

PROLOGUE: The Present Problem

A powerful religious phenomenon has swept through many churches across the world — including thousands in the U.K. Extensive comment has even appeared in the national media. For example, on June 18th 1994 the *Times* newspaper carried a report headed ‘Spread of Hysteria Fad Worries Church’, in which it was stated that ‘*a religious craze that originated in Canada and involves mass fainting and hysterical laughter has crossed the Atlantic to cause growing concern in the Church of England*’. In this article, it was reported that the vicar of a large church in London ‘*was forced to cancel an evening service of holy communion... because so many in his congregation were lying on the floor*’. Apparently, the service had ‘*ended in chaos...as dozens of people burst into spontaneous laughter or tears, trembled and shook or fell to the floor*’. The church’s parish newsletter then carried an article about the service under the headline ‘Holy Spirit Fever Hits London’, in which it described the phenomenon as a ‘revival’.

The widespread occurrence of this activity in churches today — often referred to as being ‘Slain in the Spirit’ — requires some careful examination. When confronted with unusual phenomena which purport to be of Divine origin, the diligent believer will search the Bible to see whether they are compatible with what God has revealed to us. In view of the publicity which has been given in the media, and the confusion into which so many believers have been thrown on this issue, the questions which must be asked are: 1) What is the Biblical evidence for this phenomenon? 2) What is its true origin? 3) Can its occurrence rightly be described as a ‘revival’? 4) Is it really the work of the Holy Spirit?

These are the questions which we will address in this brief paper.

WHAT IS THE BIBLICAL EVIDENCE?

To establish if there is any support in the Bible for the experience of being ‘Slain in the Spirit’, let us examine the texts which have been offered as proof that it is a legitimate Christian practice. In the Bible, there are a number of people who are spoken of as having fallen down as a result of a spiritual encounter. These are cited as proof of the ‘Slain in the Spirit’ experience. But we must first discover in what manner they fell, what caused it to happen, and whether their falling could be considered as normative for all believers in every era.

For example, proof is sought in the fact that Abram fell into a deep sleep, during which God gave him a revelation about his descendants (Gen.15:12-21). But this unique event involving a lone servant of God could hardly be likened to the euphoric, mass Pentecostal-Charismatic experience of being ‘Slain in the Spirit’, especially as the Scripture says that ‘*horror and great darkness fell upon him*’! Another alleged proof text involves the pagan soothsayer Balaam, who is said to have ‘*fallen*’ while undergoing a visionary experience (Num.24:4ff.). But this extraordinary event involving the giving of judgmental prophecy can hardly be cited as a normative experience for all believers, as Balaam was not even a believer! In fact, he is presented by the apostle Peter as an illustration of the false teachers in the Christian Church who pervert the truth of the gospel (2 Pet.2:15; cf. Rev.2:14-15), and he was eventually killed by the children of Israel as an enemy of God (Jos.13:22).

Another proof text offered is that which tells of Ezekiel having a vision of the Lord in all His glory (Ezk.1:28). The prophet was so utterly awe-struck and overcome by what he had seen — a vision too terrible to behold — that he fell forwards to the ground, prostrate in a state of abject worship. But this response of a lone man of God cannot possibly be used to support the ‘Slain in the Spirit’ experience as it is entirely different to what happens in

Pentecostal-Charismatic gatherings, where a mass of people simply fall down (usually backwards) in a swoon because of the loaded suggestions and triggering touch of a human being, rather than as a response to the awesome power of God.

It is also important to note that Ezekiel fell *forwards on his face*. In the Bible it is only God’s *enemies* who fall *backwards* when confronted with His naked spiritual power (e.g., Jn.18:6; cf. Isa.28:13); whereas true believers in the Bible always fall on their faces in reverential adoration and worship, without a trace of the hysterical laughter or convulsions we see in so many churches today (e.g., Gen.17:1-3; Jos.5:13-15; Ezek.1:28; 43:1-5; 44:4; Mt.17:5-6; Rev.1:17; 7:11; 11:16-17).

