



Religious identity through Religious Experience

Eduqas A level R.S. G1A Christianity Theme 4E

Key Concepts:

- New Testament passages describe special qualities (**charismata**, 'gifts of grace') Christians receive from the Holy spirit (see **1 Corinthians 12:4-11**).
- The Charismatic Movement (CM) involves churches across denominations which believe that gifts should be discovered, practiced and used today.
- It is also known as the '**Renewal Movement**' or 'neo-Pentecostalism' because many remain in their denominations, seeking to renew them.
- Key events include Episcopalian priest **Dennis Bennett** introducing his charismatic experience to his congregation (1960), the first Church of England congregation to declare itself 'charismatic' (1963), and Catholic students/lecturers on a retreat in 1967 experiencing speaking in tongues and other spiritual gifts.
- Today, most major denominations have some charismatic congregations; 10-15% of Catholics worldwide are involved in this movement. See cgr.org.uk.
- Four main practices are:
 - (i) speaking in tongues (**glossolalia**), an incomprehensible 'language' that help worshippers feel close to God
 - (ii) **prophecy**, the speaking of a message from God in a direct, personal way, i.e. 'God wants you to expect great things this year...'
 - (iii) **healing**, often through the laying on of hands (see **James 5:14**), and
 - (iv) inspiring worship which may involve dancing, raising one's hands in the air and speaking in tongues.
- A. J. Ayer** said that all knowledge outside of statements that are true by definition (2+2=4) must be verifiable through sense experience.
- Glossolalia is sometimes 'interpreted' by another member of the congregation; however, since we have no independent knowledge of the content of this language, it is impossible to verify.
- No scientific study has confirmed physical healings in charismatic circles, though they are seen by some as miracles according to **Aquinas'** view that a miracle can include something that nature would do but at a greater speed.
- The messages given in prophecy are often so vague that they elude verification. How can one judge if 'This week you can expect blessings from God' is true or false?
- There are natural explanations for tongues; it is a cross-cultural phenomenon which may be viewed as a form of psychological **regression**.
- Healings may be explained as the original diagnosis being mistaken or a natural **spontaneous remission**.
- The sense of God at work in Charismatic circles is real to those who have the experience and can be seen to bear real **ethical** and emotional '**fruit**'.
- Many who claim these experiences are intellectually and emotionally mature.

Key arguments/debates:

The strengths of the Charismatic Movement are that it meets experiential needs and allows for a full range of human expression - one is reminded of the importance R. Otto placed on an encounter with God over dry doctrine. The NT speaks about the Holy spirit, after all. However, one can be emotionally engaged in traditional worship. Perhaps the Movement has elevated the more 'miraculous' gifts over other gifts (i.e. service)? Doesn't love dwarf all other experience (1 Cor. 13)?

Natural explanations appear to discover charismatic claims. Psychological suggestion and social pressure can be proven to be a motivating source for human behaviour. Yet, naturalistic explanation can co-exist with a supernatural explanation in that the brain could be the location but not the ultimate source of these experiences. However, there is no empirical evidence of this and a psychological gap may have been prematurely filled with beliefs about the Holy Spirit.

Key questions:

- Is the Charismatic Movement truly inclusive in nature? Who might feel excluded?
- Does the Charismatic Movement redress a Trinitarian imbalance in Christianity?
- Can experiences in the Charismatic Movement have both a religious and natural explanation?
- How is it fair/not fair to say that the Charismatic Movement successfully addresses declining Church attendances due to boring and lifeless rituals?
- Is the Charismatic Movement ecumenical?

Key quotes:

"..glossolalia...is a voluntary activity which any uninhibited person can perform." (J. D. Castelein)

"The Charismatic Movement is a form of Christian existentialism." (Church of England)

"Social groups can condition the way such experiences are felt and expressed." (W. Wildman.)

Key words:

Charismata | 1 Cor. 12:4-11 | Renewal Movement | Dennis Bennett | RCC | CCR | glossolalia | prophecy | healing | James 5:14 | A.J. Ayer | Aquinas | regression | spontaneous remission | ethical fruit