

FLOW, ENERGY AND TRANSFORMATION IN PENTECOSTAL WORSHIP

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Leaving behind the bright lights of the foyer, I entered the dark auditorium. Whether it was day or night, one could not tell. I took my seat. My eyes roamed around the theatre. The grandeur of the interior was overwhelmingly rich. The tall ceiling, the gothic décor and the imposing pillars that emerged from the walls captivated me. The Dubstep beat permeated the whole room, bouncing back and forth off of the walls. I could feel my muscles tensing up, and could not keep my feet still. A wave of excitement surged through my body. I did not know what to expect but I was ready, ready for an experience like no other. Spotlights surveyed the room, like guard towers, trying to catch every person in the audience. Everyone was seated and the band entered onto the stage. Four lead singers took their places at the front of the stage. On a raised platform behind them, two hip young men took up their guitars, and another took a seat behind the drum kit. A sound system operator stepped into his booth behind them all, like a king on his throne. The music began, arms were raised and everyone was ready. The theatre came alive, alive at the very moment mouths were opened. Here I was, in a West End Theatre, not watching a concert or a musical, but in a church, a Pentecostal church with thousands of Christians ready to worship Jesus.

Christianity has always fascinated me. In my experience, Christians have a spark and glow about them, and a joy that is difficult to describe and account for. I set out to do my ethnographic encounters project in a Pentecostal church in London. Pentecostalism is a movement within Christianity where emphasis is placed on a personal experience with God through the Holy Spirit in worship (Bowen 1951: 201). Participants who are empowered by the Holy Spirit are often granted the gift of speaking in tongues, which I find mysterious and perplexing. I wanted to find out what it was about Springfield, a large, charismatic Pentecostal church in the heart of London which attracts 6,000 people over the course of three different services every Sunday, to come and worship.

Before entering the field, I was convinced that people were attracted to church for the fellowship and community with other Christians. Much to my surprise, this was not the case with Springfield. Christians, as well as non-Christians, were drawn to Springfield for the electric and transformative worship for which it has a worldwide reputation. Firstly, this project will explore music and performance and the influence that this has on church growth. Secondly, I will apply Victor Turner's work on liminality to my findings, in order to give shape to my project. Within the liminal stage of the service, I will look at how there is a breaking down of social structures through worship, and how this builds community, and is a transformative ritual.

First Impressions

I had no problem finding Springfield church. The theatre the church convened in had speakers, blaring out catchy Dubstep music in the street. Much to my surprise, there was no Christian element to the music. One might have been entering a concert or even a nightclub. Many passers-by stopped to see what was going on, and others took photos of the scene. As they did, they were immediately approached by one of the twenty volunteers who stood outside the theatre, clad in bright coloured t-shirts. It was clear that I was an outsider and I was approached immediately by a friendly volunteer who asked me whether I had ever been to the church before. Before I knew it, I was ushered into the theatre. I then began conducting my research, talking to many young people about their reasons for coming to the Church. I felt intimidated by the atmosphere. Groups of young people clustered together, engrossed in conversation. I plucked up the courage to approach some of the huddles. To my surprise, I was met with warmth and friendliness and was invited to sit with a group of girls of a similar age. At once, I felt more relaxed and at ease. I was no longer lost in a sea of faceless people.

Music and Performance



Image 1: Author's photograph taken during worship at Springfield Church

'We all know the feeling generated by good music. Something permeates the body, loosening, juicy fibers. The volume shakes our bones, instigates a nervous system shift, a mode of sensual pleasure.' (Brahinsky 2012: 215).

Music and worship are fundamental to charismatic Pentecostal churches. As illustrated by Brahinsky, music has the ability to transform us (Ibid.). Music can change the way we feel at a particular moment in time. It can restore our soul, or cause us to feel mellow and reflective. Walking into a Pentecostal service, one might be struck by a 'cacophony' of sounds (Albrecht 1992: 111). What is a 'sonic dissonance to the outsider, is to the Pentecostal a symphony of holy sounds' (Ibid.). It is the music that provides security and comfort for the worshipper and symbolizes an entrance into the presence of God (Ibid.). People in Springfield told me that it was the power of the Holy Spirit which was causing them to "go crazy," with the music. The music fosters a sense of being 'acted upon by an external source,' which cannot be easily dismissed by interpreters of religious behaviour (Ibid.). For an outsider, the music still had a powerful effect - whatever was driving it.

I did not expect to be emotionally affected by the music. I felt an energy rising inside me. I wanted to jump up and down like those around me, and I wanted to raise my hands. I refrained, but I did participate in the singing and awkwardly rocked my body back and forth. I was sitting next to a girl named Ju-In. She had never been to church before. In fact, a volunteer had encountered her at the local Starbucks and invited her in. The music bug had caught her, and she was jumping up and down, her hands raised and clapping. She was not worshipping Jesus; she was simply enjoying the experience and the music. This demonstrates that an important feature of charismatic activity is a 'collective sense of "flow" related to the verbal and bodily activity of other participants, and intrinsic to its power is excitement' (Turner 1979 in Davis 2003:125). This is true of the believer but also of the non-believer. Ju-In was continually looking at what others were doing and copying their actions. The dancing and jumping in the service are illustrative of Turner's 'flow' (Kautzmann 2008: 38). Ju-In might have felt out of place if she were not to participate in this way. The music is the reason why many people attend Springfield.

