

Contagion in The Pentecostal/Charismatic Movement: A Good Mimesis?

Paper Proposal for COV&R 2010 by Allen Johnson

ABSTRACT

Pentecostal/Charismatic churches are the fastest growing worldwide Christian expression, from its start in 1906 to 27% of the world's Christian population in 1997 (about 1 in 4 Christians, or 500 million). It is a movement that especially appeals to the poor while tending to be disparaged by the better educated, socially connected, and professional classes. Adherents practice of a literal interpretation of the gifts of The Holy Spirit as listed in 1 Corinthians 12, including speaking in tongues, inspirational verbal prophesying, and seeking of miracles such as divine healing. Gatherings often are emotionally charged and physically expressive. Is the crowd contagion of these meetings a good mimesis that results in social harmony without scapegoating violence? When assembled believers enter passionately into worship, they are released from their prisons of mimetic interpersonal resentments toward one another, engendering unity and peace. Using insights of mimetic theorists Rene Girard, Jean-Michel Oughourlian and others, and drawing upon my own ongoing personal involvement within the charismatic movement, I discuss crowd contagion phenomena such as holy laughter, the slaying in the spirit, emotionally charged music, shouting, and cadence preaching. How might divine healing tie-in with mimesis? How does the personal charisma of leaders mimetically hyper-charge passions of the congregants? Why is this movement so vulnerable to charlatans? Could a reason many in the movement are skeptical of science and are non-ecumenical be that they instinctively fear demythologization that would implode them? I will give some illustrations of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement from my own experience as an insider, and how to an extent the Girardian light has demythologized the movement for me personally (do I lament or not?). Most importantly, does this form of corporate worship build lasting harmonious relationships, personal inner peace, and a positive outworking of lives toward the larger community and world?

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