
In the need to understand my experience of joy while reading this book over and over again, my attention gradually came to a focus on this expression of Cox on page 306: “a genuine personal appropriation of the faith.” This led me to ask the question: is the book aimed at appropriating a personal response to the religious experience of the past nine decades? Readers familiar with Lonergan’s Method in Theology will readily recognize the source of the question.1 But even apart from the source, the wording of the question provides a convenient outline for this review article by dividing it into discussions of four phrases: (1) the past nine decades; (2) religious experience; (3) objectification; and (4) personal responsibility.

PAST NINE DECADES

The signs of the times during these final decades of the second millennium since Pentecost may be pointing to a convergent process in religious history. Cox recently visited a pentecostal gathering at a crime-ridden area of Boston that called itself the

“Azusa Christian Community.” He was able to trace the name Azusa to a street in a run-down section of Los Angeles where a pentecostal movement burst forth in 1906. He perceived an unmistakable continuity between 1906 and 1994 and proceeded to interpolate this by empirically verifying it in his travels in Latin America, Europe, Asia and Africa. He is a widely read scholar and his method of synthesis and verification is impeccable; this is clear from his bibliographical notes on pages 323-32.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The experiential component of the pentecostal phenomena described by Cox includes all kinds of signs and wonders, especially speaking in tongues, healings, ecstasies, slayings in the spirit, shamanic behavior, etc. The cultural diversity among his pentecostal subjects introduces a rich variety in the details of the manifestations, but there commonly is a perception of something extraordinary, mysterious, numinous, vibrant with fascination or fear, strangely contagious within groups, large and small, and flinging a challenge to human intelligence for authentic objectification.

OBJECTIFICATION

To respond to this challenge, there is need of organizing the data into a pattern, and a pattern may be purely experiential or partly theoretical.² Most of the book seems to favor a partly theoretical pattern based on Cox’s theological formation and early biography. He tries to avoid becoming didactic, moralistic or utilitarian. But values in social realism, especially those concerned with problems of racism, play a significant role in his patterning process. He sees the possibility that the racial problem in Boston and Los Angeles may be sublated within a broader

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context. He speaks of the liberation theology of Latin America that preaches a “preferential option for the poor.” He also speaks of the minjung theology of “ordinary people” in Korea. Does this mean that the global thrust of pentecostal phenomena today is devaluing religious elitism? But hierarchies are elitist. So are preachers, teachers, administrators, pastors, shepherds of flocks. Is there dialectical opposition between sheep and shepherd? between laity and clergy? between primal piety and academic theology?

Academic theology that methodically limits its catechesis to the technical languages of Europe and America may find it difficult to objectify the significance of the contemporary re-emergence of primal speech and primal piety. Cox calls this a “verbal paralysis.” People speak in tongues in a manner that resembles jazz spontaneity in improvising on ineffable moods. The Azusa pentecostals of 1906 went on a global mission of evangelizing in tongues in their travels to Chicago, New York, and to the cities of Africa, Europe and Asia. Not everyone in these cities welcomed primal speech and primal piety.

Even Cox has misgivings about some televangelists. For example, on page 151, he refers to Jimmy Swaggart’s version of pentecostalism as “garish.” And on page 278, he agrees with the perception that Swaggart is “in touch with something fearsome but real in all of us.” Something satanic? A warning that the pentecostal flame “can burn and destroy as well as purify and inspire”?

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

It is clear that Cox judges the pentecostal phenomena of recent decades as extremely ambiguous, a powerful mixture of good and evil, explosive with opportunity and peril, erupting with hope and fear. If so, what is his personal response?

This is elaborately spelt out in his concluding chapter of 22 pages. Because of the wealth of insights, this chapter is quite difficult to summarize. One particular insight gives me great joy: the challenge on page 321 to the young graduates of prestigious universities around Boston to join the Azusa praying community. This is a superb challenge for all divinity schools. By immersion
in worshipping ghettos, they can discover wisdom in today’s pentecostal flames and, with their gift of discernment, help prevent them from sparking an infernal conflagration of jihads, inquisitions, iconoclasms, cultic killings and ethnic cleansings.

Still, the challenge evoked by such conflagration will ultimately be purifying.