

Anthropology, Pentecostalism, and the New Paul: Conversion, event, and social transformation.



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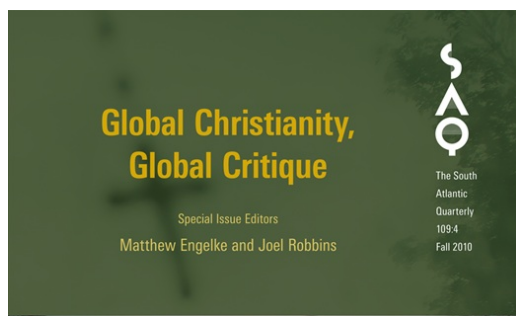
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Anthropology, Pentecostalism, and the New Paul: Conversion, Event, and Social Transformation

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This essay brings together the current philosophical discussion of Paul and recent anthropological work on Christianity. Taking the development of notions of the event as a source of radical cultural change as the center of new philosophical discussions of Paul, I argue that the rapid spread of Pentecostalism around the world in the last hundred years has subjected many communities to just this kind of evental transformation. Given this, how might philosophical theories of the event that claim Paul as their patron saint be read in relation to what it means for Pentecostal converts to become Christian in the contemporary world? After outlining Alain Badiou's theory of the event and arguing for its anthropological usefulness, I deploy it in analyzing in some detail the history of a community's conversion in Papua New Guinea. While Badiou's model brings out many aspects of this case—showing the value of putting anthropological materials on lived Christianity into dialogue with recent philosophical work on Paul—the case's details also push in some ways against the model. In particular, they demonstrate the difficulty people have living their lives wholly in terms of what Badiou sees as the universalism of the event. This point leads to a consideration of the possibility that Christianity and, in fact, all universalisms are best understood as what Simon Coleman calls “part-cultures”—those that require some other culture that they both reject and curate in order to be able to play a role in shaping social life. Taking account of this part-culture quality of evental universalisms allows for a more complex account of the nature of radical cultural transformation than one finds in the new philosophical literature on Paul.

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