The music has a different purpose and function for believers and non-believers. For non-believers the music facilitates an enjoyable and emotional experience. It does this for believers too, but they believe that they are encountering God in worship through the power of the music (Kautzmann 2008: 38). The music facilitates a common experience. Ultimately, however, there was a great diversity of experience within the theatre. Some participants, such as Ju-In, were having a superficial, musical experience, while others would hold that they were standing in the presence of God, worshipping him 'in the Spirit and in truth' (John 4:24).

From what I knew about church, prior to attending Springfield, I did not believe that performance was or could be a part of a church service. The band was stood on raised tiers, with lights surrounding them. I was geared up to watch a theatre performance or to listen to a secular band. According to Bowie, there is a clear distinction between what constitutes ritual and what constitutes theatre (2000: 159). Bowie argues on the one hand there is 'efficacy,' and on the other there is 'entertainment' (Ibid.). If the purpose of a performance is to be efficacious then the performance is a ritual (Ibid.). If the purpose is to entertain then it is theatre (Ibid.).

However, as Springfield demonstrates, no performance is purely one or the other. Some of those I met were going to church solely for entertainment. As a Springfield church volunteer, Andy told me all the youths who were 'going crazy at the front,' were most likely just enjoying the music and performance. She could not tell me whether they were Christian or not. Indeed, those who videoed the worship were probably there for entertainment. On the other hand, many participants were not there for the performance or quality of the music. Sophie told me she would not mind if the band were out of tune, or whether or not she was in a theatre. She said what really mattered was 'what we do in there.' This being so, for many Christians the performative aspect of church helps them to form their identity in Christ. Through the vibrancy of the worship, participants feel more attached to God, and they are able to know his presence even more as they lose themselves in a musical ecstasy.

My research aligns with Bowie's arguments. That is, that Pentecostal church performance has moved further towards the entertainment end of the spectrum (Ibid.). As my informants continually told me, the reason they were attracted towards Springfield was because it is fun, vibrant and relevant to young people. Mike told me the reason he was attending church at Springfield, rather than at his local parish church, was that Springfield '...is fun. It is not like any other church, other churches are boring.' The performative element of the church seemed to be a magnet for attracting and selling the church to young people. Pentecostal churches have contributed significantly to the growth of Christianity. Douglas Davis argues that experience motivates religious life, and excitement empowers much of that experience (2002: 135). A church volunteer told me that coming to Springfield is like going to a shoe sale, it is so exciting that you cannot wait to get there. Whilst she did not deny that many were coming for the experiential, musical, side of the service, she also argued that people encounter Jesus in whatever church they go to. Music and performance are two of the major factors that draw people to church. It is easy to be cynical about the worship at Springfield. What, after all, is the difference between this and a secular concert? However, it was written on the faces of many of the worshippers that they were having a personal religious experience. The music may have facilitated this religious experience, invoking energy in the worshippers and a sense of the presence of God, but it was sincere for many of those in the congregation.

Understanding my Encounter: Liminality

Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner's concepts of liminality and 'communitas' provide a useful framework for understanding the impact of the worship experience on the community of believers (Kautzmann 2008: 31). Turner's liminal state consists of "a loss of previous caste, wisdom and social status, but a gain in sacredness and spiritual power" (Davies 2003: 403). Turner argues that those who have been previously bound by social structures are set free (1972: 485). When believers enter the auditorium and stand before God, their social status is arguably stripped away. In the eyes of God, everyone is equal, and the rich and the poor stand on equal ground. It is here that believers are in a state of being 'betwixt and between' the limits and standards of society (Albrecht 1992: 121). It is as if they have left the social structures of the city outside. These conditions create an "anti-structure," where almost anything can happen. It is during this liminal phase that 'anything may go' (Turner 1979: 478). This includes: speaking in tongues, chanting, dancing, all of which I witnessed during the service. During my second visit to Springfield the man I was sitting next to was shouting out during the sermon, when the rest of the congregation was silent. At the top of his voice, he was shouting, 'yes, Jesus, yes,' over and over again with his hands in the air. It is this type of behaviour, abnormal for the rest of society, which is considered acceptable and characteristic within Turner's liminal state.

