

Glossolalia as a Sociopsychological Experience

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The recent, rapid rise of speaking in tongues—or glossolalia—in the ranks of Christendom has been phenomenal. Stanley Plog, a psychologist at the University of California, questioned more than 350 glossolaliacs and concluded that there are over forty denominations involved in the new outbreak of the tongues movement.¹ He believes that the largest groups are Episcopalian, Baptist, and Presbyterian, asserting that about 11 percent of the memberships of each of these groups are experiencing the phenomenon. Morton Kelsey claims that during “this century some two or three million, and perhaps a great many more, Americans have had a strange personal experience of religion known as speaking in tongues.”² These figures may well be exaggerated, but nevertheless, there is mounting evidence that the Neo-Pentecostal movement is making a significant infiltration into the main stream of Protestantism.

This rapid spread of the phenomenon has produced many books and articles dealing with the subject, most of which reflect one of the several views held by the writers. Some feel that glossolalia is a sign of church renewal and that it is an experience that all Christians should strive for. Others see it as a sectarian and clannish phenomenon which leaves disunity and bitterness in its path. Still others feel it can

be nothing more than an escape from the more exacting demands of the Christian life.

A survey of the available material on the subject of glossolalia portrays a threefold pattern into which the vast majority of the writings readily fit: (1) exegetical studies,³ dealing with the Old Testament, with the interbiblical and Greek parallels, as well as with the several New Testament references; (2) historical studies,⁴ examining the phenomenon as it has occurred throughout the ages of the church; (3) psychological,⁵ including actual clinical research and firsthand accounts by involved persons.

It is this last avenue which is being increasingly explored by the researchers. This is due in part to the growth and application of psychological and behavioral research methodology to various religious phenomena. Indeed, since the time of William James, who suggested that a psychopathic temperament is often present in religious leaders, students of psychology of religion have not hesitated to consider the possibility of a psychopathic involvement in the religious experience itself.⁶ But even though great religious movements may be accompanied by strong emotion, and despite the fact that glossolalia under religious auspices is itself an emotional experience, the presence of emotion alone

neither accredits nor discredits the actual experience.

This paper will survey some of the experimental studies of the phenomenon from several perspectives, paying particular attention to the sociopsychological dimensions of glossolalia.

Ecstasism in Non-Western Cultures

The subject of keen interest among anthropologists, ecstasism is obviously a phenomenon which predates the beginnings of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Carlyle May⁷ has published a study of the various ethnographic data on glossolalia and related phenomena. Practices which seem to resemble glossolalia as it is known today have been documented in ancient India and China, as well as in many other parts of the world. Some researchers point to the fact that speaking in tongues and related phenomena are usually found in those areas where spirit possession is commonplace.

The phenomenon itself can be, and often is, the result of a kind of induced ecstasy. May concludes that as long as mankind has known divination, curing, sorcery, et cetera, he has been practicing glossolalia.

In both Western and non-Western cultures, it is interesting that the "interpreter" who often volunteers from the audience to interpret the message into human language

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has never been venerated by empirical research. In fact, the investigations that have been carried on have never verified the claim of speaking in an actual foreign language unknown to the glossolalist. Moreover, actual linguistic comparisons of tongue speech and the "interpretation" have revealed that the interpretation is not in fact a translation. Thus, the role of the "interpreter," rather than that of translator, is one of "verifier" in which he serves to insure to the audience the genuineness of the experience.

Mansell Pattison concludes: "We can at least suggest that the reports of audience observers 'verifying' the foreign language of glossolalists is not an indication of either malingering or pretense, but an honest report of *subjective* auditory perception, which, of course, may be quite different from the objective linguistic patterns spoken."⁸

The Sociocultural Dimensions of Tongues

Both the social and psychological significance of speaking in tongues varies with the particular social movement of which the phenomenon is a part. R. A. Knox,⁹ for example, has surveyed the occurrences of glossolalia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in traditional Christian groups. He noted that the experimental aspect of the religious experience had been replaced chiefly by a new kind of intellectual sophistication. Thus, speaking in tongues was a vehicle used to establish again an experimental base for the faith. At the same time, during this age, the enlightenment, with its rationalistic criticism of the faith, was in vogue; and glossolalia quickly became a proof for the presence of God in the believer's life. It served to validate one's Christian experience in certain circles.

