



Introduction: The Charismatic Movement and Contemporary Social Change

TONY WALTER AND STEVE HUNT

'Church was never like this!' proclaimed the leaflet handed to one of us while out shopping in the local high street one day in the mid 1980s. The leaflet comprised an invitation to a three-day celebration in the town's biggest municipal park, a celebration organized by the fast-growing house church that had recently taken over and immaculately restored the town's superb art deco cinema. Handed out to all and sundry in the shopping plaza, the leaflet was presumably intended to appeal to unchurched people who had long ago been put off by church. Like many manifestations of the charismatic movement, however, the celebration may well have appealed rather more to existing churchgoers who yearned for a different kind of church, a church that isn't churchy.

The charismatic movement in contemporary Christianity may be looked at as a response to the ossification of the church. Some charismatic groups have left the mother church, creating fission in a classic sectarian mode—though not quite classic, in that some charismatic leaders have read their sociology of religion and are rather more reflexive than were nineteenth-century Protestant sectarians. Others remain within mainline churches—in the U.K. mainly Anglican, Baptist and Catholic—though the sociological dynamics of renewal from within have yet to be paid the attention that researchers have paid to new sectarian groups.

As hinted in the vignette with which we began, the movement may be seen as a statement about the church in relationship to modern society—this is the research perspective of this symposium. Is the charismatic movement evidence of a reversal of the general trend in the West toward secularization? Is the movement a creative response to modernity, postmodernity, globalization and all the other *-ity*s and *-ization*s that sociologists like to identify as characterizing the contemporary world? Or has it been co-opted by that world's largely secular trends and fashions? Or both? The movement is certainly in the world, but is it of the world? Is it for the world, or against it?

In his article, Steve Bruce disputes the proposition that the charismatic movement has in any way stemmed the tide of secularization. He claims that the numbers involved, in Britain at least, are not as large as some have claimed, and do not compensate for the steady, long-term drift away from churchgoing. Moreover, most of those who join charismatic churches do so from other churches, so overall numbers are not increased. Against Bruce's view, it could be argued that the movement does signify a renewal of spiritual life within the churches—never mind the lack of width, feel the quality.

What, however, is the quality of the charismatic experience? Modernity displays a particular relationship between reason and experience. Modernity is the project of applying systematic rationality to conquer nature for human ends and to solve the problems of society. It also entails, as Bruce notes, urbanization, industrialization and

Several of the articles in this symposium were given in November 1996 at a conference entitled *The Charismatic Movement and the Future of Religion—the Charismatic Movement and Theories of Contemporary Religious Change*, a conference which aimed to bring together sociological researchers and adherents of the charismatic movement. The conference was organized under the auspices of the Sociology of Religion group of the British Sociological Association and was hosted by the Sociology Department of the University of Reading.

mobility. But where does this leave the person? Modernity has also witnessed the search for meaning and identity, the romantic celebration of feeling and experience. Religion has not been immune from this double aspect of modernity. Both liberals and evangelicals, in their own very different ways, apply a systematic rationality to the study of the Bible; each is inconceivable except in a society that places facts above all other kinds of knowledge. The charismatic movement expresses the more emotive pole of modernity. For charismatics, it is not only the centuries-old Church of England that is in need of revival but also the dry-as-dust biblical expositions of many evangelicals. Both are deemed to need a healthy shot of direct experience of the Holy Spirit. Yet, as Cartledge demonstrates in his case study, Pentecostalism itself entails a rigid adherence to certain fundamentals, so for the charismatic (or 'Neo-Pentecostal') there can be a tension between fundamentalism and experientialism. Christianity has perhaps always been torn between religious experience and rational reflection upon that experience; this tension is today actively encouraged by the same tension between reason and emotion within society at large. Cartledge suggests that charismatics are caught between the fundamentalism of modernism and the experientialism of postmodernism.

What is clear from the sociology of sects is that religious authority rooted in experience rather than dogma is likely to lead to splits, because what *I* experience may not be what *you* experience. One certainly finds this within the charismatic movement, though one also finds within the mainline churches, especially the broad churches of Anglicanism and Catholicism, the phenomenon of different worshippers mouthing the same doctrinal words but having very different religious experiences. In such churches, the retention of formal creeds keeps everyone together, but is no longer where spirituality is actually at.

