THE CRITICAL TRADITION OF PENTECOSTALISM

Walter J. Hollenweger
Im Grueb
CH-3704 Krattigen, Switzerland

Introduction

Pentecostalism is anti-intellectual, to the left of the evangelical spectrum and anti-ecumenical. These are three criticisms which can no longer be accepted without qualification. It is true one finds a lot of anti-intellectualism in Pentecostalism. And there are reasons for this, as C. van der Laan explains in the case of Gerrit Polman:

Polman was not equipped with the tools to develop a theology in which inconsistencies are acceptable and ended up as a sectarian against his will.
Surely this was not his fault alone. He received no help from the Evangelical colleagues nor from the academic theologians.¹

But now one finds scores of first-class Pentecostal scholars. Proof of this lies in the impressive pages of EPTA Bulletin² and Pneuma, as well as the conference papers from the Society of Pentecostal Studies³ and the European Pentecostal Research Conferences.⁴ The trouble is that these publications are not read by Pentecostal leaders (not to speak of the rank and file) who in general have no idea what a mine of

2. Elim Bible College, London Road, Nantwich, Cheshire CW5 6LW, UK.
3. c/o Peter D. Hocken, P.O. Box 2671, Gaithersburg, MD 20886, USA.
insight and dedicated scholarship they are missing. In most cases the
denominational periodicals do not report the critical, yet deeply
spiritual and helpful essays and dissertations of their own scholars. All
the more reason that the mainline theological journals and publishers
take them up. They would be astonished what a wide market this
research could command. However, it is my own experience that most
mainline publishers want easy, sensational or simply 'up-lifting'
manuscripts from the Pentecostals and not specialized analyses of
Pentecostalism and ecumenism, Pentecostalism and social ethics,
Pentecostalism and pacifism, Pentecostalism and feminism,
Pentecostalism and critical exegesis, etc. On all these issues,
Pentecostals have original contributions to make which are based on
group-roots experiences.

As to the qualifications of Pentecostals as arch-evangelicals, it must
be said that for a long time Pentecostals tried to present themselves as
a kind of 'evangelicals plus', that is to say, evangelicals plus fire, dedi-
cation, missionary success, speaking in tongues and gifts of healing.
But that will no longer do. Pentecostalism is a denomination sui
generis. Its roots in the black, oral tradition of the American slaves, in
the catholic tradition of Wesley, in the evangelical tradition of the
American Holiness movement (with its far-reaching political, social
and ecumenical programmes), in the critical tradition of both the
Holiness movement and the critical Western theology, in the ecumeni-
cal tradition of their beginnings—all this qualifies it as a movement
which is not just a sub-division of evangelicalism on fire. It is in itself
already an ecumenical movement. So far Pentecostalism has not been
able to project itself in this way. One of the reasons for this is that of
the over 300 million Pentecostals/Charismatics/Independents only
about 60 million are represented in the Pentecostal World
Conference. And this means that Pentecostalism has not yet found a
mode of global co-operation and communication which effectively
expresses its coherence and its pluralism. The official statements
mostly use out-dated confessional concepts of the turn of the century,
the Aristotelian pseudo-rationalism of the last century which in no

5. G.T. Sheppard, 'Pentecostals and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism:
6. M. Vanvelderen, 'Pentecostal World Conference', in Dictionary of the