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# Postmodern Allusions In Contemporary Pentecostalism

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## Extent and Limitations of Pentecostal Postmodernity

### *1. Introduction : Popular Theology and Culture*

In the face of wide spread religious apathy and an across-the-board decline in attendance in other denominations, Australian Pentecostalism has been able to expand consistently. In this article, I want to put forward the argument that there are sound cultural reasons for this state of affairs in the way in which Pentecostals have become adept at moving in the cultural territory of postmodernity. However, Pentecostalism is not religious postmodernity pure and simple. This article argues that wrapped up in the postmodern packaging of Pentecostalism long dormant pre-modern values and concepts are once more coming to the fore.

The initial impetus for the proposition of this article came out of the preliminary research for my PhD thesis. Spending a lot of time at our University library and finding very little on the subject, I could not help but become aware of the comparative scarcity of academic material on the general subject of Pentecostalism. The movement's early orientation toward the working class have been extensively documented by Hollenweger<sup>1</sup>. This initial orientation and a certain anti-intellectualism that went with it have left an imprint on the movement that is still making itself felt.

As I am arguing in my thesis, Pentecostalism broke out of its sectarian mould and started to make a home for itself in the cultural territory of postmodernity in the early seventies. In this process, the movement's early anti-intellectual orientation assumed a key role in facilitating the early assumption of certain suspicions towards elites (including church-institutional and theological elites) which are such a hall mark of post modernity. In this way both the historical critical academic discourse on matters biblical, as well as the often « liberal »-theological stance of main stream church institutions marked these elites out as peer groups with whom a dialogue was to be avoided rather than sought. At the same time established academics and theologians were often put off by the seeming irrationality and the often crass populism of many protagonists of the Pentecostal movement.

For these reasons I came to an early conclusion that if Pentecostalism was to be understood any better, there was to be circumvented a double brick wall of suspicions on one side and academic silence on the other side. Even so, if only because of the rapidly growing size of the movement an attempt at a deeper understanding of the Pentecostal movement was a work needed to be made<sup>2</sup>,

With both academic and church institutional avenues somewhat dubious, one particular avenue offered itself as a promising entry point into contemporary Australian Pentecostalism. This avenue was the great wealth of popular Pentecostal literature that reaches the market

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<sup>1</sup> Walter J. HOLLENWEGER, *The Pentecostals*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publ House, 1972.

<sup>2</sup> Philip HUGHES, *The Pentecostals in Australia*, Canberra: Aust. Government Publ. Service, 1996, p. 87.

every year, which allowed for a treatment of the movement within its own *emic* presuppositions. According to Canadian Sociologist David Lyon, who has long had an eye on religious postmodernity :

« the postmodern is associated with a society where consumer lifestyles and mass consumption dominate the waking lives of its members... Consumer culture may be connected with other more general cultural phenomena. Not just artistic and consumer goods, but also intellectual and even religious ones become subject to the market, which resists both monopoly and hierarchy. »<sup>3</sup>

As has become clear to me in the detailed working out of my dissertation, many aspects of contemporary Australian Pentecostalism are more easily understood when they are put into the context of such postmodern religious consumerism. For throughout it is *popular literature* that fills the shelves and goes over the counter. Academic concerns like the historical critical project or other expressions of theological academic endeavour (e.g. feminist or liberation concerns) are notably absent. Church hierarchical concerns might have somewhat more of an influence on what is on offer, but my research has shown just how marginal this influence is. In a way that would be inconceivable in Anglican, Catholic or other mainstream Christian bookshops it is the consumer, the market - not the hierarchy - that often seems to decide what is bought and sold in the Pentecostal book shop.

A question will serve to sum up and apply the argument so far : what is more representative of the Pentecostal mind set : Joyce Meyer's *Battlefield of the Mind*<sup>4</sup>, which according to information made available to me has sold 600 copies in three months through one local denominational book shop alone - or Duffield and Van Cleaves' *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology*<sup>5</sup>, which took months to track down even one copy of ?

Once the research focus is directed onto a corpus of popular Pentecostal literature, it soon becomes obvious how remarkably adept the popular Pentecostal literary scene in general and popular Pentecostal writers in particular have become at tuning into the spirit of the age - a spirit that is thoroughly postmodern.

## 2. *A Postmodern Gospel*

Interacting with the literature, it became necessary to create a conceptual framework within which to assess the cultural shift to postmodernity, as this shift presented itself in a corpus of contemporary Pentecostal writings. The academic discourse on postmodernity is enormous and so is the popular Pentecostal discourse. To connect the two fields with each other it was important to find a credible way to link these two discourses with each other.

