

## THE HOLY ROLLERS COME TO TOWN

By ANTON T. BOISEN

[*Dr. Boisen, author of "The Exploration of the Inner World," and the Seminary's Research Associate in the Psychology of Religion, has recently completed a study of the ecstatic sects which have spread so rapidly across the country in recent years. A fuller report of his survey and findings will be published soon. The article that follows tells the story of these sects in one small city of the Middle West. Last spring Washburn College conferred upon Mr. Boisen the D.D. degree in recognition of his distinguished service in the study of religion and its relation to mental health.*—THE EDITOR.]

THE Pentecostal sects are going strong in my native town. They have both numbers and enthusiasm. They fill their churches not just on Sunday mornings but also on Sunday evenings and even during the week. Their people go not from a sense of duty but because of an interest which makes each believer a zealous missionary, eager to bring to others the good news of the blessing which he has found. The other churches look on with amazement. Troubled over the crudities of these new forms of religion, they wonder about the secret of their appeal. What needs are they meeting? What lessons can be learned from them?

### FORTY YEARS AGO

The town in question is a college town of some eighteen thousand souls. Forty years ago as a town of six thousand it had merely the churches usually found in a middle western town of that size. There were Methodists, Disciples, Presbyterians, Baptists, a small Episcopal, and a small Catholic church. There were also representatives of Protestantism's rear guard, small groups which maintained a separate existence because of their greater resistance to change. The Covenanters still clung staunchly to the Reformation Principles of their Scotch-Irish forebears. They sang only the Psalms of David, they denied themselves the luxury of instru-

mental music, and they refused to vote until the Constitution of the United States should be amended to include a declaration of religious faith. The United Presbyterians, likewise Scotch-Irish, still refused to sing "human hymns," and the Church of Christ still held aloof from their kindred, the Disciples, because they could find no scriptural warrant for the use of organs in the church service. On the whole, however, our churches were fairly liberal and forward-looking. Aside from the older members there were few, even of the Scotch-Irish, who laid any great stress on the distinctive doctrines. We of the younger generation merely identified ourselves with the church of our parents and grandparents and wanted it to prosper without being required ourselves to make too great sacrifices of time or money. We accepted their faith as our faith without scrutinizing it too closely. Of course, we saw some differences. The Presbyterians, from the early years, had been identified with the college group, and their services of worship were adjusted to the standards of the "cultured." In the Methodist church, on the other hand, some of the older people still shouted their "Amens" whenever the spirit moved them without regard to the susceptibilities of the sophisticated. The Methodists, together with the Disciples and the Baptists, still held that one must be converted in order to become a Christian, and they

had certain techniques for inducing such experiences. Some of us who belonged to the more sedate communions went sometimes to the Methodist church to see the fun. But all of us believed more or less in revivals; and when Wilbur Chapman came to town, we all participated in his evangelistic services.

#### SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS CHANGES

Since that time things have changed. The college has grown from eight hundred to six thousand, and with it the churches too have grown. The older churches still are there, but their visage is altered. The Methodists today worship in a large and costly church. The older people with their "Amens" have long since passed away. There is now a stately service which appeals to college people. No longer do they labor to produce conversion experiences. Such experiences in all the older churches have practically dropped out of the picture. In short, all the older churches are geared to the tastes and requirements of the college group.

But meanwhile the less privileged have also been increasing. There has been in this town a considerable industrial development. This has brought in large numbers of working-class families from the surrounding countryside. Since the depression these people have been hard hit. They are up against a grim struggle for existence. It is among these people that the Pentecostal sects have arisen. Going back after the lapse of the years, I find three Pentecostal Assemblies of Jesus Christ, an Assemblies of God, a Church of God, a Church of the Nazarene, a Wesleyan Methodist, a Free Methodist, and several small groups whose exact affiliations I have been unable to determine. The aggregate membership of these new sects is well over a thousand. All of them have come to town within forty

years. Some of them did not exist anywhere before that time.

#### WHY THE PENTECOSTALS HAVE COME

The explanation of the rise of these new sects may be found first of all in the cultural factors they represent. They have been recruited from those who, rightly or wrongly, have felt they were not welcome in the older churches. In any case they have not felt at home in the atmosphere of the dignified service and have found the informality and spontaneity of the small "believers' groups" much more to their liking. And just as these people prefer "St. Louis Blues" to a Beethoven sonata, or the *Chicago American* to the *New Republic*, so also they prefer "When the roll is called up yonder" to "Our God, our help in ages past." They have therefore gravitated toward the culturally like-minded. Many who formerly would have found their home among the Methodists or the Disciples now forgather with the Pentecostals.