In the New Testament, Mt.28:1-4 and Jn.18:1-6 are cited as biblical proof of the ‘Slain in the Spirit’ experience. But these two cases of falling to the ground are simply the responses of fearful men to the overwhelming force of Divine power, and have no redemptive or salvific qualities whatsoever — as the sequel to the second example clearly shows (see Jn.18:12).

The experience of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, as recounted in Acts 9:4 and 26:14, is also offered as proof for the validity of being ‘Slain in the Spirit’, as also is Paul’s ‘third heaven’ experience in 2 Cor.12:2. But these are hardly normative experiences for all believers, and one cannot equate being ‘*caught up to the third heaven*’ with the ‘Slain in the Spirit’ experience. Actually, the only clear examples of people being ‘slain’ by the Holy Spirit in the Bible are Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), and that was not an experience to be sought after!

It is evident that there are no Scriptures supporting the validity of the Pentecostal-Charismatic experience involving ‘mass swooning and hysterical laughter’ during meetings of worship. In view of the widespread nature of the phenomenon in professing Christian churches, and the fact that there is no sound guidance being given to those seeking it, this is a matter for serious concern. And that brings us to our next question.

WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF THIS PHENOMENON?

If there is no support for this experience as a *bona fide* Christian practice, then how are we to identify its true origin? According to the above-mentioned article in the *Times*, the spate of ‘religious fainting’ to which it refers has its recent origins in a church in Toronto, Canada — hence it has been referred to as the ‘Toronto Blessing’. This experience can easily be transferred from one church to another by the ministry of people who have themselves experienced it. But that is by no means the real wellspring of this phenomenon, which has always been practised in one form or another in the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. In fact, it can be traced back even earlier than the beginnings of Pentecostalism which took place around the turn of this century.

One of the earliest and most notorious advocates of this experience was an itinerant preacher in the so-called ‘Holiness Movement’, Maria Woodworth-Etter (1844-1924), who also gained a reputation for falsely prophesying that San Francisco would be destroyed by an earthquake in 1890. In her preaching in the 1880s, she advocated a religious experience which she called ‘The Power’, and she would often go into a trance during services, standing with her hands raised in the air for more than an hour. Nicknamed the ‘trance-evangelist’ and even the ‘voodoo priestess’, she was often accused of hypnotising people. And here we come to the very crux of the ‘Slain in the Spirit’ phenomenon.

What Maria Woodworth-Etter had discovered was the ancient art of hypnotism, the practice of which was first popularised in the West a hundred years earlier by the Austrian physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815). As one researcher of the occult has noted,

‘the phenomena that are now defined as ‘hypnotic’ emerged from the faith-healing activities of Mesmer at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ (James Webb, ‘The Occult Establishment’, Open Court, 1976, p.352). Mesmer had developed his pantheistic theory of ‘Animal Magnetism’, which resulted in the famous faith-healing sessions at his clinic in Paris. In a major book on the occult (which was originally entitled ‘The Black Arts’), a description of these sessions reads as follows:

‘Mesmer marched about majestically in a pale lilac robe, passing his hands over the patients’ bodies or touching them with a long iron wand. The results varied. Some patients felt nothing at all, some felt as if insects were crawling over them, others were seized with hysterical laughter, convulsions or fits of hiccups. Some went into raving delirium, which was called ‘The Crisis’ and was considered extremely healthful’ (Richard Cavendish, ‘The Magical Arts’, RKP, 1984, p.180).

In a book significantly entitled ‘Three Famous Occultists’, a record of Mesmer’s clinics by a contemporary historian gives a similar portrayal of his manipulative sessions:

‘Some are calm, tranquil and experience no effect. Others cough, spit, feel slight pains, local or general heat, and have sweatings. Others, again, are agitated and tormented with convulsions. These convulsions are remarkable in regard to the number affected with them, to their duration and force. They are preceded and followed by a state of languor or reverie’ (R.B. Ince, ‘Three Famous Occultists’, Gilbert Whitehead, 1939, pp.87-88).