The yearning for ever new spiritual experience, unlike the security of dogma, is always on the move: experience that remains static becomes dull and formal. Cartledge points out that, whereas in its early days (the 1960s) speaking in tongues was the defining mark of the charismatic, today glossolalia is no longer a defining characteristic of charismatic meetings and is practised mainly, if at all, in private. Instead, we now see new manifestations of divine power—healing, deliverance, prophecy and in the Toronto Blessing (the subject of Percy's chapter) barking, uncontrollable laughter and being slain in the Spirit. For spiritual experience to be sufficiently noteworthy to be taken as evidence of God's power acting in this world, this year's experience must cap last year's. To use charismatic jargon, 'to be at the cutting edge of where God is at' requires a constant cranking up of experience into the ever more wonderful and miraculous, a process that cannot go on forever and is in imminent danger of collapsing in on itself. This process is remarkably similar to what we find in contemporary television culture, with ever shorter, more colourful, more eye-catching sound bites clamouring for attention. Spiritual experience becomes ever hotter, leaving behind a trail of yesterday's charismatic fashions. Whether this is usefully termed spiritual bricolage, as Cartledge suggests, it certainly seems typical of what is now often termed postmodernity.

The charismatic movement is typical of postmodernity in another way: it is at the same time both personal and global. Coleman's article on the faith movement in Sweden and Percy's article on the Toronto Blessing reveals the way in which charismatic experience and teaching waft from continent to continent, typically starting in North America but rapidly indigenized in Sweden, Britain or wherever. Though God acts globally, the uniqueness of *where* he acts is emphasized by Coleman, and illustrated by Percy. Indeed, Toronto introduces an intriguing new phenomenon: the

Protestant pilgrimage. Evangelicals have for many years taken time out from everyday life to travel to the special crusade, conference or camp meeting, English examples being the Keswick convention in former years and Spring Harvest more recently. Such meetings can attract tens of thousands for a week at a time, but hitherto what has drawn evangelicals and charismatics has been not the place but the famous speakers gathered there—together with the buzz of being with thousands of fellow believers having a good time. But Toronto is different: the pull is not any one teacher who is world famous for being God's mouthpiece but a *place* in which God is peculiarly manifest. Hitherto, it was only Catholics who went on pilgrimage to places of sacred power.

Thus far, we have introduced the use in this symposium of the sociological concepts of secularization, modernity, postmodernity and globalization. Percy's chapter on the Toronto Blessing utilizes a further sociological approach, exchange theory, and enquires whether this sheds any light on the Blessing. Percy suggests that in return for their investment of time, money and devotion, pilgrims are rewarded with manifestations of God's power. Quite why middle-class charismatics—who come from a typically far less deprived background than classical Pentecostals—should be so concerned with divine power is something yet to be satisfactorily explained. Other sociological theories could surely also find a place. For example, Hunt analyzes the charismatic movement in terms of the sociology of magic. Meanwhile, in the modernizing countries of Latin America, where charismatic Christianity has arguably made the biggest impact, discussed by Crowley, different processes may be at work from Europe and North America, where modernity has run its course for much longer. This course may additionally prove a different one from that now being embarked upon in Latin America.

So, whither the charismatic movement? Is it a radical shake-up of the churches and a witness of divine power to the world? Overall, the articles in this symposium suggest not, at least not in Europe or North America. Anyone who has witnessed first-hand the goings-on at Sheffield's Nine-o-Clock Service or at the Toronto Airport Vineyard Church would surely agree that 'church was never like this'. But in many ways, postmodern society is precisely like this. Maybe the charismatics have turned their backs more upon the historic church than upon the postmodern world.

TONY WALTER and STEVE HUNT teach in the Sociology Department at the University of Reading. With Malcolm Hamilton, they are the co-editors of *Charismatic Christianity: Sociological Perspectives* (Macmillan, 1997); they also organized the conference which gave rise to the present symposium.

Department of Sociology, University of Reading, PO Box 218, Reading RG6 6AA, U.K.