But this is by no means a full explanation. On a recent visit to one of these Pentecostal churches I heard the following testimony given by a manly-looking fellow in the early prime of life: "I know what it means to live in sin. I know what it means to have your conscience gnawing at your heart. I know what it means to have the load lifted and your heart flooded with joy. I know what it means to have God talk to you just as he talked to the old prophets. Yes, my friends, I can testify that God lives and works today just as much as ever he did." It was easy to see that this man was speaking straight to the heart of many who were present. They were people who knew what struggle meant, people who felt themselves beset with dangers both within and without. The message which this man gave in his testimony is the message of the Pentecostal churches. They proclaim individual

salvation from sin. They deal with a problem which for multitudes of men and women is still a matter of life and death. The older churches in their reaction against the excesses of nineteenth-century evangelism have gone too far. They are passing by on the other side at a point where men lie writhing in misery. Experiences such as this man described are with them a thing of the past. Right at this point the Pentecostals are on the job. They may be dealing in patent nostrums; they may be giving treatment without diagnosis—but at least they are giving treatment.

But most important of all is the sense of reality which pervades the religion of these newer groups. They are convinced that they have found God. They feel themselves able to bear witness to his presence in their own lives. They are sure that he talks to them just as he talked to the old Hebrew prophets. Evidence of this they see in certain unusual experiences. They find themselves uttering words which do not seem to come from themselves, dancing or thrusting up their hands as under the control of some power not themselves. They may even pass into states of unconsciousness. As men have done all through the ages, they interpret such things as manifestations of the supernatural. We may question the validity of that evidence, but that does not alter the fact that such an experience carries with it a terrific impact and that, wherever it occurs under group influence and is interpreted as possession by the Holy Spirit, the results may be definitely constructive. It gives men power to reorganize their lives and kindles in them a faith that is contagious.

#### THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

The history of the Christian church, as Richard Niebuhr has shown, furnishes many instances in which vital religious

movements have begun in just this way. Little groups of like-minded persons, nearly always of the struggling, underprivileged classes, have come together on the basis of some new vision, some vivid sense of the presence of the divine. Others have been drawn into the fold on the basis of a shared experience. Then gradually the voluntary society becomes a church. The original believers are replaced by their children, and institutionalization follows. The sacraments become means of grace rather than symbols of confession. The creeds become standards of doctrine rather than confessions of faith. Even religious experience itself becomes standardized in the form of patterns which have to be induced by all sorts of meretricious devices. But the general process is one of leveling. The great prophetic forward movements are leveled down and conventionalized. The eccentric and regressive manifestations are leveled up and become respectable.

The Pentecostal churches undoubtedly belong in the group of the eccentric and even of the regressive. Their fundamental assumption that the divine manifests itself in the unusual, that the prompting which seems to come from without is of divine origin is highly dangerous. That same assumption figures also in the experiences of the mentally disordered. Moreover, I see in their message nothing which goes to the heart of the problems of this sick and suffering world. I find in it no social vision, no promise of social salvation except that which is to come miraculously with the second coming of the Lord. I am impressed by the diminutive size of the universe which that message depicts. It has in it no room for all that we have been finding out about stars and atoms and plants and men. It is merely a tiny world into which they may withdraw and feel themselves secure. Such a world may be satisfactory for the older people, but it is

likely to cramp the development of their children.

I am concerned about the misrepresentation of the doctrine of the cross which these sects perpetuate. The death of Jesus is for them a vicarious atonement. It is the price he paid in order that we may find personal salvation, not a way of life which we must follow in order that the Kingdom of God may come upon earth.

And yet I see constructive elements. With all their regressive features these groups are nonetheless part of Protestantism's advance guard. They are exponents of radical mysticism. They are manifestations of the spontaneous religious fervor of the common people. They represent their attempts to heal the sick of soul. To many distressed individuals they are bringing hope and courage and strength to keep going in the face of difficulties. In so far as they succeed in doing this, the economic and social status is likely to be raised. In so far as they succeed in holding

their young people, they are likely in time to become comfortable middle-class churches. Some of these new sects are already well on their way toward respectability. Their sincerity and earnestness is then likely to find its reward in the improvement of the individual status.

These churches do have a message for us all. They tell us of the needs of the common man, of the grim battles which he has to wage both within and without. They reveal the need of a new kind of evangelism. They remind us of the message of salvation which is ever within the keeping of the Christian church, the good news of release from the burden of guilt and failure through faith in the Love that rules the universe. And they call upon us to reinterpret the doctrine of the cross of Jesus and to proclaim in flaming words its true meaning for a perishing world, that the cultural gaps may be bridged and that all who call themselves Christians may unite in the struggle for the redemption not just of the individual but of mankind.