Ecstatic Pentecostal Prayer and Meditation

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Overview

We have witnessed in the last decade an upsurge of interest among the youth of our country in many and diverse forms of altered states of consciousness (ASCs).

Perhaps the most recent ASC to capture the interest of young people is a religiously induced state called glossolalia, i.e., speaking in other tongues. Historical reports of the phenomenon (among Christians) appeared as early as the first century A.D. (Acts 2:4).

A few scattered accounts can be found in church history between the first century and modern times. The phenomenon became institutionalized in 1914 with the organization of the Pentecostal Assemblies of God Church.* This denomination places emphasis on the ASC as distinctive evidence of holiness and right relationship with God. Three other Pentecostal denominations have since come into existence. They include the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee), Four-square, and United Evangelical Brethren. These denominations claim a combined membership in this country of over 2,000,000, representing one percent of the population. Since 1950, speaking in tongues has been openly identified within the ranks of all the major denominations, although practiced only by small minorities in each. The routes of the recent outbreak of glossolalia among young people can be traced to these sources. Estimates of the incidence of glossolalia among young people range from a few thousand to hundreds of thousands. Young people in the movement generally prefer to be called Jesus people or Jesus freaks.

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* The name Pentecostal Assemblies of God was chosen to denote the scriptural origin of the church in the Day-of-Pentecost (Acts 2:4) when the spirit fell upon an assembling of Christ's followers, causing them to speak in other tongues.
Personal experience

Unlike the typical Pentecostal youth in the Jesus movement, I was raised by a Pentecostal family. I first spoke in other tongues at age 11 following two years of tarrying for the Holy Spirit. According to my church doctrine (Pentecostal Assemblies of God), speaking in other tongues is the initial evidence of having received the Holy Ghost into the body (temple of the Holy Ghost). Since the initial infilling I have acquired the ability to speak in tongues at will. Between the ages of 11 and 22, I talked in tongues on an infrequent but regular basis, i.e., weekly during Sunday night church services. In October of 1967, I read a book written by a Pentecostal minister in Harlem, New York, entitled *The Cross and the Switchblade*. The author, The Rev. David Wilkerson, reported considerable success in a work of redemption among drug addicts following a decision to set aside two hours a day for prayer and meditation. The experience I wish to describe here took place over the next 26 months. Each day I set aside one hour for prayer and meditation, proceeding as follows. First, after everyone in the household had retired I would turn on gospel music that I had come to associate with various outpourings of the Holy Spirit in church. The next 15 minutes were used to build rational faith and expectancy in the power of God and the works of the Spirit. I would read a chapter in the New Testament, then a testimony of healing or an anecdotal account of someone who had spoken in a verified known tongue, reported in a Pentecostal journal. I would often begin to cry before putting the journal aside. The next 45 minutes were used strictly for prayer and meditation. After turning out the lights, I would lie in a comfortable position on the floor with a pillow under my head, raise my hands toward heaven and forcefully speak in tongues frequently used in the past. If I was not crying to begin with, I would spontaneously begin to cry within five or six minutes. The reader should understand that I wanted to cry. It was a pleasant experience: resonant, deep, and rich in feeling and meaning. Meanwhile my tongue would loosen up, new words would come to me, words that had distinctive qualities of an unknown tongue, words I had never spoken before. This would heighten my belief in the reality of God and his Holy Spirit. The volume and pitch of my utterances and crying would sharply increase. My hands would begin to shake. Sometimes it felt as if Christ's nail-pierced hands were touching mine. My thoughts were free from semantic constraint. My mind was free to run back and forth over sentimental sensory experiences of the past, reliving each scene as if experiencing it for the first time. Such abreaction frequently resulted in tremendous outbursts of pent-up feelings similar to catharsis obtained in Gestalt psychotherapy. A tremendous feeling of agapeic love (God's love) would come over me. I would think "I love you, Jesus" over and over again. After a while important loved ones would come to mind, and then people causing turmoil in my life or family. Yet I would continue to feel intense love. Such a pairing involved classical conditioning many times over and resulted in improved relationships and feelings.