interdenominational Evangelical organisations, by maintaining strict rules for clothing and hair styles (women should always use long skirts, long hair and no makeup, men should have short hair) and by not allowing for the use of musical instruments in services. Most active members of the EPC in Valparaíso belong to the lower socio-economic sectors of society. However, a generational gap in terms of income and education can be observed. Some of the younger 'native' church members are pursuing higher education and entering the middle classes, whereas most first generational Pentecostals have low levels of education and modest incomes. Many Pentecostal men are either unskilled workers or self-employed in the informal sector. Approximately two thirds of active members in the church are women, the majority of whom are housewives or work as domestic servants or vendors in small shops or street markets.

A theological dualism between the life with God, and the godless and corrupted 'world', is important in many Pentecostal churches in Chile and elsewhere, but it is particularly outspoken in the EPC. This dualism has a temporal dimension as testimonies of salvation generally take the specific cultural form of a story about a journey from the 'world' to the life with God. And it represents a perceived tension between the children of God and the rest of society with its political and Catholic institutions and decadent mainstream culture.

A variety of Christian denominations and other religious movements are present in Chilean society. However, an overwhelming majority of the Chileans who convert in the sense that they become born-again or 'saved' Pentecostals used to be either Catholics² or

nominal (mostly native) Pentecostals. In the EPC a majority of active members below 40 years of age have Pentecostal parents, whereas the number of ex-Catholics increases among the older generation. Differences in pre-conversion religious affiliation are not always reflected in testimonies. Pentecostals insist that the saving power of the Holy Spirit is acquired rather than inherited, and being born and raised within a Pentecostal family does not make anyone a child of God. Salvation must follow repentance of sins and an individual decision to receive Christ as a personal saviour. In Pentecostal terminology, Catholics, non-saved Pentecostals and people from other religions all belong to the 'world'. Most testimonies, including those of 'native' Pentecostals include accounts of an unsatisfying life in the 'world' followed by salvation. In several testimonies, told to me personally or during church meetings, church members did not even mention their pre-conversion religious affiliation unless I asked them directly.

Defining conversion

A classical Pauline model of religious conversion as instant, total and caused by a moment of revelation has been subject to considerable scholarly scrutiny. While this model often seems to inform the narratives of Pentecostal and other religious converts who place a good deal of emphasis on one particular turning point, anthropologists, sociologists and other scholars mostly conceive of conversion as a gradual and sometimes ambiguous process of socialisation into shared linguistic and ritual practices (Coleman 2003: 16; Buckster and Glazier 2003; Rambo 1993; Stromberg 1993; Harding 1987).³ Echoing the views of Susuma, scholars have further argued that this process continues long after the original event, and that conversion as a movement *away* from something and towards something new is continuously re-enacted in different ritual and quotidian practices (Lindhardt 2004, 2009; see also Stromberg 1993; Robbins 2004). Lewis Rambo suggests that the word 'converting' might capture the phenomenology of the process better (1993: 7) and in a similar vein Simon Coleman refers to rhetorical and other practices of Swedish charismatic Christians as "continuous conversion" (2003).

While conversion to Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity is experienced as reorientation to new belief systems, whether such reorientation constitutes a radical break with the past or—to use a rather hackneyed expression—is better seen as 'new wine in old wineskins', has been vividly debated in recent years (Lindhardt 2009; Robbins 2004, 2007; Meyer 1998; Engelke 2004), with most scholars placing themselves somewhere on a continuum between these two positions. What appears to be beyond scholarly dispute is that new identities, beliefs and dispositions cannot be created totally *de novo* but always build up from existing beliefs and practices. As mentioned, most 'saved' Pentecostals whom I have met in Chile were already Christians in some sense, either nominal Pentecostals or (mostly nominal) Catholics, before they decided to receive Christ as their personal saviour.⁴ In the case of nominal Pentecostals who convert or 'become saved', a Pentecostal world view and rhetorical system already existed as a latent resource to be mobilised in a given situation (often some kind of life crisis).

I do not think that a rigid dichotomy between believer and non-believer is a very fruitful point of departure in the study of conversion to Pentecostalism in Chile. Instead I want to

argue for the usefulness of Joel Robbins' distinction between two senses of the word 'belief' in analysing the kind of transformation that occurs when nominal Christians become saved or born again. To 'believe in' something implies trusting it and committing oneself to act in a certain way towards it, whereas 'belief that' is usually applied to propositional statements like 'I believe that God exists' (Robbins 2007: 14). None of my Pentecostal informants described their conversion as a process of coming to realise or believe that God existed. Conversion or salvation was rather conceptualised as a question of establishing an intimate relationship with God. One young Pentecostal man described the difference between 'before' and 'now' as follows: "I have always believed that God exists. But before, well, I was minding my own business and he was minding his own business. There was no relation."

What I hope to demonstrate in this paper is that conversion to Pentecostalism can be seen as a process through which the belief *in* a powerful and caring God who can and frequently does intervene in human affairs begins to inform reflection upon oneself and the social world.

