Some Personal Reflections on Pentecostalism

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When I attended the annual meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies (SPS), held last fall in Springfield, Missouri, I was welcomed at least as warmly as the younger son in the parable who had decided to forsake the husks for the more satisfying fare of his father’s table. I felt genuinely included. Still, I could also see that some of the members had a little difficulty hiding their astonishment that the author of The Secular City, and a long time member of the faculty of Harvard Divinity School, should appear at an SPS gathering, and one held at the main seminary of the Assemblies of God at that. But when I explained--quite truthfully--that I had not come to give a paper but to listen and learn, no one seemed surprised.

Pentecostals recognize that there is something fascinating, to insiders and outsiders alike, about their burgeoning global movement. They know it has an engrossing history and a complex and intriguing theology, and they know that the role it has recently begun to play on the global religious scene makes it impossible to ignore. Further, I sensed that they know their movement is now finding its way through a wrenching transition and that candid conversation between reflective insiders and sympathetic outsiders is now more important than ever. Still, I can understand why some Pentecostals might be puzzled by my interest. Allow me to explain.

I have now spent almost thirty years teaching at Harvard University, in both the Divinity School and in the Religious Studies Program of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. I have also taught in the Moral Reasoning division of the Harvard undergraduate core curriculum where I offered a course for several years on Jesus that attracted enormous enrollments, often six or seven hundred students. During these very rewarding years, however, I have come to realize what might seem quite obvious, that when you teach theology and religion nowadays in most universities you study mainly other people’s ideas and experiences. You investigate the history of religions, comparative religion, the scriptures of the world, maybe the psychology of religion. This is perhaps as it should be. Few universities are equipped to help students enter into a mystical quest for their own spiritual center. Also, in order to avoid myopia and provincialism, any truly educated person must be familiar with what has been taught and experienced in past ages and by other peoples, both in one’s own spiritual tradition and in the others.

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But there is a downside to this second-hand consumption of religion. As Ralph Waldo Emerson eloquently warned a gathering at Harvard Divinity School in 1838, the danger of a steady diet of other people’s religion is that it can often dry up one’s own resources. Ideas, which can be very secondary, can take the place of experience, which must in some way be personal. I have sensed this danger acutely during my years as a teacher and—perhaps also as the result of an inclination that started in my boyhood—have felt personally drawn to those religions which major in the “affections” rather than in doctrines. I am sure this experiential orientation is one of the things that has sparked my recent interest in Pentecostalism.

My lifelong propensity for the kinetic does not mean that I have no appetite for the philosophies and doctrines of religion. On the contrary, my hunger is so voracious I can never devour enough of them. But this is just the point. It is precisely my daily immersion in the fascinating formulations that make up the world of theological studies which causes my personal religious inclinations to wander elsewhere, and to ask time and time again, what experience, what encounter with the numinous, lies behind and beneath this or that theology?

This experiential disposition no doubt also traces back to my earliest encounter with the transcendent which, though clearly called forth by the narratives and images of my own evangelical Baptist church, was never contained or exhausted by them. I could sense the presence of the great mystery not only in my own church, but also in the Nazarene church at the edge of town, in St. Patrick’s down the block, and in the local African Methodist Episcopal congregation. The result is that during my lifetime I have encountered the transcendent in many guises, in a variety of holy places, and through a number of different modes of worship. I have sat in meditation for back-breaking hours with Zen monks, prayed with my face toward Mecca with Muslims, puffed on a feathered peacepipe with Sioux holy men, and felt the warming fire in Hindu temples. I have always gravitated toward experiential religion, but I have never forgotten that it was through a personal experience of Christ that I first came into the presence of the Divine Spirit. Given this pattern of life trajectories, it was probably inevitable that one day I would develop a strong interest in Pentecostalism, the experiential branch of Christianity par excellence.

Still, however natural my interest in Pentecostalism seems to me, I can see why for some people there might appear to be innumerable counter-indications. Was I at the SPS as the prodigal son or as a wolf in sheep’s clothing? After all, I am the theologian who once wrote somewhat favorably about the positive side of secularization, even claiming that it was in some measure a product of the impact of biblical religion on society. Although I was never one of the “death of God” theologians—a media-created blip I stoutly opposed during its