By and large the main practice of glossolalia has been limited to the Pentecostal and Holiness groups. These groups may generally be characterized by their marginal socioeconomic position in society as well as by a lower degree of intellectual sophistication. There have been many studies which have sought to show that the various forms of ecstatic behavior, including glossolalia, served both as an outlet for repressed conflicts and as a means of demonstrating that, despite one's position in society, one does have a certain possession of truth and righteousness.¹⁰

Recently in American Protestantism, glossolalia has made significant inroads into the middle-class Pentecostal groups who do not occupy a marginal social position at all. This group, according to some researchers, employs glossolalia as a function in the sense of a *rite de passage*, that is, a technique of recruitment and demonstration of behavioral change.¹¹ Thus, in this stratum of society, speaking in tongues functions not to serve personal needs so much as it provides a mechanism for nurturing of the social movement itself.

Personality Stability of the Glossolalist

One of the major concerns as the psychologist looks at glossolalia is the exact nature of the psychological makeup of the person who speaks in tongues. There have been obviously many contradictory claims and reports, depending on the population sampled and other sociocultural variables.

In the early part of the twentieth century, there were numerous psychological and psychiatric studies of glossolalia. Among the most extensive studies were those of George Cutten,¹² Emile Lombard,¹³ and Eddison Mosiman.¹⁴ In general, these researchers concluded that tongue speakers were probably emotionally unstable and that the experience of glossolalia itself was a regressive pathological experience.

In more recent years, clinical studies have been based on much larger and very diverse samples. William Sargant,¹⁵ for example, alludes to tongue speech as a form of regressive abreactive behavior, while Weston LaBarre¹⁶ reports an extensive case history of Southern snake handlers who, in addition, engaged in the practice of glossolalia. In his view, these were examples of the externalization of characterological conflict.

One fascinating study conducted as a

doctoral dissertation in Johannesburg, South Africa compared a group of glossolalists with a comparable group of controls. The researcher, Lincoln Vivier, found more histories of developmental conflict and life disturbances among those who spoke in tongues. He concluded, however, that personalitywise the tongues groups were not significantly different from the controls groups.¹⁷ Similar conclusions have been drawn by John Kildahl and Paul Qualben in a study done on a grant from the Behavioral Sciences Research Branch of the National Institute of Mental Health.¹⁸

A study conducted in 1966 by a psychiatrist in Berkeley, Dr. Paul Morentz,¹⁹ showed that the glossolaliac tended to assume a different position when he functioned in Pentecostal churches where glossolalia was a part of the expected religious ritual in comparison to its appearance among staid, main line churches where it is usually considered to be deviant behavior. Based on interviews of some sixty glossolalists, Morentz found several dominant personality patterns. Among these were (1) hostility to authority, (2) a consuming wish to compensate for feelings of inadequacy, (3) the desire to rationalize feelings of isolation, (4) strong feelings of dependency and suggestibility mixed with a strong tendency to dominate.

Stanley Plog²⁰ employed a battery of tests to a group of glossolaliacs and concluded that there were no atypical personality patterns among the group. Also he did not find a higher than expected rate of psychopathology. A similar conclusion was reached by L. P. Gerlach and his associates,²¹ who sampled a wide population. These researchers, likewise, found no evidence of unusual psychopathology among Pentecostal adherents. They conclude: "Most Pentecostals, though they are different in some behavior, are not 'sick.' . . .

They function effectively and cope adequately." These researchers admit the possibility that some church groups do attract more troubled individuals than do others and concede that it is entirely possible that some groups in more depressed areas attract more deprived persons or persons who are aged or lonely.

Glossolalia as a Psycholinguistic Phenomenon

The glossolalia movement has created considerable interest among linguists. In general, these researchers maintain that "tongues" does not represent any language known to mankind. Eugene A. Nida, of the American Bible Society, conducted an analysis of "tongues" which was recorded on tape.²² He was assisted in the project by linguists who represented more than 150 aboriginal languages in more than twenty-five countries. Nida concluded: "The types of inventory and distribution would indicate clearly that this recording bears no resemblance to any actual language which has ever been treated by linguists."²³

The linguistic evaluations of glossolalia as a language vary considerably since the speech itself varies in degree of organization. Some glossolalia, for example, is poorly organized and consists of nothing more than grunts and barely formed sounds, while other instances of tongue speech are highly organized into systematic series of phonemes.