Testimonies of salvation: a few theoretical perspectives

The personal narrative or testimony of salvation (*testimonio de salvación*) is central to Pentecostal religiosity. It is in large part through the narrating of testimonies that believers construct and reaffirm their own religious self identities and position themselves within a Pentecostal community. Pentecostal services provide rich opportunities for the narration of individual testimonies. If members of the EPC from another Chilean city visit the church in Valparaíso, they will usually be encouraged to come forward and introduce themselves to the congregation during a church meeting. In these contexts self presentation mainly consists in the narrating of a testimony of salvation.

Through the construction of a testimony believers learn to organise and situate their own life course and experiences within a biblical narrative and time-line. John D. Y. Peel defines the narrative as a critical instrument of human agency in that it enables agents to "integrate the temporal flow of their activities" or provides a sociocultural form in which an arch of memories, actions and intentions "may be expressed, rehearsed, shared and communicated" (1995: 582–583). Narratives, he continues (quoting David Carr) are informed by a superior knowledge, which gives the author an advantage over the chronicler. Unlike the latter, the former has knowledge of an outcome that is used to define incidents as relevant or irrelevant (ibid: 593). In a similar fashion Wayne Booth claims that the teller of a narrative dwells at the point of arrival, which is implicit throughout the story and informs all details (1995: 372–373). The relation between narrativity and lived time has also and quite thoroughly been examined by Paul Ricoeur who conceives of the construction of narratives as a process of emplotment. This process mediates between individual events and the story as a whole as the narrator flashes back and forth between the two (1984: 81–85; Carr 1991: 167). It is through emplotment that a subjective identity with a felt unity of experiences or a sense of "self-sameness" is constituted (Ricoeur 1988: 246).

Peel further argues that the narrative is both an expression of power and works to empower those who can achieve it (1995: 593). Dwelling at the point of arrival and possessing a

superior knowledge, the narrator exercises a certain definitional and categorical control of his or her past. This point is echoed in the literature of religious conversion with several scholars arguing that conversion should foremost be seen as a process of autobiographic reconstruction that—unlike the continuous and subtle reorganizations of biographies that we all engage in on an everyday basis—are informed by radically *new* knowledge and stories (Berger and Luckmann 1972; Rambo 1993). Pointing out that people’s consciousness of themselves and the world is to a large extent structured by language, scholars have also emphasised the role of language transformation in conversion (Rambo 1993: 137; Beckford 1978). David Snow and Richard Machaleck define conversion as a process by which a new or former peripheral universe of discourse, defined as a system of common and interpretative frameworks, rooted in language, becomes central. They further suggest that conversion involves the adoption of a new “master attribution scheme” informing casual interpretations of self, other and the world (1983: 269).

While testimonies and other narratives can be seen as instruments of individual autobiographic reconstruction they are also inherently social in that they tend to follow culturally accepted plots. As Ervin Goffman argues in his study of Asylums (1961), institutions may exercise power over people by providing a restricted formula for the construction of self-stories. A standard testimony in the EPC takes the form of a story about a journey from the ‘world’ of sin to the encounter with God, through which a certain sense of control, clarity and power is gained. The distance between the point of departure and the point of arrival and the obstacles that are met on the way provide the main plot of the story. Through the construction of a personal testimony of salvation, cultural religious knowledge becomes self knowledge, and church members learn to objectify experience in particular ways. Thus “belonging to the ‘world’” is a cultural-linguistic typification that can summarize a wide range of individual pre-conversion experiences and lives. By being both personal and stereotypical at the same time, testimonies of salvation connect individual stories to a common story of the religious community, that is, the metanarrative of an ongoing movement, struggle and tension between God and the ‘world’ of sin. Hence the construction and narrating of individual testimonies contributes to the creation and reaffirmation of shared realities and values. The institutional constraints and guidelines for the construction of a personal testimony were highlighted during a sermon in the EPC, when the preacher posed a question to the listeners: “I have never heard a testimony from a brother, who said that he was happy when he lived in the ‘world’. Have any of you ever heard such a testimony?” The question was answered with a loud and unanimous “*no*” from the congregation. The construction of a testimony of salvation with a happy past in the ‘world’ is simply not narrative possibility. What are sometimes reported in testimonies are pre-conversion illusions of happiness while living in the ‘world’.

Testimonies and life stories from the Evangelical Pentecostal Church, Valparaíso

Manuel:

When I first met him in July 1999, Manuel was in his early twenties, unemployed and living with his parents, who were both active church members, and his brothers, who were not. He spent a fair amount of time working in the construction of a new church building,

claiming that this was the least he could do considering all that the Lord had done for him. Before converting he had developed a drug abuse problem and had spent most of his time hanging out with friends, some of who were criminals, occasionally getting into fights. He had now left all that behind him and considered himself to be a new man. One of the first questions I asked him was if he had been a Catholic before converting:

