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The Benefits, Stigmas, and Childlikeness of Glossolalia and Speaking in Tongues

Introduction

When feeling overwhelmed, excited, or a flood of emotion, it is not uncommon for people to scream or make some sort of sound that might not be classified as a part of an official speech. Feeling “ugh” or “blah” are phrases used to describe the expression of emotion through verbal word of mouth that does not fit into the category of language. Babies are a great example of this. Considering that they are unable to speak the way humans can, they express their feelings and needs through ‘baby talk.’ This form of expression includes illegible sounds that may be best articulated through groans, whines, laughs, and shrieks. Although ‘baby talk’ is societally normalized only through infants, it is a quite normal, and even encouraged, way of self-expression for some religious groups. Baptism, in general, as well as baptism in the Spirit, are meant to create or retrieve the relationship of the individual Christian as a “child of God.” This is stated clearly in Romans 8:14-17 which says “for those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.” Throughout baptism in the Spirit for Pentecostals, individuals partake in ‘baby talk’ of sorts, in which they cry, yell, and make an array of illegible sounds. The demonstration and reiteration of this behavior are classified through the term ‘glossolalia.’

Glossolalia can be defined as “the phenomenon of (apparently) speaking in an unknown language, especially in religious worship”(OED). Glossolalia often goes hand in hand with ‘speaking in tongues’ and the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which are most active in the denominations of Charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity. A recent survey from the Spirit and Power Pew Research Center found that approximately 25% of Christians identify as Pentecostal (PRC). Considering the relevance of Pentecostal Christianity in the modern world today, aspects

of the faith can be seen in a variety of ways in the world around us. The rise of ‘Cool Christianity’ and mega-churches have contributed tremendously to societal acceptance of religion. Common expressions of glossolalia are noticeable in a variety of pop, rock, and rap songs. Additionally, live exclamations of glossolalia and speaking in tongues are demonstrated in a multitude of movies, shows, and sporting events.

Although the practice of tongues and glossolalia is mainly associated with the praise of God, sensations of the Spirit, and Christianity in general, the expression of glossolalia could potentially be beneficial to all people, no matter their religious affiliation. To understand the possible therapeutic qualities of glossolalia, it is important to also understand its religious significance, criticisms, and restrictions. In this paper, I will evaluate how Christian religious life interacts with the rest of society by drawing on my own experiences with ‘Cool Christianity.’ Furthermore, I will examine aspects of Pentecostalism both in whole and in part, looking at significant events such as Azusa Street, as well through the examination of modern-day glossolalia. Additionally, I will review the skepticism of psychosis, narcissism, and derangement that critics of glossolalists shine a light on while also highlighting ways in which glossolalia could be used as a form of expressive therapy.

Overview

To understand the idea of glossolalia as a whole, it is important to have a complete comprehension of its modern relevance within the faith to which it owes its significance.

Although glossolalia has a long and significant history throughout the religious world, the practice today is commonly associated with Pentecostal Christianity. This specific denomination refers to a charismatic movement that focuses on physical release and personal connection with

the Holy Spirit. The faith emphasizes individualism, energy, and community outreach.

Pentecostals relay the important practices of speaking in tongues throughout baptism of the Spirit in the course text titled “Theological and Pastoral Orientations on the Catholic Charismatic Renewal” which notes that the baptism of the Spirit refers to two different theological definitions. One is more sacramental and notes it to be an initiation process of sorts whereas the other one refers to it as a "moment or growth process in virtue of which the Spirit, given during the celebration of initiation, comes to conscious experience” (Word of Life). This elaborates on how the baptism of the Spirit is a very experiential process. Throughout this sort of baptism, it is common for many people to scream, speak in tongues, and display intense emotions through physical release, showing a sign of a direct experience with God. The act of speaking in tongues is thought to be a reaction to being filled with the Holy Spirit. William Kay, throughout *Pentecostalism: A Very Short Introduction* notes on page 5 that "people are empowered by the Spirit to do what they could not otherwise or previously do” (Kay). Although the Holy Trinity (The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit) are critical to the Christian faith, other denominations do not stress the experience of the Spirit as much as Pentecostals do.