On one side there was the « deep reading » of a corpus of this literature as it was sold over a particular period of time - on the other side this corpus of contemporary writings needed to be put into the larger context of contemporary culture(s). In the process, this afforded a closer look at the values, myths and doctrines that were propagated in the literature of the Pentecostal sub-culture. In this way such an approach could be termed cultural- historical or ethnographic, and indeed I am partly indebted to studies like Clifford Geertz's *The*

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<sup>3</sup> David LYON, *Postmodernity* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup>Joyce MEYER, *The Battlefield of the Mind*, Tulsa: Harrison House, 1996.

<sup>5</sup>G.P. DUFFIELD and N.M. VAN CLEAVE, *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology* Los Angeles: L.I.F.E. Bible College, 1983.

### *Interpretation of Cultures* or Philip Almond's Heaven and Hell in Pre-Enlightenment England.

It needs to be noted that even though the dissertation has something of the format of a literary study, it is not the aims, motivations, genres and techniques employed by the authors that are of interest. Rather, it is the cultural shift of the Pentecostal movement towards postmodernity, as this shift appears in its popular literature.

A valuable contribution to the study was made by other cultural studies, in particularly Marsden's article *Evangelicals, History and Modernity*<sup>6</sup>, where the strong cultural connection between conservative Evangelicalism and the cultural values of Modernity was shown. Stanley Grenz in his influential *Primer on Postmodernism*<sup>7</sup> sums up the argument presented by Marsden :

« Evangelicalism shares close ties with Modernity. A child of the Reformation, pietism, and revivalism, the evangelical movement was born in the early modern period. North American evangelicalism reached maturity in the mid-twentieth century - at the height of the modern era ».

In his book, Grenz discusses evangelicalism and its relationship to issues like the postmodern world view and the postmodern philosophers in some detail. On the basis of this discussion, Grenz makes a start at looking at what kind of theological shifts would need to be expected in order to assure that the traditional evangelical message remain relevant in the Postmodern age. In his discussion of a hypothetical Postmodern Gospel Grenz<sup>8</sup> comes to the conclusion that such a Postmodern Gospel would need to be characterised by a number of post-individualistic, post-rationalistic, post-dualistic and post-noeticentric elements. The underlying motivation of Grenz' book was obviously to reform Evangelicalism. He did not even mention Pentecostalism. In this article I argue that this was a major oversight - because it is quite startling to observe how many aspects of Grenz' hypothetical « Postmodern Gospel » fit the Pentecostal mind set at it is expressed in contemporary popular literature almost congruently. In this way, this article argues that the hypothetical Postmodern Gospel Grenz is groping for has already become reality in the burgeoning Pentecostal movement.

### 3. Grenz among the Prophets ?

To come back to the original line of argument and to apply it to the corpus of popular Pentecostal theology that has been the object of my dissertation, it needs to be shown now how Grenz' hypothetical postmodern Gospel is evident in the corpus of popular literature on Pentecostal theology. I see the following major areas of affinity or even interface :

a) According to Grenz<sup>9</sup> a Postmodern Gospel would be post-individualistic, in the sense of being community- based as well as community- oriented. And indeed, post-individualism is no longer a hypothetical possibility but a living reality that clearly evident in Pentecostalism. The Pentecostal is no longer the reformation pilgrim, battling the world, the flesh and the devil in a grim struggle onwards to the Celestial City. Nor is he or she the conservative Evangelical, who is being sanctified by a rational interaction with doctrines derived from the Bible. More typically, contemporary Pentecostals see themselves as members of a spirit-filled

<sup>6</sup> George M. MARSDEN, « Evangelicals, History and Modernity » in: *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984.