Manuel: No, I just belonged to the 'world'. I did many bad things. I was really bad. I was very aggressive with my parents, I went to parties all the time, drugs, women. But then, when the Lord enters into your life he changes your mind, and he changes everything. You really start realising; the Lord takes your mind away, it is as if you have a blindfold put over your eyes. Before you are not really aware of the things you do. You think that you are doing fine in the 'world'. Or maybe you are aware but this evil thing inside you is haunting you. But when the Lord takes this thing away, you start realising all the bad things you did, that you were really wrong. Now with my parents, there is a big difference. Now we have a good communication. Before, I hardly communicated with them. Because the enemy [Satan] puts so much anger and resentment in you, he turns you against your own parents. They are Christians, so I didn't talk to them. There was no dialogue at home. And now, uuuuh, there is so much peace in my home; he changed everything. He even took my television away, now I don't have a television anymore (...) Now I have been saved and forgiven for almost four months. Five months ago I started asking the Lord for salvation, and with my human mind I thought that it would take the Lord at least a year to forgive me and save me, considering all my sins. But he saved me after only three weeks. You know, when the affliction is greatest, that's when you most seek the Lord. I came to the Lord with depression, with affliction in my soul, and I became possessed by a suicidal spirit, I wanted to kill myself, the enemy was really working hard with me. Then, I started to go to the church, but when I came home, I would turn on the television, and it is true that the television steals all spiritual things from you, the enemy steals it all with the screen. So when I was in my room, the enemy made me terrified, it wasn't fear that I was feeling, it was more like terror. I had to go to my parent's room. So you see, Martin, the best thing you can do is to seek the Lord, to ask the Lord for salvation.

ML: Yeah, well, so you said that a suicidal spirit had possessed you?

Manuel: Yes, it was terrible, and you cannot fight this thing. Since the Lord had not saved me yet, I had no strength, I could not fight against this thing. It was too strong. I had to ask my father for help so he prayed for me in the name of the Lord.

A little later Manuel explained how his behaviour and personality had changed after salvation:

Yesterday, for instance, I took the bus with my younger brother. I paid for the tickets, and the driver asked me where I was going. But there was too much noise in the bus, so I couldn't hear him properly and I thought he was telling me I had to pay more and I didn't have more money. So I said: "well, then I'll just have to get off the bus." But it was because I hadn't understood him. So he scolded me, he became very aggressive: "who do you think you are?" and he almost threw my money in my face. And I, if it had been up to my human part, if Christ had not been present in my heart; I would have taken him by the hair and hit him. Before I met the Lord, I was violent. I would act without thinking. But thanks to the Lord, I could resist this. I just got off the bus in silence. I didn't say anything to anyone. So I feel that the Holy Spirit of God is guiding me. It's something beautiful.

Manuel uses a standard Pentecostal linguistic typification, belonging to the 'world', to describe his own pre-converted condition. In his description, this condition is partly characterised by ignorance and an illusion of happiness ("you think that you are doing fine in the 'world'"). When things were very bad and he was considering suicide, he was obviously aware that something was wrong. But he told me that he did not know that he was being

possessed by a suicidal spirit, and that his father had been the first to reach this conclusion. In retrospect, Manuel now explains his problems, including domestic disharmony and poor communication with his parents, in terms of diabolic manipulation. His preconversion condition is further described as characterised by lack of strength, and inability to deal with his problems. In the second excerpt Manuel adds that he used to be violent and dominated by his “human part” which implied inability to control his own aggressions. Now, on the other hand, he is able to control himself as Christ or the Holy Spirit is dwelling in him.

Manuel’s conversion and autobiographic reconstruction can be seen as an example of ‘alternation’, defined by Berger and Luckmann as a transformative process through which an individual comes to see him or herself and his or her past within a whole new structure of plausibility (1972: 181–185). In his own description Manuel changes from being an object, haunted and manipulated by the Devil and a suicidal spirit, dominated by a violent human part, ignorant of the causes of his conditions and—to the extent that he did understand that something was wrong—unable to fight back and control himself because of lack of spiritual strength. Dwelling at a point of arrival (being saved), and being in possession of a superior knowledge, he now exercises a definitional or categorical control over his past and present condition. He has, in other words, taken charge of his own life and narrative.

For Manuel being a converted, saved and transformed person was facilitated by a new community of significant others. He explained that he had very little contact with his ‘worldly’ friends with whom he used to drink, party, smoke marihuana, do drugs and womanise. When he ran into some of them they would usually talk for a while and get along well but he did not participate in their sinful activities. He now spent most of his time at home or in the church where he had made new friends.

André:

I first interviewed André in July 2000. He was a university student in his early twenties (he has now graduated) who had moved to Valparaíso to study from Los Andes, a large provincial town in central Chile, six months after becoming saved. He was currently living alone in a rented room. His mother was a highly committed member of the EPC in Los Andes, and for years she had persistently, yet unsuccessfully, tried to introduce André, his father and his brothers and sisters to the church. After finishing high school and failing in his first attempt to enter the university, André was feeling dejected. Besides his academic trouble, he had serious love-related emotional problems. He spent most of his time partying and smoking marihuana. Sometimes he felt that his conscience was trying to tell him that he needed to change his life (only after being saved did he realise that God had been working with his conscience). Eventually he was feeling so miserable that he was crying all the time and even considering suicide. In a moment of absolute desperation he decided to ask God for help. He started assisting church meetings, talking with other church members, and reading the Bible and Christian literature:

