

**THE BLACK ROOTS AND WHITE RACISM OF  
EARLY PENTECOSTALISM IN THE USA**

# The Black Roots and White Racism of Early Pentecostalism in the USA

Iain MacRobert

*Foreword by*  
Walter J. Hollenweger

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**For My Brothers and Sisters of the African  
Diaspora**

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# Preface

This book is an unforeseen consequence of research, which I began in 1981, into the reasons for the non-integration of the black-led and white-led Pentecostal congregations in England. Increasingly my narrow parochial study became something of a historical and geographical odyssey as the realisation grew that many of the profound differences which underly the superficial similarities in the black and white Pentecostal churches are a legacy from the bi-cultural crucible of the New World in which the Pentecostal movement was born and grew and fragmented during the early years of this century.

However, my 'journey' in time and space was not to end in the Americas of the early 1900s, for the black Christian tradition from which the Pentecostal movement sprang still possessed something of that spiritual heritage from West Africa, which had survived the aculturising and dehumanising brutality of the Middle Passage and slavery, and sustained black Christians during that long dark night of bondage and the grey dawn of an emancipation which continued to deny black people equality with whites.

Among the many people who have been of assistance I would especially like to thank my Pentecostal friends – both black and white – for sharing their experiences and understandings with me; the library staff at the Oldbury building of Sandwell College of Further and Higher Education for their invaluable help in obtaining books and papers; Professor Walter Hollenweger of Birmingham University for his encouragement and the loan of books from his personal collection; Rev Roswith Gerloff and Rev Dr Bongani Mazibuko for their assurances that my perceptions were shared by others; Tony Martin for reading the final draft and ensuring that my idiosyncratic style did not depart too much from standard English; and my wife Janet who, in addition to producing the typescript, has been both my severest critic and my most strenuous supporter.

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*Langley*

IAIN MACROBERT

# Foreword: Pentecostalism: Promises and Problems

Why is it that a country like Britain with its long tradition of democracy and human rights and some of the best anti-racism laws in the world, is experiencing racial tensions and race riots? Why is it that, although there is no legal apartheid here, there is a *de facto* exclusion of black people from higher education, from the police, from politics and, alas, also from office in the mainline churches?

The usual explanation given is: Blacks do not present themselves as police recruits, as university students, or as candidates for the ministry.

This is an all too facile explanation. 'Blacks do not want to become, pastors', it is said. Why is it then that the Birmingham area has 120 independent black congregations, complete with their pastors, bishops and many of them with their own church buildings?

At the university the situation is similar. No one can convince me that out of the thousands of young black people in Britain almost no one is intelligent enough to study at a British university. But, looking at our student body, one could get this impression. It is a false impression. The Centre for Black and White Christian Partnership is proof to the contrary. It is said that blacks do not want to study. Why then is it that this Centre (which was started with the help of a South African and a German doctoral student) year after year attracts many black students to spend their weekends working for a Certificate in Theology at the University of Birmingham?

Since I do not believe that the reason for racial tension in Britain is ill-will or blatant racism, one must look for another explanation. Especially important is the church scene, for the behaviour of the churches is in stark contradiction to their message. What could be the reason for this?

I believe that Iain MacRobert's book goes far to explain the root cause for the division between black and white churches in general and black and white Pentecostal churches in particular.

His explanation is also applicable to the tensions between black and white Christians in mainline churches.

MacRobert shows an alternative to the way we deal with the race problem. The alternative is the early Pentecostal church. Not only did black and white meet in early Pentecostalism, but the meeting between black and white was at the root of the worldwide revival called Pentecostalism. MacRobert is especially interested in the black component of this encounter. He shows that the structure of black slave religion, including some of their thought-patterns from their African past, were not only the reason for their survival in a hostile environment but also responsible for the success of early Pentecostalism. Since the early Christian church had many slaves amongst its early converts and since these slaves belonged to an oral culture, it is not astonishing that there are parallels between, for instance, Corinthian Christianity and early Pentecostal Christianity.

However, in the racial climate of the United States at the beginning of our century, such an inter-racial spirituality was considered to be 'unchristian' and 'immoral'. It was not acceptable to the mainline churches that a black evangelist from Louisiana could teach them anything.

Black spirituality in Pentecostalism is evidenced by scores of black hymn-writers and evangelists and above all by William J. Seymour (1870–1922), a son of former slaves from Centerville, Louisiana. Seymour taught himself to read and write and was for a time a student in Charles Fox Parham's Pentecostal Bible School in Topeka, Kansas. Parham (1873–1929), often described as a pioneer of pentecostalism, was also a sympathiser of the Ku Klux Klan and therefore he excluded Seymour from his Bible classes. Seymour was allowed only to listen outside the classroom through the half-open door.

