

WHAT IS WRONG WITH PENTECOSTAL PRAGMATISM?

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Abstract

This article conducts a rigorous analysis of Pentecostal Pragmatism, delving into its implications in the realms of religious practice and theology. By dissecting the fusion of Pentecostalism and pragmatism, this paper sheds light on the nuanced concerns that arise from this amalgamation. It contends that while pragmatism offers practical solutions, its marriage with Pentecostalism introduces complex theological and ethical challenges that demand meticulous examination.

Keywords: Pentecostalism, Pragmatism, Contemporary Christianity, Philosophical Theology

Introduction

In the realm of religious philosophy, the fusion of Pentecostalism and pragmatism, referred to as 'Pentecostal Pragmatism,' presents an intriguing subject for exploration. Pentecostalism, a vibrant branch of Christianity, emphasizes spiritual experiences and divine gifts, while pragmatism, rooted in practical consequences, prioritizes efficacy and utility. This fusion gives rise to a theological and philosophical convergence laden with profound implications. Dijk (1992) insightfully observes that Pentecostalism resonates with fervent sermons on healing, miracles, economic prosperity, and deliverance from perceived malevolent forces. This vibrant landscape has garnered a substantial following, especially in regions like Africa (John, 1997), with over 500 Pentecostal churches in Nigeria alone (Seay, 2019).

Conversely, the Catholic Church, steeped in centuries of tradition, grapples with the challenge of maintaining relevance amidst the Pentecostal surge (Calderisi, 2013). To unravel the complexities of this juxtaposition between fervour and orthodoxy, we embark on a philosophical exploration into the essence and implications of Pentecostal Pragmatism. This investigation will navigate the theological intricacies, philosophical foundations, and existential consequences of this phenomenon, guided by the overarching question: 'What is the Dilemma of Pentecostal Pragmatism?'

In this intellectual journey, we will traverse the domains of Pentecostalism's spiritual fervour, the pragmatic appeal of tangible results, and the challenges posed to established religious institutions like the Catholic Church. Throughout, we will draw upon the

wisdom of eminent theological scholars such as Richard (1981), Kukah (2019), and Bokenkotter (2004). Our quest is to unravel the philosophical dilemmas and existential quandaries presented by Pentecostal Pragmatism, enriching our understanding of its place within the tapestry of religious thought and practice.

Within this dialogue, we may contemplate how Pentecostal Pragmatism reconciles the pursuit of divine transcendence with the pragmatism of worldly outcomes. It prompts us to question whether an emphasis on material prosperity and miracles might overshadow deeper spiritual dimensions. Moreover, we may scrutinize how Pentecostal Pragmatism's rapid growth challenges traditional religious hierarchies and hierologies, sparking inquiries about the adaptability of established faiths in a swiftly changing world. Through this philosophical lens, we aim to illuminate the intricate interplay between faith, pragmatism, and tradition, contributing to the ongoing discourse on the role of religion in contemporary society.

Problem Statement

The convergence of Pentecostal spirituality and pragmatic values, often termed "Pentecostal Pragmatism," gives rise to a complex and compelling philosophical challenge. This phenomenon, which underscores the pursuit of both spiritual transcendence and material success, engenders multifaceted questions that demand scholarly attention. Within this convergence, the primary problem lies in reconciling the traditional tenets of Pentecostalism, characterized by fervent spirituality and the belief in divine gifts, with the pragmatic insistence on tangible results and utility. This union prompts a series of philosophical inquiries: How does Pentecostal Pragmatism navigate the intricate terrain between the pursuit of spiritual transcendence and the pragmatism of achieving worldly outcomes? What are the ethical implications of religious practices that place a premium on material prosperity and miraculous manifestations, possibly overshadowing moral virtues? In the face of Pentecostal Pragmatism's rapid proliferation and impact, how do established religious institutions, notably the Catholic Church, grapple with the need for adaptation and the philosophical considerations therein? Furthermore, what are the broader cultural and societal implications of Pentecostal Pragmatism, and how does it influence contemporary perceptions of faith, pragmatism, and tradition? This study aims to address these philosophical dilemmas, contributing to a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between faith, pragmatism, and tradition within the context of Pentecostal Pragmatism. It seeks to fill a notable research gap in religious philosophy, providing insights into the implications of this phenomenon on religious thought, ethical considerations, institutional dynamics, and the broader fabric of society.