It appears that in most instances glossolalia from the linguistic standpoint is composed of the basic speech elements of English, the major difference consisting in the lack of organization of these basic phonemes into any meaningful syntactical elements necessary for intelligible speech. Pattison has concluded that glossolalia resembles the early speech qualities of a

child prior to the time when he would organize many variables associated with adult language.²⁴ Many linguistic researchers point to the fact that among the glossolalists studied there seems to be a limited phonemic catalogue utilized. The conclusions reached generally seemed to indicate that those who speak in tongues use a language, the characteristics of which resemble those of a partially formed language rather than one which has formal characteristics.

George Devereaux²⁵ has discovered a striking comparison between the speech of a child and that of the glossolaliac. In fact, some researchers have concluded that tongue speech may be nothing more than a regression to an earlier mode of speech in which vocalization serves a purpose other than that of just communication of rational thought. Al Carlson at the University of California recorded "genuine" glossolalia in a religious context and also recorded some "contrived" glossolalia outside of a religious context. These speech samples were then rated by confessed glossolalists. His research indicated that the two types of glossolalia were not distinguishable from each other. Moreover, the "contrived" glossolalia actually received a higher rating than the "genuine" glossolalia.²⁶

So it is that the structural linguist suggests that glossolalia, though it does have specific linguistic structure based on the language tongue of the speaker, is limited in organization; and the capacity to speak in this type of semiorganized language can be replicated under experimental conditions. Perhaps, then, tongue speech is not at all a "strange language" but nothing more than an aborted form of "familiar language."

Frank Farrell, however, cites competent linguists who believe that the glossolalia

which they heard did sound structurally like a language.²⁷ Farrell's view has been challenged by William E. Welmers, professor of African languages at the University of California and an ordained minister of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. He confesses that he has had his own private spiritual experience which cannot fully be explained and which he considers "precarious."²⁸ He concludes: "When Christians publicize, propagate, and endeavor to perpetuate an apparent manifestation of psychological instability and an obvious blasphemy as a special 'gift of the Holy Spirit,' I cannot refuse to apply my knowledge and training to the problem. So far, I can only conclude, with all sympathetic Scripture-centered scholarship I know how to apply, that modern glossolalia is a sad deception."²⁹

The glossolaliac knows his "tongue" well because it is a familiar subjective experience for him. Because of this and because of his own preconceptions, as a result of tongue speech, he may indeed be brought "closer to God." Speaking in tongues serves to give him a security when and if he needs it. The restricted linguistic nature of glossolalia, the predominance of vowel sounds, the "playful" quality of the utterance, the calypso-type rhythm all suggest that glossolalia may, in fact, be a vocal thought-speech regression that could be restricted to the various specific functions of the ego.

The question of "communication," if asked in a strict linguistic context, is a moot one. Obviously, once the qualification of nonverbal communication is opened, the researchers will have to be content to await the findings of additional psycho-linguistic research.

Some Psychological Theories

E. Mansell Pattison believes that glossola-

lia may occur as part of a larger syndrome of hysterical, dissociative, or trance states, or may occur as a discreet piece of behavior.³⁰ He further suggests that glossolalia may be deviant psychopathological behavior or it may be normal expected behavior, depending on the sociocultural context. Pattison claims that glossolalia is a form of partially developed speech in which the thought-speech apparatus of the glossolaliac is employed for a variety of intrapsychic functions and may accompany psychopathological regression or it may be a form of healthy regression in the service of the ego leading to more creative modes of life.

Dr. Pattison, a medical doctor, points out that the most important distinction that should be made is between cause and consequence. Glossolalia, avers Pattison, is not caused by supernatural forces, but tongue-speech may be a consequence of involvement in deep and meaningful spiritual worship.

Tying the meaning and function of glossolalia to its sociocultural context, Dr. Pattison insists that it may serve various psychodynamic functions. He concludes that glossolalia per se is not a spiritual phenomenon, but it may be a consequence of a deep and meaningful spiritual experience. Thus, speaking in tongues, according to Dr. Pattison, does not miraculously change people in a supernatural sense; but participating in glossolalia as part of a larger social and personal commitment may play an important role in the change of direction in a glossolaliac's life.