André: So I started going to the church, I started to seek the Lord, little by little. I talked to some brothers. And I had a book about spiritual matters which I started to read. And through this book the Lord made me understand many things. I would stay up and read until 3 a.m. in the morning. The book was precious, and it helped me understand the things that the Lord had done for me. The more

I read and understood, the more I realised how bad I was. Before that I didn't think that I was all that bad, I thought that I was a good guy doing a few bad things. I thought that someone bad is an assassin, someone who kills and steals from others, and I didn't do these things. But as I got closer to the Lord I came to look at myself as very bad, miserable, worthless. Until one day in the church, a Sunday, in the evening, I experienced a manifestation of the power of the Lord (...) You know the greatest sins that you commit, like the drugs, the vices, sins that the flesh obliges you to commit, you can't control yourself, and you do it by nature. But afterwards, when you are closer to the Lord, you realise that these things are bad. But you also realise that it is not easy, because the flesh is powerful. And I realised that I could not stop sinning, I tried really hard, until I read the word of God and I realised that I couldn't, so I said to the Lord: "I cannot do it, please do it for me." And so he did.

Like Manuel, André conceives of his preconversion condition as characterised by ignorance and lack of clarity ("I didn't think that I was all that bad"). The process leading to conversion is described as a process of radical self-searching and enlightenment. André gradually began to reflect upon himself in new ways and in the process he realised that he was unable to control himself. A Christian understanding of the "flesh" (as opposed to spirit) as having its own sinful will provides a conceptual framework for thematising this lack of control. Diabolic forces are not mentioned in this excerpt, but a little later in the interview, André explained that he was convinced that the Devil had been controlling and guiding him before salvation. Thus the movement from being a controlled object to an enlightened self-controlling subject—or a subject who willingly lets himself be controlled by the Holy Spirit—is also a salient feature of this testimony. Like Manuel, André only had minimal contact with his old friends from the 'world' whereas his most significant others all belonged to the church. He had good relationships with his fellow university students but he never participated in any social activities with them in his free time.⁵

In the case of André, as of Manuel, conversion can be seen as comprising processes where new or formerly peripheral knowledge (e.g. of demonic causality), and cultural-linguistic typifications become central for self-objectification and narrative reconstruction. Acquiring such knowledge is an inherently social process. Thus Manuel told me that it was his father who first became aware that a suicidal spirit was at work. For André, getting "closer to the Lord" provided him with new perspectives enabling him to look at himself as "very bad, miserable, worthless". He described how this process was preceded by his mother's year-long attempts to introduce him to the truth of the gospel and facilitated by conversations with other church members and by a book he was reading. In these examples we can see how conversion, resulting in new self-objectifications and new narrative identities, occurs through a dynamic interplay between public and private worlds.

The role of significant Pentecostal others in the development and sustenance of a new narrative identity deserves a few more comments. For converts, a new religious community is more than a point of reference when evaluating people, situations and life projects (Hefner 1993: 25) and more than a source of conceptual, linguistic resources for individual autobiographic reconstruction. The community also serves as a source of social recognition of new religious identities. In an intriguing and persuasive attempt to construct a synthesis between Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity and George Herbert Mead's theory of the human self (Mead 1962), Douglas Ezzy argues that narrative identity is integrally social. Not only is shared language the means by use of which single events can be organised into a coherent narrative, but narrative identity and the sense of self-sameness are also dependent

upon the recognition by others of the individual as the same person (Ezzy 1998: 241). This point is certainly valid in the case of Pentecostals for whom self-identification as former sinners who are now born-again, self-controlling subjects depends upon Pentecostal significant others recognising a person in this way. Apart from expressing a commitment to the values of a religious community, the public narration of testimonies during Pentecostal services can be seen as a particular ritualised act in which social recognition of narratively constructed self-sameness is sought.

Post-conversion life stories

Pentecostal narrative practice is not confined to the construction of testimonies but includes the narrating of numerous everyday anecdotes as well as longer post-conversion life stories. And while the time span varies from a few minutes to several years, anecdotes, testimonies and life stories are constructed through similar processes of emplotment and informed by a similar Pentecostal politics of storytelling, salient principles of which being crediting divine rather than human agency and planning for positive achievements. Thus anecdotes and life-stories represent important ways of continuously renarrating the engagement of the Pentecostal subject with divine others. It follows that Pentecostal identity construction through the narrative practice of emplotment is better seen as work-in-progress than a once and for all completed project.

I interviewed Marcelo in the living room of his home, the lower part of a two-storey house in a lower middle-class neighbourhood. His wife Erna was present the whole time and joined in on our conversation on several occasions. She was 28 and had been a church member since she was 8. Her mother had been the first family member to convert from Catholicism after being left by the father and going through serious emotional and financial crisis. Erna had originally come to the EPC in order to accompany her mother but at 14 she had made a personal decision to receive Christ as her saviour. Marcelo was 29 years and originally came from a small town in Southern Chile. He was born and raised within a Pentecostal family and made a personal decision to receive Christ at 13. He started the interview by explaining to me that his testimony was somehow atypical. As he had become a Christian very early in life, there would be no standard accounts of a miserable life in the 'world'. He was seventeen when he finished high school:

Marcello: I finished high school and then I applied to join the marine. And when I was told that I had been accepted, well, I had actually already sensed it because I had been praying to the Lord and my family had been praying too. And now I was thinking about what it would mean to leave my home, I had never been away from my home before, so I said to the Lord: "Look, if this is your will, you will open all doors for me so that there won't be any problems and everything will work out fine for me." And everything worked out just fine. From the whole region only seven of the applicants entered the armed forces, so I felt confident that God had arranged things to permit me to enter the armed forces.