Literature Review: Understanding Pentecostalism

Meaning of Pentecostalism: Pentecostalism is a Christian movement that places a profound emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit and the necessity for direct, experiential encounters with God. Rooted in the biblical account of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-

6), Pentecostals believe in an ongoing outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon believers, viewing the Pentecost event as a template for continuous spiritual empowerment. This is often referred to as the baptism of the Holy Spirit, accompanied by spiritual gifts such as prophecy, healing, and speaking in tongues.

As a prominent Christian movement, Pentecostalism places a profound emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit and the imperative of experiencing God directly. Pentecostals contend that the gifts of the Holy Spirit, including prophecy and speaking in tongues, are accessible to every individual. The movement derives its name from the biblical event of Pentecost, which is celebrated in Christianity as the day when the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles (Acts 2:1-6).

What distinguishes Pentecostalism is its conviction that the Pentecost experience—the outpouring of the Spirit that energized the apostles—is not a one-time occurrence but rather a perpetual encounter meant for all believers throughout history. This enduring outpouring of the Spirit is often likened to the early autumn rain, with the promise of a subsequent "later rain" for future believers. This belief finds its scriptural basis in the prophecy of Joel, cited by the Apostle Peter in Acts 2:16-21, wherein God promises to pour out His Spirit on all people, transcending gender and age boundaries (Joel 2:28-29). This enduring accessibility to the Spirit forms the core tenet of Pentecostalism. While Christians receive regeneration and sanctification through the Holy Spirit upon baptism, Pentecostals advocate for a distinct experience—the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This "second baptism" mirrors the outpouring of the Spirit on the disciples at Pentecost. This emphasis on the experiential dimension of the Spirit's presence is foundational to Pentecostal doctrines and practices.

Historical Origins and Diversity in Pentecostalism: Pentecostalism traces its roots to early 20th-century America, originating from a prayer meeting held on January 1, 1901, organized by students at Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas. During this gathering, Agnes Ozman, a student, purportedly spoke in tongues. Charles Parham, an American evangelist and faith healer, and several other students also experienced speaking in tongues. This event served as the catalyst for a revival known as the Azusa Street revival, led by an African-American preacher, William Joseph Seymour, who had studied under Parham. This revival, spanning from 1906 to 1909 in Azusa Street, Los Angeles, California, witnessed over 13,000 people speaking in tongues (Goff, 1988), igniting the widespread spread of Pentecostalism that persists to this day.

Within Pentecostalism, there exists a diverse array of beliefs and practices. The movement encompasses various sects, denominations, and backgrounds as well as a spectrum of beliefs and practices, ranging from the fervent to the liberal. However, amidst this diversity, Pentecostals share some common elements (Okafor, 2006). Commonalities in Pentecostal Beliefs and Practices: One of the unifying factors among Pentecostals is a firm belief in the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible. This

foundational belief informs many of their teachings and practices. For instance, Pentecostal prayer and worship sessions often feature the use of consecrated objects such as water, oils, prayer cloths, or handkerchiefs, anointed by their pastors, regarded as conduits of miracles, akin to the handkerchiefs and aprons mentioned in Acts 19:11-12. Pentecostal worship services are characterized by their lively nature, marked by energetic music, powerful sound systems, and active participation from worshippers, engaging in fervent expressions of faith, including dancing, clapping, and the spontaneous utterance of "amen" and "hallelujah."

Furthermore, Pentecostals draw upon biblical passages to justify various practices such as foot-washing, tithing, women's ordination, snake handling, and child dedication, finding scriptural support in passages like John 13:14-17 (foot-washing), Mark 16:18 (snake handling), Joel 2:28-29 (prophecy by sons and daughters), Mark 10:13-16 (blessing of children), and Malachi 3:8-10 (tithing).

