BOOK REVIEW


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With the publication of this volume, the secondary literature regarding Swedish Pentecostalism has taken a major step forward. The book is a collection of fourteen essays and lectures published and or delivered by anthropologist Jan-Åke Alvarsson of Uppsala University between 1980 and 2009. Many of these have been lightly updated to take into account some of the newer research of the past decades. Each essay is preceded by a “meta-text” in which Alvarsson summarizes the thesis of the essay with additional comments and provides additional comments about the original impetus and context of the essay. Each essays is further supplemented by a short “Postscriptum” by a Swedish scholar of Pentecostalism, commenting upon the essay. A methodological introduction (pp. 9–10) summarizes this approach of the book. The first chapter is a short introduction (pp. 11–19), with some later bibliography added, which provides a very brief summary of Swedish Pentecostal history.

Part I comprises four essays described as “Pingströrelsens Historia” (“History of the Pentecostal Movement”; pp. 22–171). This is the most important part of the book. The first of the historical essays, “Pingstväckelsens tidiga historia (1906–1919),” (pp. 22–78; postscript by Nils-Eije Stävare) is a combination of two earlier articles originally published in 2007 and 2008. The essay introduces Alvarsson’s argument that the Swedish participants in the USA Azusa Street revival were the crucial shapers of early Swedish Pentecostal developments. These were, he insists, more important than the foreign or other Swedish adherents to Pentecostalism. The second essay, a case study of Uppsala during the same period (pp. 81–100; published 2006; postscript by Fred Nyberg) again insists on the importance of the Swedish participants at Azusa Street but discusses in detail Norwegian T. B. Barratt’s role among the Methodists in Uppsala. The next study is of Bethany Church in Adelöv, considered by some to be the first Pentecostal Church in Sweden (pp. 103–41; postscript by Ulrik Josefsson). The approach is sociological with historical data included, focusing on 1980. The final essay of this section (pp. 143–71; early version 2007; postscript by Torsten Bergsten) is addressed revisionism in Pentecostal historiography before returning to the issue of Pentecostal origins in Sweden, identified as a choice between T. B. Barratt and the Swedish Azusa Street participant, Andrew Johnson-Ek.
The historical section makes a major contribution by passionately describing and emphasizing the role of the Swedish Azusa Street Revival participants in the early years of Pentecostalism in Sweden. What is lacking in this collection of essays is an effort to identify the networks in which these (and others) functioned, both in Sweden and globally, and the importance for these networks in Sweden. This is a serious issue for Pentecostal historiography in every country. Does “first” mean most important? What is important? How is importance to be understood? How are these to be understood in relation to the organizers of loosely knit networks into churches and denominations? In every country there were diverse Protestant, Orthodox or Catholic elements that provided people (and ideas) to the early evolution of Pentecostalism. In Sweden, for example among the Pentecostals were Lutheran, Missionsförbundet, Baptist, Methodist, Salvation Army and Holiness Movement Church persons who brought their earlier experiences, relationships and values to the new experience of faith. Outsiders argued and organized for (T. B. Barratt) and against (S. L. Brengle) the Pentecostal revival. Newspaper editors and writers, both religious and secular, as well as scholars of religion made their contributions to the eventual shape of Pentecostalism in Sweden. All of these had an influence from the earliest days of the Pentecostal movements in Sweden.

Related to the issue of networks is another matter that is rarely discussed, although sometimes used as a tool for claiming a tradition as central to early Pentecostalism. This is the issue of the primary identity of individuals. In Sweden, the early Pentecostal believers maintained or abandoned primary identities as the movements evolved. There are many individual cases that could be examined. For example, early Pentecostals in Göteborg refused to compromise on earlier Apostolic, Baptist, Methodist and Lutheran doctrines which resulted in different Pentecostal congregations. Other examples are John Ongman, who arguably remained Baptist during his Holiness and Pentecostal evolutions, and Lewi Pethrus, who arguably became Pentecostal, repressing his Holiness and Baptist identity (although retaining earlier Baptist and Holiness practices and beliefs), even eventually claiming to be part of the State Church (Lutheran) of Sweden.

The essays of Part II (pp. 174–248) focus on the character and culture of the Pentecostal movement in Sweden. An essay discusses the changing patterns of naming congregations (pp. 175–196; postscript by Magnus Wahlström). The following essay discusses the place of Pentecostalism in Swedish society (pp. 199–230; published 2007; postscript by Ivar Lundgren), tracing the evolution from the edges of Swedish society toward the mainstream, with comments on the African-American beginnings of Pentecostalism, echoing Hollenweger’s interpretation. The final essay of the section discusses the definitions of the terms Pentecostal (four different forms), Evangelical and Charismatic (pp. 235–48; postscript by Göran Janzon), unfortunately with minimal reference to discussions in other parts of the world.

Part III (pp. 250–308) includes studies on the “Tro och Liv” (“Faith and Life”) of the Pentecostal Movement. The first essay (pp. 251–71; postscript by Joel Halldorf) is both a report and analysis of the conversion narrative of a Swedish
50-year-old male, as well as a reflection on the contributions of anthropological readings and interpretations of Pentecostal experience. The second essay insists on the cultural importance of baptism as an initiation rite (pp. 273–87; postscript by Kristina Helgesson). The original title, from an ephemerally printed Uppsala University set of “Working Papers,” now translated into Swedish and with a “light reworking,” was “Baptism as a Rite of Passage: Initiation of Neophytes in Swedish Baptist Churches as a Rite of Passage.” A comparison of the two texts would be a worthy subject of an essay!

Part IV (pp. 309–443) is devoted to Swedish Pentecostal Missions. The first article is a general introduction to Swedish Pentecostal Missions (pp. 311–378; postscript by Kajsa Ahlstrand). The second chapter (pp. 381–443; postscript by Sven-Erik Brodd) deals with mission meetings and organization in the Tranås Pentecostal congregation, 1983–95.

Appended are two useful items. First are the biographical notes on the contributors (pp. 444–6). Second, there is a list of books by Jan-Åke Alversson (pp. 447–8). The first reveals for those new to Swedish Pentecostal studies the stellar cast Alversson assembled to contribute to this volume. Unfortunately the available space does not allow a discussion of the historiographical and cultural issues raised by these scholars in their postscripts. The second displays the long-term passion of Alversson for Swedish Pentecostal mission and the discipline of anthropology. One merely wishes that the myriad articles had also been included in the list of publications! Unfortunately there is no index to the volume.

With this volume, Jan-Åke Alversson has brought together aspects of his study of Pentecostalism during the last three decades. It is a passionate statement of his central theses: the Swedish origins of Swedish Pentecostalism and the usefulness of the intellectual tools provided by anthropology to examine Pentecostal traditions. The volume will join the ranks of a small but important corpus of intellectual “landmarks” on the shelves of scholars of Nordic Pentecostalism, and will serve generations of doctoral students as a place to begin and a foil with which to argue! These will need to work with both versions of texts available, but also the significant corpus of research impinging on Alvarsson’s subjects written in the last few decades that is not mentioned or marginally mentioned in the revisions for the current publication.