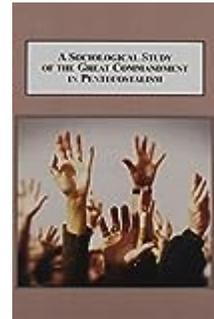




Matthew T. Lee, Margaret M. Poloma. *A Sociological Study of the Great Commandment in Pentecostalism: The Practice of Godly Love As Benevolent Service.* Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009. vi + 175 pp. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7734-3902-3.



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Prisoners of Love

This is an arresting book because it launches into an area of enquiry that has been largely ignored by previous scholars. The enquiry is into godly love, the effect of the love of God poured out on individuals who, subsequently, express love in a diversity of ways. Love in all its manifestations is vital to theology and permeates much popular culture but, oddly enough, has been almost entirely avoided as a topic of study by sociologists and psychologists. This book is concerned with the outworking of God's love through more than a hundred individuals and is part of the Flame of Love project which is itself connected with the establishment of an interdisciplinary science of godly love funded by the John Templeton Foundation and associated with the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love directed by Stephen Post.

The book begins with a discussion of the social sciences and the attempt to reduce or explain away spiritual experiences as a function of biological, psychological, or social factors. The guiltiest reductionists are probably sociologists who, wedded to methodological atheism, build theories out of factors and concepts that take no account

of the possible existence of God (p.22). Sigmund Freud and Emile Durkheim are equally reprehensible in this respect. But because of the Darwinian background that lies behind much intellectual activity in Western culture, the assumption must be that competition enabling "the survival of the fittest" drives forward human development. In such circumstances altruism poses a problem since it appears to run contrary to survival mechanisms. Only by redescribing altruism as egotism in disguise can the dominant Darwinian paradigm be maintained. And this is too often what sociology attempts to do. Part of the intention of this book is to challenge such assumptions and to demonstrate, by close attention to the life histories of exemplars, that deep-seated altruism is inexplicable without reference to love

Lee and Poloma begin their study with a discussion of Pentecostalism, drawing upon the work of Walter Hollenweger, Amos Yong and more recently Frank Macchia, from whose recent book on the baptism of the Holy Spirit they extract a model. This model makes use of three separate sets of variables: those relating to a vision of the

Kingdom of God (which express values); those relating to spiritual transformations (which include evangelical conversion, the Pentecostal baptism of the Spirit, as well a series of anomalous or negative experiences); and benevolent outcomes (community service, renewal or revival, and campaigns for social justice). In this way spiritual transformation guided by theological values results in a range of altruistic activities which may be humanitarian but apolitical or more hard-edged and focused on social justice.

The discussion of godly love is grounded in the writings of the sociologist Pitirim Sorokin, who understands “love energy” as possessing five dimensions. The first concerns the intensity of love, the second the extent or breadth of love towards smaller or larger groups. The third concerns the duration of love from fleeting expressions to prolonged demonstrations over many years. The fourth concerns the purity or selflessness of love, and the fifth concerns the adequacy of love judged by its consequences.

By building an intellectual framework the authors prepare ground for the construction of an analytical model. This involves three broad types of service: in the community, in the church for renewal or revival, and in society with campaigns for social justice. Attempts were made to select exemplars from each of the three groups in roughly equal proportions and 101 interviewees are reported here. Each interviewee was asked to fill out a short pencil-and-paper survey. The results showed that exemplars and their collaborators tended to be well educated, with a quarter holding a master’s degree and about the same number a doctorate. Their income was also well above average, with about a third earning more than \$110,000 per year. Three-quarters were white, 12.6 percent Latin, and 10.5 percent black. Although the exemplars presented a range of political opinions, just over half were conservative although a small number claimed to be fiscally conservative and socially liberal. Three-quarters had experienced praying in tongues and more than 80 percent had experienced divine healing and about the same number had been used as an instrument to bring divine healing to someone else. Three-quarters had given prophecies to other people and a little over half had experienced a mystical merging with God. Exemplars gave away 15 percent of their income on average although a small subgroup of 11.8 percent gave away more than 40 percent of their annual income.

The qualitative material derived from interviews was approached bearing in mind the precepts of “grounded

theory”—theory emerging from the data rather than being superimposed upon it. The data is organized into four parts. There is a discussion of the centrality of the divine call felt by each of the exemplars. This is followed by a demonstration of how godly love is expressed using the earlier typology of servers, renewalists, and changers. Five tensions in the expression of godly love are then explored and these are detailed in the lives of two individuals.

The call to a loving relationship with God is in most instances dramatic and overwhelming. In the words of Heidi Baker, “I am a prisoner of love. I have given my life for love. It is joy unspeakable and full glory” (p. 86). Another spoke of the call to ecumenical work and another to become a chaplain. Here the book immerses itself in the dramatic and astonishing lives of the exemplars. They feel themselves compelled or overwhelmed by their emotional and spiritual experiences. When they obey their callings in complicated social structures, they find themselves confronting a hostile or callous environment where suffering tugs at the heartstrings. One man is offered a dying baby by a desperate woman and others find themselves breaking social rules in the pursuit of their mission. There is a tension between love and law, between religious and secular worldviews, and between individualistic and collective images of the Kingdom of God. Their lives are exhilarating and exhausting and constantly renewed by love energy.

This is a groundbreaking book that seriously addresses matters about which the academy has been almost entirely silent. There is undoubtedly more material to be published from the project, which will give us further information about this extraordinary subset of human beings. If there are questions to be asked, these are to do with the precise nature of the spiritual experience which triggered the dynamic lives of these unusual individuals.

We await a phenomenological description of the moments when love was first felt. In the lives of these exemplars, we would expect to hear of an encounter with Christ adding to and running parallel to the descriptions found in William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). For the love that is felt is personal and directive rather than impersonal and pantheistic, it is a love that can call (and therefore speak) rather than a love that leaves the receiver bewildered and confused. Yet, as Lee and Poloma reflect on their meetings with these individuals, the love that is expressed may be so well focused, in Sorokin’s terms so limited in extensivity, that it supports

prejudice in other areas. Here they note the antipathy to homosexuality found among some of their exemplars as well as the hypocrisy shown by others. But they also uncover the legalistic religion that formed the childhood of other exemplars which, through the crisis experience of unconditional love, eventuated in unrestricted omnidirectional benevolence. It is a heartening story in more ways than one.

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