Other common practices in Pentecostalism would include but are not limited to the reception of gifts known as *charisms* which include faith-healing, prophecies, and wisdom. Pentecostals also follow many traditional Christian practices with their main four stressors revolving around the concept of Jesus offering salvation, Jesus healing, Jesus baptizing of the Holy Spirit, and the idea that Jesus is coming again (Robbins). Neo-pentecostalism and nondenominational Pentecosts also play a prevalent role in current religious makeup, both within the United States and globally. Pentecostalism is a fast-growing religion. Numbers continue to rise within the faith with the global number of Pentecostal followers ranging from about 250

million to over 500 million (Gooren). As Pentecostalism grows, so does the practice of speaking in tongues. Considering its rich and extensive history, unique practices around physicality, and growing modern-day relevance, the Pentecostal faith makes for an interesting topic.

Is Religion Cool Again?

Throughout the semester, one topic that was continually revisited was the concept of “Cool Christianity.” The question “is religion cool again or is ‘cool again’ today's religion?” was introduced to the class at the start of week three. Although my individual experiences with religion are limited, I will be drawing upon my encounters with “Cool Christianity” to best answer this question. As times are changing, the church has evolved in a multitude of ways to ‘keep up’ with modern pop culture and societal normalities. One example of this would be the growing phenomenon of mega-churches. Mega churches are large modern-day churches that emphasize community, music, and “fun” ways of enjoying religious life. Scott Thumma, a research professor of Sociology of Religion at Hartford University, notes that “this church form is a unique collective response to distinctive cultural shifts and changes in societal patterns throughout the industrialized, urban and suburban areas of the world” (Thumma). This reminded me of the church that I grew up occasionally going to back in North Carolina. Hope Community Church was very large and revolved a lot around the individual members of the community. In church, there were many songs, activities, and personal testimonies. The church made religious life feel like an exciting concert and I enjoyed attending because I frequently ran into neighbors, classmates, teachers, and coaches. Every Sunday at the start of the service, a band would perform. There were LED lights, large speakers, stages, and lots of dancing. Although I enjoyed my time at this church, I felt as though I was going for the social hour instead of for the content

or my own personal relationship with God. I thought that attending the service every Sunday was “cool.”

With that being said, the rise of “Cool Christianity” can be seen in a multitude of ways throughout popular culture. Kanye West is a popular musical artist and A-list celebrity who has incorporated religious life into his music extensively. He founded his religious school called “Donda Academy” and even started his own Sunday church. Although he has faced a lot of controversies recently, for the last decade he has had an extensive pull over the music industry. The demonstration of Kanye's religious beliefs throughout many different aspects of his creative work has made the idea of religion look “cool.” One of Kanye’s most popular songs titled “Ultralight Beam,” released on his album titled *The Life of Pablo* samples a young child preaching “We don't want no devils in the house, God (Yes, Lord) We want the lord (Yes, Jesus) And that's it (Yes, God) Hallej— hand over Satan (Yes, Jesus) Jesus praise the Lord (Yes, God).” The word “hallelujah” and the other words of praise demonstrated throughout the song's opening can be considered with glossolalia. The religious undertones are prevalent here as the child is referencing the Devil, God, and Jesus. In “Pentecostalism: A Very Short Introduction” by William Kay, it is noted on page 58 that “Charles Fox Parham's belief, based upon a reading of the Book of Acts, that speaking with tongues or glossolalia was the sign of baptism in the spirit brought together a specific physical manifestation and a biblical religious experience” (Kay). “Ultralight Beam” went on to become nominated for the Grammy Award for Best Rap/Sung Performance as well as Best Rap Song at the 59th Annual Grammy Awards in 2017. Considering the fact that a Grammy is one of the most sought-after and highly distinguished awards in the music industry, this demonstrates the significance and relevance of pentecostal tendencies in popular culture today.

The concept of “Cool Christianity” can be seen through a variety of different celebrities as well, with other A-listers, including Justin Bieber. Bieber was baptized in the home of an NBA player and the story made headlines. He also continues to post a lot on social media about his relationship with God and personal faith. Considering that Justin has millions of followers on several platforms, the content that is posted about religion is received by a huge collective. Additionally, religious ‘merch’ and streetwear have grown in popularity. Followers of Hillsong, a global mega-church and music collective, are commonly seen wearing the brand's slogans after the group released an extensive collection of clothing. This demonstrates how aspects of Christianity are becoming intertwined with popular culture today. Considering how prevalent some aspects of religion are in the world around us today, it opens the door to a realm of ‘normalcy’ for things like speaking in tongues and glossolalia. If more aspects of Christianity continue to appear “cool,” it is probable that the number of people interested in participating in the practice will rise.

