BOOK REVIEW


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The history of Pentecostalism in Italy has been much overlooked, both by non-Italians, and also by Italians themselves. The barrier for non-Italians is obvious: most sources are in Italian, and those with theological interests in the Protestant world tend (where they study other languages at all) to engage with literature in English, Dutch, German or French. Those Italians – from the Turretini and Diodati families forwards – who have made an impact on the Protestant world have worked in these other languages. This has tended to disguise the influence of Italian thought in the West: beyond theology, of a Benedetto Croce on R. G. Collingwood, for example. It is doubly the case when one speaks of Italian Pentecostals, originally a largely working-class people, many of limited education, and/or located in the South. Those spokesmen who could connect to an international stage – a Nello Gorietti, who found a key translator in US emigrant-turned-missionary Anthony Piraino; or a Francesco Toppi, who trained in England – were thus heavily dependent on interpreters from Britain, Switzerland, or the United States. The seemingly monolithic association between the Assemblies of God USA (AGUSA) and the Assemblea di Dio in Italia (ADI), therefore, has tended to project the impression that this is all that there is to say.

It is the real value of Salvatore Esposito’s charming work, *Un secolo di pentecostalismo italiano*, that his reliance on sources undoes many of those cultural and denominational assumptions. The effect is not always intentional – Esposito is himself an ADI minister. His patient sourcework, however, elicits the voices of people rarely heard in either the formal Italian accounts, or in those accounts considered sufficiently noteworthy to achieve translation into the dominant languages of Protestantism. The first section of the book is familiar to scholars of Pentecostalism in the West. Here Esposito explores the associations between evangelicalism and Pentecostalism, defining the latter, so as to set the scene for Italian readers not aware of the burgeoning literature in English. For Esposito, the interest lies in developing his source-based method and in defining Pentecostalism as a “novum” in the history of Protestantism, one which emerges as much from autochthonous movements as from cross-cultural transmission. This sets up the book to later refer to the multi-levelled interplay between cyclical migration, pre-extant “waves” of Italian evangelicalism, and the local revivalism which
mushroomed all over the South. This is passed over too lightly, the author showing a preference to follow the public sources rather than chase the oral record. He does show, however, an awareness of the consequences of his research – that is, that the “beginnings” of Italian Pentecostalism are far more populist and uncontrolled than has previously been allowed for in a historiography that has preferred the ADI tradition. Esposito’s reference to the “conventional” starting points and origins of the ADI point towards the histories that are yet to come.

It is in the official and parliamentary sources that the book’s method really produces “gold”. Many of the court records and parliamentary debates involving Pentecostals have never before appeared in print, and will be of great use to historians. The interplay between regional centres and Rome that emerged from the convegni of the 1940s and early 1950s displays the importance of overseas aid to starving communities as an impetus towards unification. While the first conventions occurred in the South (where all the largest churches were), the shift towards a bureaucratic structure centred on Rome reflected the interests of the Allies and the desperate need to bring on board support from Springfield, Missouri, in order to deal with poverty and the continuing oppression of le forze d’ordine, manipulated by the Christian Democrat government and legitimized by fascist legacy legislation. Esposito provides the inside story which, when attached to the external politics traced in the “Italian Persecution” and “Italian District” files held in the AGUSA Archives in Springfield, demonstrates how Italian Pentecostals used their transnational status to qualify the emerging Catholic/anti-communist hegemony in post-war Italian politics. As noted above, their impact (with the political and juridical assistance of the non-communist Left, and the intellectual leadership of the Methodist and Waldensian churches) on activation of the freedom of religion clauses in the Italian Constitution was far out of proportion to their putative public influence.

The detail in such sources provides interesting pointers for future historians. The fact that the parliamentary speeches were led by Luigi Preti and Vittorio Foa, two figures of the non-Communist left, and that Foa himself points to the activism among piemontese in particular, indicates possible areas for research. Esposito explains that such people (such as the eminent jurist A. C. Jemolo, or his associate in the Council of State, the lawyer politician Leopoldo Piccardi, or the historian Giorgio Spini, and many others besides) committed themselves to defend the religious liberties of Pentecostals, but not why they did so. Likewise, it is clear that at certain stages there was much greater flow between the older evangelical movements in Italy – particularly those Waldensians and Methodists involved in Mazzinian and Garibaldian circles – and the emergent Pentecostal communities. This is readily demonstrable in the histories of local churches in America (e.g. the influence of Paolo Geymonat, one of the leaders in the Waldensian revival movement, and Theophilus Gai, on local pastors such as Filippo Grilli, who were directly affected by the emergence of Italian pentecostalism). It is less well documented in Italy itself, in part (again) because of the oral nature of the sources, and in part because of the narrowing of the story through the institutionalization of the ADI. This is work still to be done in understanding the real, autochthonous roots of Pentecostalism in Italy. It is a sign of the valuable contribution made by Esposito that such questions can now be asked.

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