Experimentation and Renewal among Malaysian Christians: The Charismatic Movement in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya

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Introduction

As a religious minority in a Muslim dominated society, Malaysian Christians have become increasingly aware of the need to transcend traditional divisions which fragment the Christian community, and to foster more active religious involvement on the part of laymen. These concerns have found expression in the international Charismatic or neo-Pentecostal movement. The movement has enjoyed an enthusiastic response among Malaysian Christians since the mid-1970s. Neo-Pentecostalism is both a source of vitality and conflict for the Christian minority in Malaysia. The movement on the one hand is undeniably effective in mobilizing Christians and evangelizing non-Christians, yet on the other hand it creates considerable tension within traditional mainstream churches. The influence of the Charismatic movement is felt throughout the Malaysian Christian community since the movement draws participants from among Roman Catholics and Protestants alike.

This paper examines the Charismatic movement in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya in relation to three forms of organization: the Pentecostal denomination, the revival ministry, and the cult. An example of each form of organization will be described. Through a comparison of these three forms of Pentecostal organization, the range of variation within the movement will be shown. The impact of the Charismatic movement on Malaysian Christians will be considered from the perspective of the mainline churches’ responses. The first section sketches the historical background of neo-Pentecostalism. Protestant Charismatic groups in Kuala Lumpur are described in the second section which focuses on the Pentecostal denomination and revival ministry forms of organization. The third section is concerned with Roman Catholic Charismatic groups and the cultic form of organization. The impact of the Charismatic movement on Malaysian Christianity is taken up in the fourth section.

Neo-Pentecostalism is an urban, middle-class, non-Malay movement. These features of the movement are revealed in the ethnic and geographical distribution of Christians in Malaysia. In 1980 Christians constituted 7 per cent of the population of Malaysia as a whole (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 1983). In Peninsular or West Malaysia, however, Christians are only 2 per cent while in the Borneo states of Sarawak and Sabah, they are 29 and 27 per cent of the population respectively.
(Department of Statistics, Malaysia 1983). The membership of Peninsular Malaysian Christian churches is concentrated in urban areas, especially in the largest west coast cities. Vierow's survey (1979) of Malaysian Christians, based on the 1970 population census, shows the following breakdown of the Christian population in Peninsular Malaysia by area: in metropolitan urban areas 6.7 per cent of the population was Christian, in other large urban areas 2.87 per cent, in small urban areas 2.93 per cent, and in rural areas only 1.14 per cent. The Christian population tends to be overwhelmingly of Chinese and Indian origin (Vierow 1979). The Indian community has the largest proportion of Christians, while the Chinese community has the largest absolute number.

The Roman Catholic Church represents the mainstream of Christianity in Peninsular Malaysia, where almost 80 per cent of all Christians are Catholic (Thomas 1978). Among the Protestants who account for 19.4 per cent of Christian membership, the Methodists are the largest and most influential denomination. The Methodists represent 42 per cent of Peninsular Malaysian Protestants. The next largest denominations, the Anglicans and Seventh Day Adventists, account for 17.5 and 7 per cent of Protestants respectively. The three Pentecostal denominations established in Peninsular Malaysia, which include the Assemblies of God, the Pentecostal Church of Malaya, and the Independent Pentecostal Church, represent 9.1 per cent of the Protestants (Thomas 1978).

Pentecostal doctrines had only limited influence among Malaysian Christians before the emergence of the interdenominational Charismatic movement in the mid-1970s. Classical or sectarian Pentecostalism, however, was introduced to the Peninsula as early as 1930. The largest Pentecostal churches in Malaysia, founded between 1930 and 1952, began as sects which shunned contact with mainstream Christianity. As a result of classical Pentecostalism’s isolationist and sectarian outlook, the Roman Catholics, Methodists, and Anglicans who comprise the mainstream of the Malaysian Christian community had little or no interaction with the Pentecostal churches. Mainstream Christians were largely unaware of Pentecostal teachings and forms of worship until interdenominational neo-Pentecostalism reached Malaysia about a decade after the movement’s beginnings in the United States.

**Background of the Charismatic Movement**

The Pentecostal movement, in both its classical and recent phases, seeks to restore original Christianity, the golden age when the power of the Holy Spirit flowed through the Apostles, enabling them to manifest such charisms of the Spirit as preaching the Gospel in unknown languages, healing the sick, driving away evil spirits, and prophesying. According to Pentecostal doctrine, glossalalia or “speaking in tongues” is the most immediate sign of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, which confers divine power and spiritual gifts upon those who become filled with the Spirit. Pentecostalism asserts that the experience of Spirit Baptism is as available to present day Christians as it was to the Apostles. In seeking the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, Christians of today can receive the spiritual power and gifts described in the New Testament books, Acts of the Apostles, and Epistle of First Corinthians, and