Professor John P. Kildahl is director of the program in pastoral psychology at New York Theological Seminary and is a member of the faculty in the postgraduate center for mental health. He has recently conducted a study and published a book³¹ in which he has sought to demonstrate

that glossolalia can be learned, almost as other human abilities are learned. So it is academic whether one refers to the practice as a gift of the Spirit. Since glossolalia does make the individual feel better, it is perhaps theologically possible to claim that anything that makes one more at home with himself is beneficial and could be referred to as a gift of God.

Kildahl concludes that it is the use of tongues that determines whether it is constructive or divisive.

Professor Ira J. Martin has written extensively on the subject of glossolalia and conceives that tongues appear "to be an ecstatic form of speech, seeking to give vent to the joy of new life of spiritual redemption."³² He believes that glossolalia is one form of psychic catharsis, "a genuine but not universal concomitant of the Christian conversion experience."³³ Furthermore, Martin differentiates two types of glossolalia: the genuine and the synthetic. The former represents a "psychic catharsis." He suggests that in the deep, basic reintegration of the individual's personality the psychological upheaval is often too great to control; therefore, the resulting joy of release from suppressed guilt feelings is similarly too thrilling to repress and that the eager desire which one has to express the joys of the new life of inner peace and the fresh outlook will not be subjected to constraint.

In Martin's view, "synthetic" glossolalia represents that tongue speech which occurs when other factors are operating, for example, autohypnosis, normal hypnosis, or the laws of autosuggestion.

Professor Emile Lombard suggests a threefold classification of "automatic speech."³⁴ These types represent degrees of progression from the remote forms to the nearer and more familiar forms of organized language. First, there are inar-

articulate sounds such as hiccups, cries, sighs, and wailings. These simple vocal sounds are especially apparent in glossolalians at the beginning of their automatism. The second classification, avers Lombard, encompasses the most common type of glossolalia—a pseudolanguage or speech composed of articulate sounds which resemble words. There is actually a phonic differentiation, and a person appears to be speaking and expressing specific ideas. In reality, however, the language is meaningless and has no content. Finally, Lombard suggests that there are “manufactured” or “coined” words (neologisms) which emerge on a base of well-characterized pseudolanguage and have a constant representative value of meaning.

Having more than a passing interest in the phenomenon known as glossolalia, C. G. Jung’s first reference to the phenomenon occurs in the published dissertation for his medical degree “On the Psychology and Pathology of So-Called Occult Phenomena.” This was the first work Jung published. In it he describes his single observation of tongue speech and classifies the phenomenon as a kind of somnambulism or multiple personality in which some center other than the ego takes possession of the motor centers which control personality. He is not suggesting that somnambulism is necessarily pathological or otherwise damaging to the personality. In fact, he suggests that the experience may have “an eminently teleological significance” if it provides the individual, who might otherwise inevitably succumb, with a sense of victory.³⁵

Almost fifty years later, Jung again referred to the phenomenon of speaking in tongues. He seemed to suggest that the more inhibited and out of touch with the unconscious, the more likely a person is to be a glossolalist. In his view, this is preferable to neurotic forms of behavior, which all serve to release tension and inhibition.

Most of the interpreters of Jung have

sustained the view that tongues is a genuine invasion into consciousness of content from the deepest level of the collective unconscious.

Some Theological Implications

Since most of the discussions about glossolalia have been strongly polarized, perhaps what is needed more than anything else is sympathetic listening. There is much more research that will have to be done before the whole story can be known. Research is needed not only from the psychological point of view but also from the historical and biblical perspectives.

In the meantime, those of us who do not speak in tongues must be patient and understanding of our brother who is caught up in this experience. Sometimes beyond the repugnant external form of glossolalia, significant and abiding questions are being raised.

Beneath the external furor, the genuine glossolaliac may be deeply committed to the reality of the presence of God in his life. He may be desperately searching for a symbol which will adequately express his sincerity. But, alas, much of Christendom rejects both him and his symbol; and he may become withdrawn, defensive, and hostile. Yet he makes his point: every Christian is obligated to give a significant place to the concept of the Holy Spirit in his life. The nonspeaking brother may denounce the symbol, but how can he attack the reality?