Community and Belonging

During the liminal period there is a sense of solidarity among the people (Albrecht 1992: 121). This unity and sense of oneness among the congregation is what Turner terms 'communitas' (Ibid.). During this time people feel like they belong to a group, a community. In a world lacking in community and belonging, Springfield provides a sense of security and support to those who would otherwise go without it. On approaching the field, my first impression was that there was no sense of community; Springfield was too big to really get to know anyone. I was even told by my informants that there was a lack of community. For those who go to church for a sense of community and belonging, I could not see why they would go to Springfield. One informant told me that at first he felt lost in the church, as if he did not fit in

anywhere. There were three services every Sunday in the church. The congregation gets rushed out at the end of each service in order for them to prepare for the next. This did not facilitate a good environment for conversation and it also made my research more difficult as people did not have a chance to hang around after the service. Indeed, straight after the service finished, Pharrell Williams' *Happy* blared out on the speakers, furthering discouraging conversation and community.

The way to get to know others and form a group of friends, I was told, is through the weekly "Connect" groups. They consist of a group of Christians meeting up to talk through issues and concerns in their lives, like a support group. However, it has become clear to me that it is during the worship, or the liminal period that a sense of strong, close-knit community emerges. As Albrecht argues, it is the environment and dynamics characteristic of the liminal phase which can aid the community building process (1992: 121). I was told that being a member of the congregation felt like being in a family, 'we are all the children of God when worshipping.' Pentecostal ritual not only draws people together in a physical space, it unites them emotionally and spiritually (Ibid., 123). This also creates a sense of belonging. The performance of Pentecostal rites creates and sustains a community of Christians who all share in a common belief (Ibid.). It is also the suspension of social status, during the liminal period, which allows for new relationships to be formed as a result of *communitas* (Ibid.). What seemed to be a lack of community was in fact another form of community. Looking beneath the surface, it became evident that the sense of belonging and community was formed during the liminal stage of ritual where members worshipped God together. The strong sense of community formed during the worship is another reason why so many are attracted to Springfield.

Personal Reflection and Transformation

Another characteristic of the liminal dimension of ritual is the creation of a space for personal reflection, which in turn provides the framework for transformation (Albrecht 1992: 126). According to Turner, liminal qualities help free participants to be reflective. This involves

questioning and examining oneself. Several comparisons can be drawn from my fieldwork to Turner's liminal state. There were several points during the service when the whole congregation went silent and bowed their heads and the pastor said a series of prayers. One of those prayers was directed to the non-Christians in the congregation. Non-Christians are given the chance to reach out and give themselves to Jesus. The pastor said 'those who do not know Him, but recognise the power of God, on the count of three lift your hands and give your lives to Jesus.' Turner might argue that those who lifted their hands and began their journey with Jesus demonstrate the transformative aspect of liminality, which stems from the moment of reflection. One man I spoke to said he was originally coming to Springfield as a social experiment and then was converted to Christianity. Many of my informants told how a friend had brought them along, and that they now come every week. As you leave the church the congregation would "supposedly" enter the world as changed people (Kautzmann 2008: 34). My fieldwork supported this statement, one girl told me: 'I come out a different person, I can't quite explain the feeling.' I was told that it was the power of God, the transformative experience of worship, where God acts among his believers and transforms their hearts.

The "yearning" for transformation is demonstrated in the language and other symbols of Pentecostal ritual (Albrecht 1992: 125). At the beginning of the service, a list is put up on the overhead projector of all those who in the past week had been transformed by the power of God. On the Church website there is a section for prayer requests where anyone can enter in a prayer request. For believers, participating with God results in transformation (Ibid.) The transformation could be healing or conversion achieved through prayer. When the list was read out during the service of those who had got their new job, or were healed from a bad back, the audience thanked God. These are clear demonstrations of transformation, which are characteristic of Turner's ritual liminality.

It became clear to me throughout my research that one of the key factors contributing to the growth of Pentecostalism was the vibrant, charismatic and energetic atmosphere. The young, fashionable people and contemporary music created this setting. I found it was for this reason that many young people were attracted to Springfield and would travel up to two hours

to reach it. If it were not for large charismatic churches, then Christianity would not be attracting as many followers. Pentecostalism is making churches more relevant for young people through embracing popular culture. I recently visited my local Baptist Church near my home in London, where there were no more than 15 people in the congregation. However, the Springfield attracts up to 6,000 people a day. Evidently, this is saying something about the pull of the worship there and the relevance of Springfield to young people. Victor Turner's liminal dimension of ritual provided me with a framework for analyzing a number of aspects of the service which were not evident from my fieldwork. These include the strong close-knit community created during liminality, as well as the transformative aspect of the ritual of worship. Believers leaving the church feel that they have been empowered by the Holy Spirit during the powerful worship and feel freed and restored. Being a person who is not quite sure what to believe concerning God and Christianity, I was struck by seeing the power of God influencing so many people's lives. My fieldwork reminded me that there is a God at work in people's lives and many find their identity and worth not in money, work, or worldly pleasure, but in God. Christianity is a religion that is alive and kicking in the world, transforming and changing lives everyday.

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