<sup>7</sup> Stanley J. GRENZ, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167f.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

fellowship of believers where the sum total (the Body of Christ) is of much more consequence than the individual parts. Fifteen books of my corpus which relate to a recent revival are full of biographical and auto biographical material of People who « get swept up in Revival », become involved in Pentecostal style group spirituality and come under the leadership of charismatic leaders. The same literature throws fascinating lights on the ease with which Pentecostalism is not only able to transcend national borders, but for all practical purposes is able to ignore the nation state, a central tenement of modernity.

b) Grenz<sup>10</sup> postulated a trend towards post-rationalism for his « Postmodern Gospel ». Few who ever have attended a « full on » Pentecostal meeting would deny that Pentecostalism is thoroughly post-rationalistic in its whole charismatic outlook. It is the celebration and the presence of the Holy Spirit that holds the center stage at Pentecostal meetings. The rational exposition of doctrine that has been so important both in traditional evangelicalism and in the reformed tradition is no longer the only priority. The « Word » is still handled, almost ritually at times - but it is handled post- rationally. On one side there are the phenomena which I have developed elsewhere<sup>11</sup> ; a peculiar mixture of hermeneutics, theology and « Holy Spirit inspired prophecy ». The research corpus shows how open Pentecostals are to all sorts of « inspired » interpretations. The presence of a variety of so-called spiritual gifts (given specific names such as prophecy, the « word of knowledge », the gift of wisdom, etc.) is present even where at the superficial level Pentecostals seemingly only relate to particular biblical text. However, in many cases the application of these texts to present-day issues is in such a manner as to use these texts as the basis of « prophetic » statements. In this context, it is of interest what Pentecostals themselves understand « prophecy » to be : Mike Bickle, an authority in the field<sup>12</sup> :

« The term “prophetic” is typically used to refer either to the fulfilment of end-time biblical predictions or the speaking forth of current revelatory messages... Prophetic ministry involves more than receiving and communicating information; it also includes, in some measure, the ability to experience the compassion, grief and joy of God. As we experience God, we will be given insight into some of His future plans and purposes. »

The literature I have looked at is full of « prophecy » of that sort, including quite a number of attempts to document how « prophetic words » and « words of wisdom » successfully predicted outcomes that were sometimes years in the future.

Methods, aims and motivations of Pentecostal postrationalism extend considerably farther than simply predicting the future. However, for the purposes of this article « prophecy » - the credibility of which often hangs on the « prophet » who has uttered it and not much else - may serve as an illustration of the extent to which standard conventions of Enlightenment rationalism have been abandoned by the writers - and presumably the readers - of the researched popular Pentecostal literature.

c) Grenz<sup>13</sup> calls for a post-dualistic and therefore a more holistic emphasis (holism in the body / soul / spirit sense - not theological non-dualism in the sense of monism). Many of Evangelicalism's fine tuned theological and doctrinal tenements have been incorporated into

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>11</sup> Peter T. WEILER, « Iconic Readers - Daniel 7-12 in a community of Pentecostal Readers », *Australian Studies in Religion Review* 1998, 11/1.

<sup>12</sup> For a treatment of the topic from a Pentecostal point of view that is both extensive and recent, refer to: Mike BICKLE and Michael SULLIVANT, *Growing in the Prophetic*, Orlando: Creation House, 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Stanley J.GRENZ, *op. cit* (note 7), p. 171.

and are outwardly adhered to with remarkable conservatism in Pentecostal circles. However, the research corpus affords a rather large body of applied theology as well as numerous personal testimonies which show to what a degree Pentecostalism is trying to engage the whole person at a variety of levels. It knows how to integrate the emotional-affective (e.g. through ecstatic worship, spiritual warfare and deliverance sessions), the bodily-sensual (e.g. through laying on of hands, « Toronto »-style experiences, or the emphasis on physical and emotional or « inner » healing) and the intellectual-rational (the doctrines which are still around but now travel more in the back-seat, as it were).

Increasingly, Pentecostal holism is trying to understand and interpret society at a « wholesale » level as well. At the levels of the family and of social conventions. However, the wider world is not neglected either. Out of a wealth of possible illustrations that could have been used to illustrate this point, consider the following quote by bestselling popular Pentecostal author Francis Frangipane :

« The revivals and harvests we see emerging around the world, the collapse of communism, and the exodus of Jews back to Israel were all birthed as individuals agreed with the intercession of Christ and the plan of God »<sup>14</sup>

In ways that are often somehow not quite rationally accessible to the outsider, Pentecostals have produced a world view that is able to creatively deal with issues for which the rational economic or political explanations of modernity are felt to be unsatisfying.

d) Grenz<sup>15</sup> sees a need for a Postmodern Gospel to become post-noeticentric and therefore more practice- and experience orientated. Accordingly, rather than for example concentrating on an ever- increasing accumulation of propositions about the historical context of the Bible as with historical critics, or an ever more compellingly crafted rational theology as with Evangelicals, a post- modern approach would be expected to highlight the more experience-based and practice- oriented aspects of the Christian life.