During his first five years in the armed forces Marcelo lived in different parts of Chile where he assisted various Pentecostal churches whenever he had the chance. He was then transferred to Valparaíso where he joined the EPC and met Erna.

I had the future ahead of me in the armed forces, I was doing well, and I was good at everything, swimming, shooting, running. And then suddenly it was as if everything fell apart. I found out that I was sick; I had a heart disease. So the armed forces decided to pension me off, as if I had finished my military career. And now I analyse all this and I reach the conclusion that God permitted that I should enter the armed forces and spend ten years there, eeh, I think that somehow God wanted to form my character, my life and maybe prepare me for something else, something more than that, maybe to serve him. Now I have time to devote my whole life to serve the church and serve God without having to worry about work and money.

ML: So you receive a pension now?

Marcello: Yes, as if I had worked for twenty years. So for me this is a blessing, because it is difficult to leave the armed forces like that. Some people leave after nineteen years and they leave without this pension and they have to work. In my case, I was doing really well, I had specialised in mechanics and I had the best grades among more than one thousand students. And I said: "How is this possible?" And I asked him: "Why is this happening, you are giving me all these benefits and then at the same time you are taking it all away from me?" But today I think, and I was talking with her [Erna] about it the other day: imagine, if all this had not happened, maybe we would never have married, I would have had to leave Valparaíso, my period here would have finished in December, and then they would have sent me somewhere else, maybe to Iquique [in Northern Chile] for five years. And many of the things I am able to do here in the church, I couldn't have done them. Well, maybe there would have been someone else instead of me. But God gave me this opportunity, so that I can be here, so you start looking at all these things and you start realising that God never leaves you alone. I had to make a lot of decisions. My family lives in the south, and they want me to come back and stay with them. But I say no! If the Lord took me out the armed forces and gave me freedom, why is that? To go home and live with my parents without doing anything? That is not logical. Logic says that he gave me freedom to serve him. He said to me: "I give you your salary every month." We both have free medical care. So in order not to understand, well you would have to have a brain like this [makes gesture with his thumb and forefinger indicating 'tiny'] to say: "This is not the work of the Lord." And the fact is that all this has been the will of God, this is what God wants for me now that I am prepared, if the Lord needs me. For instance, if the pastor needs help, I cannot say that I am not able to help him.

ML: So you don't work now?

Marcello: No, I am not working, I could work in mechanics, I have been offered jobs in Viña, and I could look for work in other parts.

Erna: But he also says to me that that would be to limit himself; if the Lord gave him freedom, what is that freedom for?

Marcello: If the pastor says to me that I should help him, how could I say no, because I have to work? I think that the Lord put me in this situation so that, when the pastor says: "let's go and do this," I can say, "amen, let's go!" Because the pastor needs a person to help him with all kinds of things!

Here a divine plan for salvation and more particularly the role that God has for Marcelo within it, seems to be the master attribution scheme that informs casual interferences and interpretations of details. The confusion that Marcello expressed in a conversation with God after first getting sick was caused by events which, at the time, did not seem to fit or make sense within the overall narrative structure of his life story. But after engaging in interpretive processes of emplotment, partly in interaction with Erna, the pieces were put together, coherence recreated and confusion and the sense of ambiguity replaced by clarity and a renewed sense of direction. Rather than being experienced as a mere succession, lived time becomes structured, meaningful and coherent by being enrolled within Biblical time and thus liberated from elements of ambiguity, chance and bad luck.

Narratives are models of, and for, reality (Geertz 1973: 93): interpretative reconstructions of the past and “sketches of possibilities, prophecies, or scenarios for things that might be” (Peel 1995: 584). According to Ricoeur the narrative construction of plots mediates between two levels of time, namely succession and configuration, the latter being characterised by movement from a given origin and towards a certain end (1984: 85, see also Carr 1991:167). By articulating a sense of direction, narrative imagination provides a symbolic structure and a temporal schema for present and future action. In the last part of the excerpt it becomes evident that Marcelo’s decisions to stay in Valparaíso instead of going back to his hometown and to be available for the pastor instead of looking for a job are informed by the same narrative structure that informs his interpretation of the past. Marcelo’s life becomes meaningful by being narratively reviewed in the light of Pentecostal religious knowledge or master attribution schemes *and* by being lived according to a narrative script.

