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AN IRRESPONSIBLE SILENCE[1]

Walter J. Hollenweger

I was *trained* in the most rigid critical scholarship of the universities of Zurich and Basel. My teachers were Hans Conzelmann, Gerhard Ebeling, Eduard Schweizer and Karl Barth. I knew also Rudolf Bultmann, Ernst Kasemann and Emil Brunner personally.

I was *raised* in the oral, experience based spirituality of Swiss Pentecostalism. At that time we had a number of highly gifted lay preachers who used the Bible in order to understand what happened to them in the factory, when they were injured or lost their jobs, when they had no food for their children. This is probably the most important contribution of Pentecostalism, its oral culture, its oral homiletics. The interpenetration of critical scholarship with oral culture on the level of university studies has become a lifelong task for me. It materialized in the Centre for Black and White Christian Partnership in Birmingham where we educated black Pentecostal worker pastors in a university surrounding without destroying their natural spiritual gifts. It also shows in my research on Pentecostalism, and in dozens of Pentecostal post-graduate students. After my retirement from the university, I engaged in a new ecumenical adventure, namely in the oikoumene between theology and the world of drama, between the gifts of the Spirit of the right hemisphere of the brain (such as speaking in tongues, healing, making music, dancing, visions) and the left hemisphere of the brain (the analytical gifts of theological scholarship, the rational gifts of humanity). For instance I recently produced Bach's Passion of John together with professional artists, or the Requiem for Bonhoeffer (at the University of Zurich) or in Germany and Switzerland the Hommage for Maria Von Wedemeyer (Bonhoeffer's fiancee).

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Oral spirituality of Pentecostalism is a heritage from its founder, William J. Seymour, an Afro-American ecumenist who in 1906 was at the centre of a revival which bridged black and white, men and women, academics and proletarians—something absolutely astonishing for that time, when black music, black culture, black religion was considered unchristian in the USA.

I know of only two world-wide Christian movements that have been founded by non-Europeans. The first is Christianity itself. Its founder was a story-telling rabbi from the oral culture of the Middle East, who healed the sick and never wrote a book. And yet, he probably influenced more people than any writer. The second is the Pentecostal movement. Its founder was a black ecumenist. The black oral root is also responsible for the growth potential of both these movements.

The other roots are:

1) Catholic Spirituality: Pentecostals and Catholics follow Thomas Aquinas in believing in a natural *and* a supernatural world; they both believe—contrary to the Reformers—in free will; both Catholic Priests and Pentecostal pastors can forgive sins and withhold absolution if the conditions are not fulfilled. This type of Catholic spirituality was mediated to Pentecostalism by Wesley and Fletcher.

2) Evangelical Spirituality (in the form of the American Holiness movement): Its features are pacifism, the fight against capitalism, the fight for a world organization for peace etc.

3) Critical Root: The first document of Pentecostalism does not contain a passage on the inerrancy of Scripture, on the "initial evidence of speaking in tongues," on baptism of adults etc.

4) Ecumenical Root: Almost all Pentecostal movements started as ecumenical renewal movements. They did not want to found a new church. They wanted to revive the whole church. Today, there are twelve rather big Pentecostal churches in the World Council. There would be more if the Pentecostal Vatican at Springfield was not actively hindering them. There are countries where the only member churches of the WCC are the Pentecostals. The American Assemblies of God cooperated intensely with the National Council of Churches and with the WCC up to the time when Thomas Zimmerman became president of the National Association of Evangelicals. In order to win the sympathy of the evangelicals the Pentecostals gave up old friends. The first Pentecostal to address a World Council full assembly was the leader of the oldest German Pentecostal church, Christian Krust. The first Pentecostal

member churches of the Conference of European Churches (KEK) were black Pentecostal churches from Britain.

All this was actively suppressed in the media and many times also in Pentecostal periodicals. At least in Europe there is an irresponsible silence on Pentecostalism, in spite of hundreds of dissertations by Pentecostals at reputable universities. The myth of non-informed Pentecostal enthusiasts still dominates the field. However, there are a number of Presbyterians who know better. One of them is Richard Shaull. He played a prominent role at the "Church and Society" conference of the WCC in Geneva. He was trained at Princeton by Emil Brunner, John Mackay and Josef Hromadka. He worked for a long time as professor at Princeton and he was also active in Latin America. There he watched "the emergence of a new expression of Christian faith and life significantly different from that defined for us by the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century." He "realized that most Presbyterian churches were not growing in a healthy way because they were bound by imported ecclesiastical structures and patterns of congregational life which did not arise out of or fit their situation. And over the years he became aware of the fact that our churches created a mentality in which many of those who were converted became primarily concerned about getting an education, pursuing a career, and becoming socially and economically upwardly mobile. Along this road, their passion for evangelism as well as their concern for the suffering of the poor seemed to fade into the background."

He also describes the emergence of base communities (under the influence of Roman Catholic theology of liberation). "But after ten years, it became clear that the leaders of the church were determined to destroy a movement, the theology and social witness of which they found quite threatening." Again the same story: "Professional career and upward mobility took precedence over the passion for evangelism and for radical social witness." He concludes: "I suspected that what I and others were really doing was teaching people to have *the right ideas about God*, to learn how *to speak about God*, rather than *to and with God*. Having come to these conclusions, I decided to leave Princeton ten years before the date I was expected to retire."