And indeed, it has long been clear that Pentecostal orientation strongly tends towards such practical and experiential concerns. One instance where this post- noeticentric orientation became particularly obvious in the corpus of popular Pentecostal theology which I perused, was in its treatment of Pentecostal leadership figures. The literature I looked at makes it clear that Pentecostal leaders can do without academic or church institutional credentials, yet what they cannot do without is dependably demonstrable charismata<sup>16</sup>. This perspective comes through very strongly again and again : from early leaders such as Charles Parham and Smith Wigglesworth onwards, the emphasis of their historical treatment is always and almost exclusively on how these leaders were able to manifest « Spirit-given anointing » in a consistent way. The emphasis is never on what was achieved theologically (as with their contemporaries Bultmann, Barth, Brunner, or more recently in the Evangelical tradition : Schaeffer). Rather, the emphasis is on what these Pentecostal leaders achieved practically, or accessed experientially (eg. recent prophetic visionaries like Joyner). Roberts Liardon's recent treatment of twelve early Pentecostal leaders<sup>17</sup> is a case in point, and so is Maria Woodworth- Etter's *Diary of Signs and Wonders*. Supernaturally empowered Pentecostal leaders need to be seen as healing the sick, founding churches and raising up ministries that span the globe.

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<sup>14</sup> Francis FRANGIPANE, *The River of Life*, Cedar Rapids: Whitaker House, 1993.

<sup>15</sup> Stanley J. GRENZ, *op. cit* (note 7), p. 172

<sup>16</sup> Again, the term charismata is used in its theological sense.

<sup>17</sup> Roberts LIARDON, *God's Generals - Why They Succeeded and Why Some Failed*, Tulsa: Albury Publishing, 1996.

The pragmatic and experience- oriented attitude extends further, however, into books on church growth<sup>18</sup> and even into devotionals<sup>19</sup>.

#### 4. *Pre-modernity and postmodernity*

I want to make it clear that it is not my intention to claim that Pentecostalism is religious Postmodernity pure and unadulterated. Things are not as simple as that: The postmodern allusions are there, they are all pervading and they are undeniable. Nevertheless there is at least one other force at work in Pentecostalism, a force that is strongly antithetical to postmodernity.

In this context it is of interest to note that in a recent book Canadian sociologist David Lyon<sup>20</sup> spelt out a number of different possible reactions to postmodernity. Lyon outlined three not necessarily mutually exclusive responses to postmodernity. These responses were, firstly, the resignation to the postmodern ; secondly, the reassertion of the modern and thirdly, a reaching back to premodern values and concepts<sup>21</sup>. On the basis of my research into contemporary popular literature as it is presently emanating from the contemporary Pentecostal scene, and applying Lyon's argument to this sort of popular Pentecostal theological literature as a genuine cultural expression, I would argue that at least to some degree contemporary Pentecostals exists in the tension between a genuine embrace of postmodernity on one side, and a reaching back to theological values and concepts that were prominent in premodernity on the other side.

The argument could of course be put forward that Pentecostalism is simply conservative evangelical theology differently contextualised. Such an argument could take the approach of recognising the Gospel itself as the « product » of a premodern age, or of proposing that it simply stands « above culture » in Niebuhr's terms<sup>22</sup>. However, to make such an argument would mean to miss one important point. Even if one were to assign the Bible to a realm that stands above culture, its contemporary interpreters, be they Evangelicals or Pentecostals, most certainly do not belong to that realm. And indeed, when dealing with the popular literature as it is found in Pentecostal book shops, one is frequently confronted with phenomena which are rather hard to explain if Pentecostals were simply « modern » Evangelicals who happen to speak in Tongues. The evidence for a shift away from modernity - towards postmodernity on one side as has been shown, and towards premodernity on the other side as is argued here - is too all pervading.

If we were to extend Marsden's argument that traditional Evangelicalism feels rather comfortable within the world view of modernity, it is not a great step to connect this observation with the realisation of how intensely the Evangelical relationship to religious experience takes place as much as possible within the cultural framework of modernity - and of course this modern framework includes core values of the Evangelical world view such as individualism, rationalism, dualism and noeticentric theory, theology or ideology orientation.

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<sup>18</sup> Tony BARNETT, *Multiplication*, Lake Mary: Creation House, 1997.

<sup>19</sup> G.E. COPELAND, *Prayers that avail much*, Tulsa: Harrison House, 1997.

<sup>20</sup> David LYON, *op. cit.* (note 3).

<sup>21</sup> Compare especially David LYON (note 3), p. 74f.