Testimonies as social interaction

I have so far conceived of testimonies and post-conversion life stories as cultural, rhetoric strategies by use of which converts reconstruct their autobiographic past while at the same time providing themselves with schemes or scenarios for future action. Though testimonies are individual stories they are also deeply embedded in the social fabric of the religious community. And while they can be rehearsed and modified in soliloquy—or in an internal dialogue with God—learning to construct them is never a solitary process. One important way of learning to construct a personal testimony of salvation is listening to the testimonies of others. Apart from expressing commitment to the values of the community and articulating an implicit request for social recognition of one’s own narrative identity, the narrating of testimonies also opens up a religious world to be explored by listeners. The study of testimonies should therefore not be confined to a concern with the autobiographic reconstructions of narrators, but include a focus on the intersection between the world of the story and the world of the listener. No text is closed upon itself and, as Ricoeur puts it, the analysis of a text should not try to restore the intentions of the author, but rather “make explicit the movement by which the text unfolds a world in front of itself. What is interpreted in the text is the proposing of a world that I might inhabit and into which project my ownmost powers”. (1984: 81)

A few scholars of conversion have argued that the social power of testimonies lies in their practicality. Testimonies are often told in a way that enables the listener to identify with the ‘I’ of the story and to participate in and live out its exemplified world, which is always described as superior to the everyday world (Susumu 1986; Booth 1995; Lindhardt 2004; Pfeil n.d.). In a similar vein Harding suggests that the study of religious conversion will benefit from a focus on undramatic rhetorical recruiting techniques. One such technique is ‘witnessing’, a conversation between a saved witness, who determines the terms and the direction of the conversation, and an unsaved listener. The purpose of witnessing, she argues, is to separate the listener from a prior given reality by linguistically constituting a new compelling religious reality or truth (1987: 169). In the following I will shed light on a few narrative as well as non-linguistic strategies by use of which listeners of testimonies are invited to project themselves the religious world of the story.

Many testimonies are partly told in the second ('you' or in Spanish *tú*) or third ('one' or *uno*) person. And though they are accounts of past events, the narrator sometimes shifts between the past and the present tense. Such rhetorical strategies serve to elevate the story from a strictly personal biographic to a more general level. A few pages back I cited André whose testimony highlights a process of self reflection and autobiographic reconstruction. But his testimony can be explored a bit further, as it also exemplifies strategies of embracing the listener and suggesting that he might identify with the story. I will save the reader the trouble of going back and forth by citing him once more, though in a slightly reduced version:

Before, I didn't think that I was all that bad. I thought that I was a good guy doing a few bad things. I thought that someone bad is an assassin, someone who kills and steals from others, and I didn't do these things. But as I got closer to the Lord I came to look at myself as very bad, miserable, worthless. You know the greatest sins that you commit, like the drugs, the vices, sins that the flesh obliges you to commit, you can't control these things yourself, and you do it by nature. But afterwards, when you are closer to the Lord, you realise that these things are bad. But you also realise that it is not easy, because the flesh is powerful. And I realised that I could not stop sinning, I tried really hard, until I read the word of God and I realised that I couldn't, so I said to the Lord: "I cannot do it, please do it for me." And so he did.

By changing between past and present tense and between the first and the second person André indirectly implies that his personal story could also be relevant for the listener, in this case the anthropologist. Through such shifts the biographic past of the narrator invades and merges with the listener's present. What unites the two is the eternal, timeless truth of the gospel to which the story also testifies. The invitation to the listener to adopt the perspective of the narrator is reinforced by the use of direct speech at the end of the excerpt. The words: "I cannot do it, please do it for me" are parts of André's unique and personal story about finding God. But their repetition in a conversation with an anthropologist is more than a representation of what took place in the past. By being spoken once more the words are also placed into an intersubjective presence, where they become available for reappropriation by listeners as a recipe for approaching God (as with my other Pentecostal friends and informants, André was quite concerned with introducing me to my potential saviour).

One day my wife (a Catholic middle-class Chilean) and I were walking through a local vegetable and fruit market in Valparaíso, where we met an older woman from the EPC who was selling potatoes. She instantly asked my wife why she never joined me in the church. When my wife replied that she was a Catholic and pretty content with her religion, the woman responded by telling us her own testimony of salvation. She had once been a young and misguided Catholic, wrongfully believing that Catholic doctrines were true. Though she believed in God, she did not understand the extent to which he was actually able to interfere in human affairs and make a difference. I remember her saying to my wife: "I was just like you, very Catholic; I didn't want to have anything to do with the Evangelicals, I thought that they were all wrong and crazy." She was finally persuaded to come to the EPC where she received Christ as a personal saviour and found true happiness. After telling us about this experience the old woman looked intensely into the eyes of my wife and explained that she originally and reluctantly came to the church because of problems

and sufferings “that only the Lord knew”. Though guessing about possible unspoken intentions of informants is not a standard social-scientific procedure, I will nevertheless share an untested assumption I made with the reader: I think that the old woman *could* have been meaning to imply that whatever secret problems my wife might have, the Lord was already well aware of them and that such intimidating intimacy with the Lord was an unavoidable fact of life, better to be accepted sooner than later. But more importantly—and whether or not my assumption is correct—that was how the listeners, my wife and I, *perceived* the situation, or how the world of the story unfolded. However, no new convert was gained from this encounter.