Thus the glossolaliac forces the remainder of Christendom to elaborate its concept of the Holy Spirit since tongue-speech is rejected. At present, many of those both pro and con glossolalia need to think through the question of the relevancy for the Holy Spirit in the Christian life. What does it mean morally and socially to talk about God’s presence through his Spirit?

Also, the resurgence of glossolalia may divulge a need in man to talk about God. The twentieth century “man come of age”

is taught by his culture to suppress such unscientific or illogical speech. Glossolalians have chosen to vent this basic need, apparently disregarding the culturally imposed consequences. Again, how many "orthodox" Christians are willing to go this far in some other area to demonstrate that "the old creature has passed away"?

Glossolalia may be, in fact, a loud protest to the often cold, impersonal form which institutional worship sometimes acquires. Some regard the movement as basically a rebellion against overintellectualized and overorganized Christianity. Regardless of how the nonparticipants respond, glossolalians are saying that there must be more room for spontaneity in worship—more opportunity for the worshippers themselves to get involved. John Sherrill believes that every Christian needs a measure of order and freedom in worship, and he thinks that here the glossolalian and the nonglossolalian in dialogue can make a significant contribution to Christian life. Out of constructive debate can come a resolution of differences which would be profitable for all Christians.

What needs to be debated is not what tongues means so much as the form in which this meaning is couched. Many non-participants in the tongues movement would not hesitate to posit a meaningful role for the Holy Spirit in the Christian life. The real point of their stumbling is the actual manner in which glossolalia is practiced: it is both repulsive and repugnant.

It is obvious that mainstream Christians can learn much from their brother who speaks in tongues. Coming to accept him as he is may be itself a sign of approaching Christian maturity. Every effort must be made to understand the deepest needs of those persons involved—an effort to hear them and understand. This will require a sustained, sympathetic, nonjudgmental effort on the part of the total Christian community.

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3. Cf. Merrill F. Unger, *New Testament Teaching on Tongues* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1971); Anthony A. Hoekema, *What About Tongue-Speaking?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966); William G. MacDonald, *Glossolalia in the New Testament* (Springfield, Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 1963).
4. Cf. George B. Cutten, *Speaking with Tongues: Historically and Psychologically Considered* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1927) or Robert C. Dalton, *Tongues Like as of Fire: a Critical Study of the Modern Tongue Movement in the Light of Apostolic and Patristic Times* (Springfield, Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 1945).
5. Cf. Kelsey, *op. cit.*; John P. Kildahl, *The Psychology of Speaking in Tongues* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1972); John L. Sherrill, *They Speak with Other Tongues* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1964).
6. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans & Green, 1902), pp. 23, 478.
7. Carlyle L. May, "A Survey of Glossolalia and Related Phenomena in Non-Christian Religions," *American Anthropologist*, LVIII (February 1956), 75-96.
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17. L. M. Van Eetveldt Vivier, "Glossolalia" (unpublished doctor's dissertation, University of Witwatersand, Johannesburg, South Africa, 1960).
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19. Paul Morentz, "Lecture on Glossolalia" (unpublished paper, University of Southern California, Berkeley, 1966).
20. Stanley Plog, "Preliminary Analysis of Group Questionnaires on Glossolalia" (unpublished data, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 1966).
21. Gerlach and Hine, *op. cit.*
22. Cf. "The Report of the Toronto Institute of Linguistics" cited in V. Raymond Edman, "Divine or Devilish?" *Christian Herald*, LXXXVII (May 1964), 16.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Pattison, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
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26. Al Carlson, "Tongues of Fire Revisited" (unpublished paper, University of Southern California, Berkeley, 1967).
27. Frank Farrell, "Outburst of Tongues: the New Penetration," *Christianity Today*, VII (September 13, 1963), 6.
28. William E. Welmers, "Glossolalia," *Christianity Today*, VII (November 8, 1963), 20.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Pattison, *op. cit.*, p. 85.
31. Kildahl, *op. cit.*
32. Ira J. Martin, *Glossolalia in the Apostolic Church: a Survey of Tongue Speech* (Berea, Kentucky: Berea College Press, 1960), p. 100.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Lombard, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-34.
35. Carl G. Jung, "Psychiatric Studies," *Collected Works* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), I, 79.