Benefits of Speaking in Tongue

The concept of movement has historically gone hand in hand with glossolalia and speaking in tongues for Pentecostals. One of the largest developments in Pentecostal history has been The Azusa Street Revival. Azusa Street was started in the spring of 1906 by William Joseph Seymour. America at the time was facing many segregation battles due to the Jim Crow laws at the time. The Azusa Street meetings, which took place on a small street in Los Angeles, worked to bridge the gap between racial groups and bring people together as one community, under one God. In Vinson Synan’s “The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century” it is stated that at Azusa Street “men and women would shout, weep, dance,

fall into trances, speak and sing in tongues, and interpret their messages into English. In true Quaker fashion, anyone who felt "moved by the Spirit" would preach or sing. There was no robed choir, no hymnals, no order of services, but religious enthusiasm was abundant" (Synan). Other accounts of Azusa Street share similar perspectives. Throughout "Gotta Moan Sometimes" by David Douglas Daniels, statements from eyewitnesses to the Revival mention that "sound, along with the sense of sight, taste, touch, and smell" are what produced the sensory experience of the Azusa Street events. Also, there was a significant amount of touching of hands and acts of being washed or cleansed (Daniels). These are examples of how early Pentecostals incorporated and emphasized physical activity simultaneously with glossolalia.

Physical activity in general can hold many benefits. When human beings exercise, it is common that they feel better afterward (Horton). The release of endorphins can bring a sense of clarity and peace. The release through speaking in tongues can, in some ways, work as expressive therapy. Throughout Maegen Horton's study "Will You Scream With Me?" it is stated that "expressive activities can create self-soothing experiences that induce self-relaxation to learn and repair dysregulating/ traumatic experiences from childhood" (Horton). Additionally, neuroscientists continue to introduce more information on mind-body ways of expression and healing (Benson). Art therapy, music therapy, and other activities are becoming more commonly recommended as ways of coping, healing, and maintaining mental health. Throughout "The Handbook of Art Therapy" edited by art therapist Cathy A. Malchiodi, it is discussed how mind-body interventions are necessary in times when words may feel unavailable or "when the experience cannot be organized on a linguistic level" (Malchiodi). The inability to articulate an emotion can still be expelled on a somatic level.

Criticism of Glossolalia and Speaking in Tongues

Although glossolalia and speaking in tongues can be viewed as an enlightening experience, some might argue that it is abnormal, sick, or an “abnormal psychological occurrence” (Burdick). Considering that glossolalia is something that most people do not witness daily, the unfamiliarity of the act might make one view it as something hysterical or psychotic. Throughout ‘Speaking in Tongues’ author Felicitas D. Goodman uses the work of researchers throughout the 20th century to exemplify how they viewed glossolalia as something alien. Goodman noted that if they “had to touch the subject at all, did so with marked signs of disgust” (Goodman). This elaborates on how the practice of speaking in tongues may sometimes be uncomfortable for people to talk. The topic may come across as intimidating or even unnecessary.

In “Glossolalia and the Psychology of the Self and Narcissism” by John Donald Castelein, he mentions studies from the 1960s that examine the possibility of narcissistic disorders amongst people who participate in glossolalia. The study claims that “the Pentecostals he had examined had a less than average realistic and practical report with reality and required emotional catharsis” (Castelein). This could demonstrate the idea that people who frequently practice speaking in tongues may lose touch with certain aspects of reality and might even become emotionally dependent on the practice. Overindulgence in any practice or feeling can be dangerous and an argument can be made that glossolalia should not be excluded. For example, if a person releases a scream because they are frustrated, it is understandable yet, if a person continues to scream every day, it could signify that the person is experiencing emotional distress or psychosis. Furthermore, other studies mentioned in the Goodman passage incorporate ideas around the long-term effects of glossolalia. The examples he uses signifies that glossolalists

demonstrated “extreme permissiveness, with deep feelings of dependence and passivity; crippling self-doubt; strong feelings of guilt; a pervasive reactive hostility; identifications with God or Christ; and excessive narcissism, with feelings of superiority and omnipotence, but with reactive masochism and self-depreciation” (Goodman). Although speaking in tongues may help an individual to feel more connected with their faith, an individual should not hold themselves to be better than others, simply because of the exercise.