In July 2001, a choir from a local branch of the EPC in Santiago made a weekend trip to visit their spiritual brothers and sisters in Valparaíso. Church members in Valparaíso saw this visit as a great spiritual blessing, for which they had been preparing for weeks with practical arrangements, praying and fasting. On Saturday evening an extraordinary vigil (late night meeting) was organised in the main church in downtown Valparaíso. The church was fuller than usual. As the visit from Santiago was considered a special occasion, several church members had persuaded non-saved relatives to come to church on this Saturday. One of the visitors from Santiago, a man in his fifties, was invited to address to the congregation. He introduced himself by telling us his personal testimony of salvation. He described himself as having been a man with many vices, wandering around in the ‘world’, directed straight towards Hell. At one point he had come to the EPC:

I came to a church much like this one. It was a vigil on a Saturday, just like the vigil we have today. Christ manifested his glorious power and transformed me. I cannot explain with words what I felt, but I can tell you that the power that transformed me is also present here, tonight (...) God is here tonight (...) maybe there is someone here who has come for the first time. I came to a meeting just like this one, and in that opportunity I said: “God, let your spirit descend in this church to transform my life and make me a new creature because I don’t like my life the way it is right now.” And it is certain, like we sing: though everyone says it is not true, I feel it now in my life (...) That night God transformed me; this man so full of vices and sin, God took away the sin from me, that Saturday. I had been invited to the vigil (...) but I know now that he was the one who invited me, not my wife or my mother-in-law.

After finishing his testimony he went on to talk about other subjects. But at the end of his speech he made an explicit invitation to all non-saved persons to come forward to the pulpit and pray for salvation. As usual, when such an invitation is made, a number of the already converted/saved church members went forward to pray, but I could not spot any new converts (and despite intimate gazes from a couple of church members, suggesting that this was my opportunity, I remained seated).

In these examples the invitation to the listener to enter the world of the narrative and live out its plot is evident. The older woman on the vegetable market explicitly identified her own past with my wife’s present condition (“I was just like you”)—misguided by false Catholic doctrines and popular prejudices about Pentecostals, and unaware of the existence of a living God. The testimony from the vigil is told in general terms and without specific references to time and place, making it easy for listeners to project themselves into the world of the story, identify with the narrator and live out the plots themselves. Terms and phrases like “vices”, “wandering around in the ‘world’” and “directed straight towards Hell”

are used by the preacher to describe his own pre-converted past, but are at the same time implicitly offered to potential converts as rhetoric, conceptual resources for self reflection as well as to already converted/saved church members as means of continuous elaboration and modification of their own narrative identity.

In the first part of the excerpt, the similarity between the original context of the speaker's own conversion and the present context of potential conversion is established ("I came to a church much like this one. It was a vigil on a Saturday, just like the vigil we have today"). As the testimony continues the similarity of contexts is explicitly confirmed ("the power that transformed me is also present here, tonight [...] maybe there is someone here who has come for the first time. I came to a meeting just like this one"). Eventually the narrator guides potential converts in praying for salvation by citing his own prayer from the night he was saved ("God, let your spirit descend in this church to transform my life and make me a new creature because I don't like my life the way it is right now"). Here, he is not just speaking for himself but on behalf of anyone who can identify with the story. Once uttered, his words become detached from the speech situation and gain a life of their own so that potential converts may reappropriate them in order to describe their own life and articulate a personal request for salvation. And already converted/saved church members may take this opportunity to relive and confirm their own salvation and identity as born-again Pentecostals. The identification of the listeners with the story was reflected in their responses to it: Many were truly excited and started screaming "amen", "alleluia" or "Glory to God".⁶ Finally, the narrator asserts that it was really God—rather than wife or mother-in-law—who had invited him to the vigil where he was saved. This assertion could be seen (once more I am guessing) as an implicit suggestion to non-converted/saved listeners, who had been invited to this special event (a visit from Santiago) by their converted/saved family members, to reconsider their presence in the church as a result of a divine plan.

Through the stories that are told, a verbal context of divine presence and interference is established, and the listeners are invited to reinterpret their own experience within this context (Harding 1987). In addition to being a reconstructive representation of a lived past, the narrating of a testimony can also be seen as a certain ritual action, tailored to the here and now of listeners (Pfeil n.d.). The religious world of testimonies is pregnant with meaning and potentiality. Like a horizon it does not have a definite ending to be reached once and for all but can always be explored further by both narrator and listener.

The effects of spoken words or the extent to which listeners may become prone to accept invitations to enter the world of the story are influenced by a number of factors. The reader will probably agree that the experience of watching a movie is highly dependent upon the context of viewing (the most intense experiences occurring in cinemas where attention towards the movie is focused and there are no distractions). In a similar vein, the ability of spoken words to touch, move or absorb the listener depends upon the social, physical context of speech. One factor influencing the effects of words is a sensation of intimacy, existential immediacy and social enclosure in the speech situation. Intimacy between narrator and listener may result from intense eye contact. My wife confessed to me that she had felt uncomfortable and a little intimidated when the old woman at the vegetable market looked intensely into her eyes. The eye contact between the two women was a powerful strategy of momentarily pushing the surrounding world into the background and establishing that the story being told (which in this case was about intimacy between

a woman and God and about lack of secrecy in this relation) took place within a shared and present world, equally accessible and relevant to both narrator and listener. In my own experience intense eye contact with Pentecostals during attempts to convert me can indeed produce sensations of powerful immediacy, intimidating intimacy and of being cut off from the surroundings, which in turn makes it difficult not to be absorbed by the religious world that is being unfolded during a conversation. While such intimacy mostly made me feel uncomfortable I can easily imagine that it can have the opposite effect on others. Another strategy of creating intimacy and enclosure is direct physical contact. For example a narrator may touch the arm of a listener when the former is about to say something considered particularly important or relevant for the latter.