Sometimes the participants in these sessions would hold hands to form a circle, and it was not uncommon for waves of communal singing to occur. There is an inescapable comparison here with the phenomena which have so bewitched numerous churches today. Although its practitioners are ignorant of the fact, variations of the ‘Mesmeric Crisis’ experience are being repeated in Pentecostal-Charismatic meetings throughout the world today. Repetitive chorus-singing to create an intoxicating atmosphere, the laying on of hands, powerful physical sensations, agitation, hysterical laughter, raving delirium, convulsions, all followed by a deep sleep or state of reverie. Like its Mesmeric counterpart, this religious experience is induced as the result of the potent suggestions or physical touch (or even the mere presence) of an influential teacher. Furthermore, it is an experience that is available to anyone who is open to receive it, of whatever religious persuasion (or none), and it has as little to do with Christian spirituality as a Dionysian rite.

However, the true significance of Mesmer’s hypnotherapy sessions was well understood by some of his more perceptive contemporaries. Way back in 1784, the King of France wisely appointed a Commission to examine Mesmer’s claims, consisting of reports from two reputable medical bodies: the Faculty of Medicine of the Academy of Sciences and the Royal Society of Medicine. This commission came to the highly discerning conclusion:

‘That man can act upon man at any time, and almost at will, by striking his imagination; that the simplest gestures and signs can have the most powerful effects; and that the action of man upon the imagination may be reduced to an art, and conducted with method, upon subjects who have faith’ (R.B. Ince, op. cit., pp.107-108).

Mesmer’s discovery that his patients could be controlled by his will is acknowledged as being the great foundation-stone of modern hypnotism, as well as having a profound influence on succeeding generations of occultists of many traditions, such as the Cabbalist

magician Eliphas Levi and the U.S. Spiritualist Movement of the nineteenth century, which had discovered that in the Mesmeric trance a person could easily make contact with discarnate entities or 'spirit-guides' — the significance of which will soon become clear.

When Anton Mesmer discovered, in the late eighteenth century, the rudiments of manipulative hypnotism, the seeds of Western psychotherapy were sown — a fact which is confirmed by a prominent psychiatrist in the Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine:

'What is important is the impact and influence [Mesmer] had on the subsequent development of psychiatry. It would indeed be no exaggeration to say that he was one of the world's first psychotherapists' (JRSJ, Vol.85, no.7, July 1992, p.383).

It is Mesmer's crude form of manipulative hypnotherapy which is being practised by the 'deliverance ministries' and 'healing' crusades of the Pentecostal-Charismatic Movement, through which the strong suggestions and even the mere touch of a powerful teacher can turn the lives of the gullible inside-out. But the origins of this hypnotically-induced 'Crisis Experience' can be traced back much further than the 18th century. For the hypnotherapists of today have simply rehashed the psychological and spiritist ways of the ancient Shamans — the witch-doctors and medicine men of pagan cultures — in a modern guise. The New Age scientist, Dr. Fritjof Capra, physics professor at Berkeley University, California, reveals that

'Shamans used therapeutic techniques such as group sharing, psychodrama, dream analysis, *suggestion*, *hypnosis*, guided imagery [visualisation], and psychedelic therapy for centuries before they were *rediscovered by modern psychologists*' (Fritjof Capra, 'The Turning Point: Science, Society and the Rising Culture', Flamingo/Collins, 1982, p.337). [emphasis added]

Just as Western psychologists are offering ancient shamanistic practices in a guise which is more palatable to the uninitiated Westerner, so the professing Christian churches which peddle 'religious fainting' have simply made the Possession-Trance state of Shamanism more readily acceptable to the unwitting folk who attend their meetings. These are the true origins of the strange phenomena which are being so widely reported today and which are bringing the gospel and Church of Jesus Christ into so much disrepute.

CAN IT RIGHTLY BE DESCRIBED AS A REVIVAL?

We have seen that there is no biblical support for the 'Slain in the Spirit' experience, and that its origins are not Christian. Before we examine the claim that the Holy Spirit is the inspiration behind the phenomenon, let us see whether these unusual occurrences could be considered as a 'revival', as is often claimed by its advocates.