In the face of constant humiliation, Seymour became an apostle of reconciliation. He developed a spirituality that in 1906 led to the revival in Los Angeles which most Pentecostal historians believe to be the cradle of Pentecostalism. 'It may be categorically stated that black pentecostalism emerged out of the context of the brokenness of black existence', writes black pentecostal historian Leonad Lovett.<sup>1</sup>

MacRobert describes in detail the roots of Seymour's spirituality which lay in the African and Afro-American past of his people, in their experience of spirits, in their dehumanisation

and liberation, in their songs, in the way they told the stories of the Bible as their story. Seymour affirmed his black heritage by introducing Negro spirituals and Negro music into his liturgy at a time when this music was considered inferior and unfit for Christian worship, for he had drunk from 'the "invisible institution" of black folk Christianity' with its themes of freedom, equality and community.<sup>2</sup>

In the revival in Los Angeles, white bishops and black workers, men and women, Asians and Mexicans, white professors and black laundry women came together as equals (1906!). 'Proud well-dressed preachers came to "investigate"'. Soon their high looks were replaced with wonder, then conviction comes, and very often you will find them in a short time wallowing on the dirty floor, asking God to forgive them and make them as little children', we read in the first issue of Seymour's newspaper.<sup>3</sup> 'That the one outstanding personality in bringing about the Pentecostal revival in Los Angeles was a Negro in a fact of extreme importance to Pentecostals of all races', writes white Pentecostal historian Vinson Synan.<sup>4</sup>

No wonder that the religious and secular press reported the events in detail. As they could not understand the revolutionary nature of this Pentecostal spirituality, they took refuge in ridicule and scoffed, 'What good can come from a self-appointed Negro prophet?'

The mainline churches also criticised the early Pentecostal movement. They despised the Pentecostals because of their lowly black origins. This social pressure soon prompted the emerging Pentecostal church bureaucracy to tame the Los Angeles revival. Pentecostal churches segregated into black and white organisations just as most of the other churches had done.

The black churches developed an oral liturgy, a narrative theology, and maximum participation at the levels of reflection and decision-making. They used dreams and visions as a form of iconography in their communities and expressed their understanding of the body/mind relationship in praying for the sick.

All this was, and still is, considered to be inferior to white Christianity. Yet it is not inferior. It is different. And it could become vital for white churches to recover some of the oral culture of our common past.

As to the *de facto* segregation into white and black Christianity in Britain, the reason now seems clear. They are two cultures, an

oral, narrative, inclusive black culture and a literary, conceptual, exclusive white culture. The two integrate very badly and only if some of the black and white Christians become 'bilingual'.

As to white pentecostalism in Europe and America, it is now fast developing into an evangelical middle-class religion. Many of the elements that were vital for its rise and expansion in the Third World are disappearing. They are being replaced by efficient fund-raising structures, a streamlined ecclesiastical bureaucracy and a Pentecostal conceptual theology – usually, but not always, an Anglo-Saxon evangelicalism onto which is tacked the doctrine of speaking in tongues as evidence of spirit baptism. One has to agree with MacRobert's statement: 'To see the Pentecostal movement simply in terms of a re-emergence of glossolalic manifestations would be a grave error.'<sup>5</sup> Pentecost is more than speaking in tongues, although one should not despise the value of glossolalia as a form of 'prayer without making grammatical sentences', a kind of socio-acoustic sanctuary for people who do not have and do not need cathedrals, a form of psycho-hygienic worship experience which deals with the fears and frustrations, the joys and hopes buried deep in our unconsciousness, or in the words of Paul, a means 'to become a more mature human being'.<sup>6</sup>

But there is more than this to Pentecost. Pentecost is an intercultural agent throwing a bridge across the troubled waters between two cultures which otherwise may never meet.

With his story MacRobert has not only given us a brilliant piece of historical research, but also focused our attention on aspects of our common heritage which we have ignored but which are vital for our survival.

*University of Birmingham*

WALTER J. HOLLENWEGER

### The Spirit

*In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophecy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophecy.*

St. Peter quoting the Prophet Joel

*No man can genuinely experience the fullness of the Spirit and remain a bona fide racist.*

Leonard Lovett

### The Wall

*Jesus Christ . . . is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.*

St Paul

*Your slaves will go to heaven if you are good, but don't ever think that you will be close to your mistress and master. No! No! there will be a wall between you; but there will be holes in it that will permit you to look out and see your mistress when she passes by. If you want to sit behind this wall, you must do the language of the text 'Obey your masters'.*

Frank Roberson, a paraphrase of the type of sermon which he and other slaves were subjected to

*Pentecost is that event which broke down the walls of the nations, colour, language, sex and social class.*

Walter J. Hollenweger