When testimonies are narrated in church meetings an atmosphere of intimacy and sensual immediacy has usually been constituted through a number of ritual bodily practices such as initial singing and praying. In some church meetings, rather dramatic spiritual manifestations occur, mostly during singing, when participants start crying, screaming, dancing and jumping, all of which are characterised by an apparent absence of inhibitions. Direct physical and intimate contact take place in praying, with the imposition of hands, or when participants feel touched by the power of God and start embracing each other.

Finally the content, structure and performance of testimonies may contribute to sensations of intimacy. Narrating a testimony is sometimes quite an emotional performance accompanied by tears and trembling voices. The narrating of testimonies does not only demonstrate a willingness to expose oneself emotionally and admit how weak, ignorant, sinful—and even stupid—one used to be; they also very often include personal details such as accounts of suffering and emotional distress. As noted by Gretchen Pfeil, narratives of conversion can structure themselves as personally, intimately and dyadically addressed, and the narrated suffering is an important part of an addressive stance of intimacy (n.d.).

Conclusion

In this paper I have highlighted the central and multifaceted role of narrative practice in the life of Pentecostals. More than a question of gaining profound understandings of theological doctrines and Biblical truths, conversion is foremost a process of acquiring a new identity by learning to apply a certain narrative model in self-reflection and autobiographic reconstruction. It is in large part through the narrating of stories about themselves, their pre-conversion troubles and post conversion life with God that converts constitute and elaborate their own self-identities as born-again Pentecostals and provide themselves with schemes for future action.

I have further emphasised the importance of narrative practice for Pentecostal sociality and solidarity. Through the construction of testimonies and other stories, shared religious knowledge becomes self knowledge. By being structured in accordance with a standard narrative model, individual stories become episodes or variants of a shared religious story about a tension between the 'world' and a God who plans and controls the lives of his children and frequently intervenes in their affairs. The public narration of a testimony is a way of socially positioning oneself within a religious community while at the same time confirming and committing oneself to its basic values and world views.

Finally, I demonstrated how the narrating of testimonies—and this point could very well be extended to include other kinds of stories including short anecdotes about divine interference in everyday affairs—opens up a religious world, pregnant with meaning and potentiality. Thus I argued that the study of religious conversion and continuing growth in faith over time can benefit from a focus on testimonies and other kinds of narrative practice as social interaction that unites narrator and listener in the world of the story, thereby contributing to the creation of shared realities. Pentecostals commonly conceive of conversion and salvation as a radical movement away from the ‘world’ or the domain of the Devil towards intimacy with God. This movement is not, however, made once and for all but forms part of an ongoing Pentecostal identity project (see Robbins 2004:128). Testimonies and other stories are crucial means of narrating and renarrating the engagement of believers with God and simultaneously of (re)constituting and unfolding a religious world to be inhabited and explored by narrator and listener alike.

NOTES

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² The range of ex-Catholics I met in the EPC as in other Pentecostal churches ranged from persons who hardly ever set their foot in a Catholic church to a couple of young men who had entered the Catholic Theological Seminary to be trained as priests. But as a general tendency Pentecostal ex-Catholics never had very strong ties to the Catholic Church.

³ I fully share the view, advocated by scholars such as Austin-Broos (2003) and Norris (2003) that religious conversion involves both the assimilation of new meanings *and* the development of new ritual dispositions or of new embodied, holistic knowledge, acquired through participation in ritual. However, space constraints prevent me from pursuing an analysis of Pentecostal embodied ritual practices (but see Lindhardt 2004, 2009) and in this paper I adopt a more narrow focus on narrative practices.

⁴ The existing literature indicates that this is, in fact, the case with a majority of Pentecostal/charismatic Christians in the world.

⁵ Scholars have for some time been arguing that the probability of conversion and continued membership of a new religious group are dependent upon a person's structural availability, referring to social networks with people within and outside of the group in question (Rambo 1993: 60). André and Manuel both converted because of some kind of problem. Yet as David Smilde points out, significant life problems are too widely distributed to adequately explain why some people address them through religious solutions (2007: 180). For André and Manuel, Pentecostalism was an available option because of existing emotional bonds to other church members. And for both of them continued membership of the EPC was dependent on a weakening of social ties to non-members.

⁶ Peter Stromberg uses the term “impression point” to refer to a point in which a religious story connects with a personal aspect of a person's life and hence becomes meaningful at an individual level (1985, see also Rambo 1993: 83).

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