His contacts with Pentecostals in Chile, Brazil and elsewhere are a moving story: I cannot escape the fact that the Pentecostal movements are much closer to my expectation of what the church is than any other church I know, and that the witness is of crucial importance for us." And this is because—also in the judgment of Catholic researchers—they have gone beyond the Roman Catholic base communities. They have touched

the lives of a much larger number of poor people. Their discourse is not about the "options *for the poor*" but a discourse *of the poor* that refuse to accept poverty. Instead of focussing on political liberation, Pentecostalism focuses on catastrophe, violence and terror, the tribulations which precede the millenium. He suspects that, "if any significant change is to occur among us, it will come as the result primarily of the impact of Pentecostal witness in our midst."

That has to do with the fact that for Pentecostals reality is not limited to what we ordinarily perceive, but it includes the reality of the Spirit. No need to go to esoteric circles or Buddhist monasteries to experience that other reality (as many Presbyterians in Europe and the US do). This reality is right in the middle of our common biblical heritage. Take the healings out of the New Testament and not much is left of it. Even Rudolf Bultmann agrees that Jesus was a healer. Otherwise, we could not explain the many healing stories in the New Testament. A Church in the Third World which does not have a basic medical ministry and a spiritual ministry for the sick and down-trodden can only survive with subventions from the West. Now that these subventions are getting less they must either change (in the direction of Pentecostal spirituality) or they will disappear. That applies in particular to Third World Presbyterian churches. But the same problem hits us in Switzerland and Germany. People are no longer prepared to listen to allegorical or psychological "explanations" of biblical stories. They want the real thing, spiritually, bodily and intellectually. Contrary to what the opinion makers say, people are not "secularized." They are hungry for religion. But they are sick and tired of the gnostic explanation-culture of the Reformed churches. That is why they leave the Protestant main-line churches *en masse*. The Reformed churches try to repair the damage. They have committees on re-structuring etc. That will not help. Richard Shaull is not the only one who sees the situation clearly. There is an array of internationally respected Presbyterian scholars who sound the alarm. Probably the first one was John Mackay, the grand old man of Presbyterianism and ecumenism, friend of David Du Plessis and president of Princeton Theological Seminary. He saw in Pentecostalism the "true Hope of ecumenism." Another is Konrad Raiser, general secretary of the WCC: "The present growth of Christianity is almost entirely due to Pentecostal and evangelical churches…This means for the WCC that it has to open itself to these manifestations of Christian existence, Christian church and Christian witness." And Harvey Cox—although not a Presbyterian but a Baptist—prophesied: By the early twenty-first century, Pentecostalism will outnumber both Catholics and

Protestants. We simply cannot afford to ignore them." Lastly I want to mention: Hans-Jurgen Becken, a German specialist on African Initiated Churches. He points not only to the growth, but also to the theological and medical contribution of these churches. From an encounter with them he expects not only help "in solving the apparent crisis of our western health services but also a change in heart of the individual, be he or she medical doctor or patient." That expectation is confirmed by reports from the World Health Organization in Geneva. Medical faculties and medical doctors—not necessarily Christians—invite me to discuss with them the "spiritual dimension" of sickness and healing. The same is true for some military leaders. They know that without a thorough knowledge of religion they will make all the mistakes George Bush made. And of late some managers asked me to talk to them on the topic: "We have lost our belief in economics. Can a new culture of enterprise save us?" I mention these examples to back up my statement that the world is not antagonistic to the Gospel. But the world rejects our "churchy" way of presenting it.

All this provides ample reason for a dialogue. It is costly but it is inevitable. I know three successful ways of integrating Pentecostal spirituality within a Presbyterian church. The first—and in my opinion theologically the most reflected—is the one by the United Presbyterian Church, USA. It shows convincingly how Pentecostal spirituality can be integrated into a Presbyterian church. The second is the Bible Reading association of Ghana. It started in the thirties and did not split the church. The third is the Reformed French pastor Louis Daliere. He was—at that time—a lone voice in French Protestantism. Today half of the practicing Protestants in France are Pentecostals and a number of Pentecostal churches became members of the Federation du Protestantisme Francais. Seeing the plight of European Presbyterianism and the inability of European Pentecostalism to follow the example of their Third World sister churches in their break-through to an oral, critical and ecumenical spirituality, it seems to be high time to combine our resources for progressing "from an academic research to spiritual transformation" (Richard Shaull). That applies in particular to our theological colleges and faculties who are shining examples both of impressive scholarship (of the past) and of splendid irrelevance.

Although the academic establishment in Germany and Switzerland does not move ahead in a visible way, there are signs in the Presbyterian churches which point to a new direction. Among these signs I count the many healing or blessing and anointing services in Germany and Switzerland, including such a service at the first German ecumenical

Kirchentag in Berlin (2003) where 6000 people celebrated until midnight. Present were Catholics, Lutherans and Presbyterians plus any number of free churches and charismatics. This rite is an incarnation of the reformation by emphasizing the *sola gratia*. Healing—or even betterment—is entirely in the hands of God, and this without any condition. We put our bodies—not just our souls—into the hands of God. The ministry is administered by a majority of lay people—thus expressing the real charismatic understanding of the people of God. Many doctors and psychiatrists—some of which have difficulties with our ordinary Reformed church life—help us in these services. Since the Pope has so far not forbidden the ecumenical prayer and healing services, this is one way we can ecumenically express our provisional unity.

Notes

Quotes in Richard Shaull, "From Academic Research to Spiritual Transformation: Reflections on a Study of Pentecostalism in Brazil" in the volumes of conference papers *Purity and Power: Revisioning the Holiness and Pentecostal/Charismatic Movements for the Twenty-First Century*, 27th Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies in special session with the Wesleyan Theological Society, March 12-14, 1998, Church of God Theological Seminary, Cleveland, Tennessee, 2 vols, 2-A, available from SPS, Lexington.

All other quotes in Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997).