Charismatics and Pentecostals alike have both used glossolalia as a litmus test to determine who “has” the Spirit within them. With that being said, if glossolalists get a reputation as narcissists, it may lead people to be less inclined to explore the practice. Speaking in tongues goes against the idea of societal normalcy and may be a tricky thing to navigate amongst people who view themselves as non-religious. Participating in the practice could also appear daunting to people who are interested in it but know very little about how to get involved. If narcissism is associated with speaking in tongues, it would likely push people to resent the idea of it, much less try it out for themselves. Furthermore, in “Offering On-Time Deliverance” by Sturla J. Stalsett, it is noted that “the Neo-Pentecostal churches put their primary emphasis on spiritual warfare, exorcisms, immediate healings and personal prosperity here and now. This has notably replaced traditional pentecostalism emphasis on glossolalia (speaking in tongues); on strict, pietistic morals; on Jesus' second coming, and eternal salvation in heaven above ”(Stalsett). This demonstrates how although glossolalia is still prevalent within the walls of Pentecostalism, it is becoming less emphasized. I believe that this could be a result of the criticism that revolves around speaking in tongues and public discomfort with unusual verbal expressions.

Conclusion

Pentecostal Christianity is one of the fastest-growing religions in the world. As religious life has begun to adapt to modern society through the introduction of religious bands, mega-churches, and merchandise, the concept of ‘cool Christianity has grown in popularity. With an estimate of around 500 million followers today, an evaluation of the practices and rituals performed by Pentecostals is of the utmost importance. Pentecostalism has a strong emphasis on physicality and bodily movement to strengthen individual connections with the Holy Spirit. A core value of pentecostalism is glossolalia, otherwise known as speaking in tongues. This form of expression has been foundational to the pentecostal movement for decades and consists of shouting, grunting, and expelling abnormal verbal sounds while being overcome by the Spirit. Speaking in tongues can be seen as a ‘release’ and may benefit many people outside of the pentecostal faith as well. In the experience survey that we took on the first day of class many, if not all, of us checked “yes” to having experienced screaming as a way of feeling better. Mind-body communication and expression are increasingly becoming more prevalent as neuroscientists release more information on the importance of connecting the two elements, especially throughout the processes of healing and coping with trauma. Many critics of speaking in tongues view the act as a sign of psychosis and narcissism. Considering how prevalent pentecostalism is in today's world, I believe that glossolalia will continue to gain popularity, and elements of the act may even become incorporated into other elements of a non-religious life.

Takeaways

At the beginning of the semester, we discussed these two following questions. Now, after completing the semester, I decided to reflect on what we had touched upon throughout the first week and evaluate any closing thoughts, feelings and takeaways.

Is it something sui generis or does it have parallels in "regular" human life?

After spending the semester learning about pentecostalism, I believe that many aspects of the faith can be seen in regular human life. The first week of class, we were asked to individually fill out an experience survey. The survey asked us questions about individual experiences that we may or may not have had. The survey asked if we had ever felt the need to scream, a runner's high, or intense emotional feelings towards another. After coming to class having answered "yes" to many, if not all, of the questions on the survey, we compared answers. Many people's results were similar to mine. We came to find out that aspects of the things we marked "yes" to were things commonly felt by Pentecostals and their interactions with the Spirit. This demonstrates the idea that there could be a pentecostal in all of us. The very unique, specific, and oddly personal experiences that we have all had and said "yes" to, were all ones that could be related back to the pentecostal faith. Furthermore, religion in general is something that is very integrated into the world. Religious life has been prevalent for centuries and so I believe that a lot of things related to the overarching religion of Christianity can be seen in "regular" life.

Is it actively activating the Spirit or is it some psychological performance or delusion? Or is it in some ways both?

I believe that activating the Spirit can be both a delusion and a psychological performance as well as a real event. I think that many people have experienced God in their own individual ways and situations but there are also people who may exaggerate their experiences in order to be included within a certain group. I also believe that some people may experience a placebo effect of sorts where they feel a strong pull or have a strong reaction to something simply because they genuinely believe that they are experiencing the said thing, not because they

actually are. I think that people can will themselves to feel a certain way and have the ability to believe that they are being physically overcome with something for no other reason than pure belief. With that being said, I think that there are many personal elements to religion and it would be hard to prove scientifically that somebody has been overcome with the Spirit. With that being said, I cannot say if it is impossible or not.

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