A genuine Christian revival fosters a profound sense of the awesome holiness of God and a piercing awareness of one's own sin (Isa.6:5; Job 42:5-6; Lk.5:8). It engenders a desire to obey the teachings of Christ and the Apostles whom He appointed — as laid down in the Scriptures — coupled with a humble and orderly partaking in the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42).

In contrast with the signs of a genuine Christian revival, we find that being 'Slain in the Spirit' results in a sensual yearning for psycho-religious experiences which then take precedence over Christian spirituality and lead to a rejection of biblical revelation. Consequently, the practitioner of this all-consuming ritual rapidly becomes enslaved by its seeming catharsis. For example, even after many years of having these "charismatic" experiences, we find that a Church of England Bishop is still having to race off to a church in Toronto where he can be found lying 'on the floor roaring like a lion' (Sunday Telegraph, June 19th, 1994, p.5). That is more akin to demonic bondage than spiritual revival!

IS IT REALLY THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT?

Is it conceivable, in the light of all that we have said, that this mass experience of religious fainting and hysterical convulsions is the result of being filled with the Holy Spirit of God? We have proven that there is no biblical support for this experience as normative for the Christian believer. We have shown that its true origins lie either in the realms of suggestion and hypnosis, as proffered by Western psychotherapy, or in the Possession-Trance of ancient Shamanism. However, the susceptible frame of mind induced in the seekers of this experience opens them up to a dark spiritual realm of which they seem to be completely unaware.

We can only conclude that the spirit by which these people are being 'slain' is not the Holy Spirit of God but some other spirit, for '*God is not the author of confusion but of peace*' (1 Cor.14:33). Those churches which practise this phenomenon are being swept up into a supernatural tide of evil, where they become shipwrecked on the rocks of ignorance — ignorance of Church history, ignorance of Scripture, and ignorance of the true work of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We agree with Seraphim Rose when he writes:

'It is only foolishness when some "charismatic" apologists presume to compare these childish and hysterical experiences, which are open to absolutely everyone, with the Divine revelations accorded to the greatest Saints, such as St. Paul on the road to Damascus or to St. John the Evangelist on Patmos. Those Saints fell down before the true God (without contortions, and certainly without laughter), whereas these pseudo-Christians are merely reacting to the presence of an *invading spirit*, and are worshipping only themselves. If these "charismatic" experiences are religious experiences at all, then they are *pagan* religious experiences; and in fact they seem to correspond exactly to the mediumistic initiation experience of *spirit-possession*, which is caused by an "inner force welling up inside attempting to take control"... What is involved in these experiences — when they are genuine and not merely the product of suggestion — is not merely the development of mediumistic ability, but actual possession by a spirit. These people would seem to be correct in calling themselves "spirit-filled" — but it is certainly not the *Holy Spirit* with which they are filled!" (Seraphim Rose, 'Orthodoxy and the Religion of the Future', St. Herman Brotherhood, 1979, pp.190-191).

What Maria Woodworth-Etter practised was Mesmerism; what Mesmer practised was a Westernised form of Shamanism; and what Shamans practise is Possession-Trance — and that is what the phenomenon called 'Slain in the Spirit' is all about. To credit this occult experience to the work of the Holy Spirit is as close to blasphemy as one can get.

EPILOGUE: The Believer's Response

Christian believers need great patience, perseverance and powers of discernment. The biblically-ignorant and rebellious churches of today are not discipling followers of Jesus Christ but are instead grooming a new generation of spirit-mediums whose religious experiences differ little from those of countless pagan cults, both ancient and modern.

Those who profess Christianity should refrain from indulging in practices which undermine the essential message of its Divine Founder. Instead of inducing mass swoonings and hysterical laughter, churches should be cultivating widespread repentance and reverential worship before the present time of God's mercy comes to an end (Rev.14:14-20; 18:4-24; cf. 2 Chron.36:15-16). If the crisis in modern Christianity deepens, the ensuing Divine judgement will defy the powers of the imagination.

We All Fall Down

An Investigation into the Experience Known as 'Slain in the Spirit'

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