Key Values and Characteristics of Pentecostal Spirituality: Pentecostal spirituality is guided by several key values and characteristics (Calvin & Rybarczyk, 2007). Firstly, it places a strong emphasis on individual experience, highlighting the Holy Spirit's active role in an individual's life. This experiential dimension distinguishes Pentecostalism, allowing each believer to personally encounter God. Secondly, morality is a central facet of Pentecostal spirituality, making it appealing to non-literate cultures. This emphasis on living a morally upright life resonates deeply within the movement. Thirdly, there is a sense of "otherworldliness" or asceticism, partially rooted in Pentecostal eschatology. The belief in the imminent return of Christ encourages a detachment from worldly concerns. Fourthly, a commitment to biblical authority is widespread among Pentecostals, with many of their distinctive practices stemming from a literal interpretation of scripture, reinforcing their reliance on the Bible. Finally, spontaneity is a hallmark of Pentecostal worship, with members encouraged to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, leading to unpredictable and often spirited services. This spontaneity was especially prominent in the movement's early history when anyone could initiate a song, chorus, or spiritual gift.

In summary, Pentecostalism's theology is characterized by its functional and pragmatic nature, catering to the diverse needs and desires of people. Its power to address these felt needs has been a key factor in its appeal, attracting individuals who seek solutions to their problems. Pentecostalism's captivating and charismatic gospel has made it a prominent force within the realm of contemporary Christianity, with its roots deeply entrenched in the pursuit of a direct and experiential encounter with the Divine.

Pragmatic Elements of Pentecostalism

Pentecostalism, as a Christian movement, incorporates pragmatic elements that significantly influence its beliefs, practices, and impact on individuals and communities. These elements can be examined through the lenses of both Pentecostal perspectives and

pragmatic philosophy. Pentecostalism often accentuates a practical theology that underscores the experiential dimension of faith (Parham, 1911). According to this perspective, faith transcends intellectual belief to become a lived experience. This aligns with William James's "will to believe" philosophy, which underscores the significance of religious experiences in shaping one's faith (James, 1897).

Pentecostalism places a substantial emphasis on physical and emotional healing through prayer and spiritual practices (Fee, 1987). This pragmatic aspect reflects a desire for tangible results in believers' lives, echoing Charles Peirce's notion that beliefs should manifest practical effects (Peirce, 1877). Pentecostals firmly uphold the manifestation of spiritual gifts, including speaking in tongues and prophecy, as integral to their faith (The Azusa Street Papers). These experiences provide a sense of empowerment and divine connection, aligning with the pragmatist idea that beliefs should serve a purpose and enhance one's life (Dewey, 1934).

Pentecostal worship services are characterized by intense emotional engagement, involving singing, clapping, and expressions of joy. This emotional component aligns with John Dewey's philosophy, which underscores the importance of emotions in religious experiences (Dewey, 1902). Pentecostalism offers the promise of personal transformation and empowerment through encounters with the Holy Spirit. This pragmatic aspect resonates with the notion that beliefs should lead to positive changes in one's life, as supported by many pragmatic philosophers (James, 1902).

Pentecostal churches play pivotal roles in communities, providing social support and assistance to members. Pragmatic philosophy, which values the practical consequences of beliefs and actions, can be employed to analyze the social impact of Pentecostalism and its role in addressing community needs. Pentecostalism has demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt to diverse cultural contexts, contributing to its rapid global growth. Pragmatic philosophers, particularly John Dewey, would appreciate the flexibility and adaptability of Pentecostalism as it seeks to address the pragmatic needs of diverse communities (Dewey, 1910).

Critical examination of Pentecostalism's emphasis on personal experience and emotionalism is essential. Some argue that this emphasis may lead to doctrinal deviations and the potential exploitation of vulnerable individuals. Pragmatism provides a framework for evaluating these concerns. Pentecostalism's pragmatic elements reflect its emphasis on experiential faith, personal transformation, and social engagement. The movement's dynamic nature and its impact on individuals and communities can be analyzed and understood through the lens of both Pentecostal perspectives and pragmatic philosophy, highlighting the complex interplay between faith, experience, and practical consequences.