<sup>22</sup> Helmut Richard NIEBUHR, *Christ and Culture*, New York: Harper and Row, 1951.

The contrast between this world view and the Pentecostal world view again becomes starkly obvious when segments of the contemporary Pentecostal world view as they represent themselves in the corpus are held up before the background of conservative Evangelicalism.

Two examples : firstly, there are several books in the corpus which contain eyewitness reports of men and women who claim to have visited either Heaven, or Hell, or both places.

One of the authors on my research list (Rick Joyner in « *The Final Quest* »<sup>23</sup>) recounts lengthy conversations between himself and the resurrected Christ in Heaven. Another, M.K. Baxter makes similar claims in her rather Dantesque *Divine Revelation of Hell*<sup>24</sup>. Another author, Evangelist Jesse Duplantis, gives accounts of conversations with the resurrected Jesus in his account *Heaven - Close Encounters of the God Kind*<sup>25</sup>. The point is not that these authors have made these experiences and lived to tell the tale, or even that they have written books about these experiences. The point is that these authors found Pentecostal publishers for their books and that Pentecostal book shops find ready buyers for these books in their Pentecostal audience<sup>26</sup>.

It is highly unlikely that such experience based accounts would be given much prominence on the Evangelical scene for example - not because of an intrinsic theological incompatibility I would argue, but because there is a cultural incompatibility between Evangelicals and Pentecostals along the lines of modernity and post-cum pre-modernity. In this way I would make it my argument that post-modern Pentecostalism has established connections to Christian pre-modernity, a move which - again for cultural reasons - modern evangelicalism is not inclined to embrace.

Second example : the intense spiritual warfare dimension pervading much of the literature is an other aspect of Pentecostalism that does not really sit well with either post-modernity as it is currently defined, nor with modernity, be this modernity of the Evangelical or of the liberal ilk. Accounts of individuals wrestling with the demonic, or of whole congregations doing the same with evil principalities<sup>27</sup> are scattered throughout the books on the research list, and a number of publications are specifically devoted to the subject : Godwin's « Witchcraft in the Church »<sup>28</sup>, Gibson's « Evicting Demonic Intruders »<sup>29</sup>, Savard's « Shattering your Strongholds »<sup>30</sup>, Hickey's « Break the Generation Curse »<sup>31</sup>.

It is neither the intention nor would it be possible to thoroughly discuss the implications of this aspect of the literature here in detail. Suffice it to say that such literature would not go down very well in conservative Evangelical circles, not because Evangelicals would not at least theoretically believe in the existence of a dark realm, but because - being beholden to the world view of modernity - they tend to become a little uncomfortable when the discussion turns to the preternatural.

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<sup>23</sup> Rick JOYNER, *The Final Quest*, New Kensington: Whitaker House, 1996.

<sup>24</sup> Mary K. BAXTER, *A Divine Revelation of Hell*, New Kensington: Whitaker House, 1993.

<sup>25</sup> Jesse DUPLANTIS, *Heaven - Close Encounters of the God Kind*, Tulsa: Harrison House, 1996.

<sup>26</sup> It is of interest in this context that both Rick Joyner's and Mary Baxter's books achieved very strong sales over the period which I researched.

<sup>27</sup> Compare J. KILPATRICK, *When the Heavens are Brass* Shippensburg: Revival Press, 1997, or Renee DELORIEA, *Portal in Pensacola - The Real Thing Hits Brownsville*, Shippensburg: Revival Press, 1997.

<sup>28</sup> Rick GODWIN, *Exposing Witchcraft in the Church*, Orlando: Creation House, 1997.

<sup>29</sup> N. and P. GIBSON, *Evicting Demonic Intruders*, Chichester: New Wine Press, 1993.

<sup>30</sup> Liberty S. Savard, *Shattering Your Strongholds*, North Brunswick: Bridge Logos Publ., 1994.

<sup>31</sup> Marilyn HICKEY, *The Next Generation Blessings*, Denver: Marilyn Hickey Ministries, 1995.

To Pentecostals on the other hand, the preternatural is very important. To a large extent, it is what counts. On the other hand, they tend to be sceptical, even critical of certain core values and conventions of modernity. It will be the topic of a forthcoming article to document and discuss this Pentecostal connection to Premodernity in a more extensive and systematic way. For the time being it suffices to say that the Pentecostal discourse shows many signs of having come to regard the discourses of modernity as irrelevant or exhausted, and reaches back to pre-modern concepts and values.