Pentecostalism: A Critical Appraisal

A critical appraisal of Pentecostal pragmatism requires a thoughtful examination of its

functional and pragmatic approach to religious matters. While Pentecostalism has undoubtedly made significant inroads in the realm of faith and spirituality, it's essential to consider both its strengths and potential pitfalls.

One of the central tenets of Pentecostalism is its emphasis on solving human problems and providing tangible solutions through faith. This pragmatic orientation has, in some instances, created a perception that the relevance of the church hinges on its ability to address individual needs promptly (Ogara, 2009). While it is commendable to seek solutions to real-life issues through faith, there are concerns that this approach may foster a "my-will-be-done" mentality, where individuals become impatient to wait for God's timing (Ogara, 2009). This impatience can lead some to constantly seek quick fixes, shifting from one church to another in search of a religion that promises immediate solutions. Such an approach may inadvertently encourage a consumeristic mindset within the religious sphere.

Furthermore, the question arises as to whether the essence of Christianity should be primarily validated by the promise of solutions to life's challenges (Ogara, Year). Pentecostalism's pragmatic orientation places a heavy burden on faith communities to demonstrate their effectiveness in solving problems. This can raise ethical questions about exploiting the vulnerabilities of individuals seeking help, potentially leading to spiritual exploitation.

Another critical concern is the potential for religious practices and doctrines to adapt continually to meet the changing desires and preferences of the congregation (Ogara, Year). This adaptability, while reflecting a desire to remain relevant, raises questions about the authenticity and stability of religious beliefs. A religion that constantly evolves to align with prevailing cultural norms and individual preferences may risk losing its core identity and becoming disconnected from its foundational principles (Ogara, 2009).

In contrast, the Catholic Church's emphasis on intensive catechesis and deepening the understanding of theology and spirituality highlights a commitment to preserving the integrity of its faith tradition. This approach aims to equip believers with a solid foundation in their faith, enabling them to resist external influences and defend the core tenets of Catholicism.

However, it's crucial to recognize that Pentecostalism is not without its merits. Its dynamic evangelization strategies, openness to adaptation, and focus on the practical dimension of faith have undoubtedly contributed to its widespread popularity and success in attracting adherents (Ogara, 2009). These positive qualities emphasize the importance of engaging with the practical aspects of religious life and can serve as a source of inspiration for other Christian denominations.

Thus, while it has effectively addressed the immediate needs of many believers and contributed to the growth of faith communities, Pentecostalism also raises concerns about consumerism, spiritual exploitation, and the integrity of religious beliefs.

Balancing pragmatism with a firm commitment to preserving the core values and teachings of Christianity, remains a significant challenge for all denominations, including Pentecostal ones.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the discourse on Pentecostalism's pragmatic approach prompts us to recognize that within its multifaceted tapestry of beliefs and practices, there exist both commendable strengths and areas of concern. It is undeniable that Pentecostalism's allure lies, in part, within its captivating pastoral strategies, which have garnered remarkable success in attracting adherents. These strategies, born of a profound emphasis on the practical dimension of faith, serve as a testament to the dynamism inherent in religious movements.

However, wisdom calls upon us to tread cautiously, for the siren's song of pragmatism can lead to perilous waters. The unbridled pursuit of expedient solutions, while appealing, risks overshadowing the profound spiritual truths that underpin our faith traditions. In our quest for relevance, let us not forsake the timeless wisdom of our religious heritage, for it is here that we find the enduring wellspring of our spiritual identity.

Therefore, as we contemplate the interchange between pragmatism and faith, let us not be consumed by the allure of the practical, but rather, let us discern with discernment, drawing from the strengths of Pentecostalism while steadfastly safeguarding the sanctity of our faith's core principles. It is in this delicate balance, this harmonious synthesis of pragmatism and spirituality, that we may discover a path toward a faith that enriches our lives and illuminates our souls.

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