

## Tongues Untied: Memoirs of a Pentecostal Boyhood

*Michael Warner*

I was a teenage Pentecostalist. Because that is so very far from what I am now—roughly, a queer atheist intellectual—people often think I should have an explanation, a story. Was I sick? Had I been drinking? How did I get here from there? For years I've had a simple answer: "It was another life." If you had spent adolescence passing out tracts in a shopping mall, you might have the same attitude. My memory gives me pictures of someone speaking in tongues and being "slain in the spirit" (a Pentecostalist style of trance: you fall backward while other people catch you). But recognizing myself in these pictures takes effort, as though the memories themselves are in a language I don't understand, or as though I had briefly passed out.

Once, when I said, "It was another life," someone told me, "That's a very American thing to say." And it's true; a certain carelessness about starting over is very much in the national taste. On average, we afford ourselves a great deal of incoherence. Americans care about the freedom not only to

have a self, but to discard one or two. We tend to distrust any job—peasant, messiah, or queen, for example—that requires people grown specially for the purpose. We like some variety on the résumé (though not necessarily a degree from Oral Roberts University, as in my case). We like people who take you aside, very privately, and whisper, “I’m Batman.” In fact there’s an impressive consistency on this point in the national mythology, from Rip Van Winkle to Clark Kent and Samantha on *Bewitched*.

Still, even allowing for the traditional naïveté and bad faith that is my birthright as a citizen of this, the last of history’s empires, I have never been able to understand people with consistent lives—people who, for example, grow up in a liberal Catholic household and *stay* that way; or who in junior high school are already laying down a record on which to run for president one day. Imagine having no discarded personalities, no vestigial selves, no visible ruptures with yourself, no gulf of self-forgetfulness, nothing that requires explanation, no alien version of yourself that requires humor and accommodation. What kind of life is that?

For us who once were found and now are lost—and we are legion—our other lives pose some curious problems. Is there no relation at all between our once and present selves, or only a negative one? Is there some buried continuity, or some powerful vestige? In any case it would be hard to imagine a more complete revolution of personality. From the religious vantage of my childhood and adolescence, I am one of Satan’s agents. From my current vantage, that former self was exotically superstitious. But I distrust both of these views of myself as the other. What if I were to stop saying “It was another life”? What if that life and this one are not so clearly opposed?

Of course, my life in the bosom of Jesus influenced me; but what interests me more is the way religion supplied me with experiences and ideas that I’m still trying to match. Watching Kathryn Kuhlman do faith healing, for example, didn’t just influence my aesthetic sense for performance and eloquence; it was a kind of performance that no one in theater could duplicate. Religion does things that secular culture can only approximate.

Curiously enough, considering that fundamentalism is almost universally regarded as the stronghold and dungeon-keep of American anti-intellectualism, religious culture gave me a passionate intellectual life of which universities are only a pale ivory shadow. My grandfather had been a Southern Baptist preacher in North Carolina mountain towns like Hickory and Flat Rock, but my family migrated through various Protestant sects, including Seventh-Day Adventists, winding up in the independent Pentecostal congregations known as “charismatic.” We lived, in other words, in the heart of splinter-mad American sectarianism. In that world, the subdenomination you belong to is bound for heaven; the one down the road is bound for hell. You need arguments to show why. And in that profoundly

hermeneutic culture, your arguments have to be *readings*: ways of showing how the church down the road misreads a key text. Where I come from, people lose sleep over the meanings of certain Greek and Hebrew words.

The whole doctrine of Pentecostalism rests on the interpretation of one brief and difficult passage in the book of Acts. The apostles have been sitting around with nothing to do: “And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” In the late nineteenth century, certain Americans decided you not only could but should do the same thing. In 1901, for example, Agnes Ozman of Topeka, Kansas, asserted that after being filled with the Holy Ghost she spoke and wrote Chinese for three days. (The Paraclete’s literary tastes seem to have changed; nowadays people who speak in tongues favor a cross between Hebrew and baby talk.)

Pentecostalism interprets this verse as a model to be followed mainly because of another verse that comes a little later, in which Peter tells passers-by to be baptized and “receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.” My mother, my brother, and I, like other Pentecostals, accepted an interpretation in which “the gift” means not the Holy Ghost himself (i.e., “receive the Holy Ghost as a gift”), but the glossolalia given by him/it (i.e., “receive incomprehensible speech from the Holy Ghost as a gift”). We were known as “charismatics” because of this interpretation of the word *gift* (charisma); on the basis of this one interpretation my family was essentially forced out of our Baptist church. But only after a lot of talk about the texts and their interpretation. Throughout my childhood and adolescence, I remember being surrounded by textual arguments in which the stakes were not just life and death, but eternal life and death.

When I was fifteen or so, my family moved to Tidewater, Virginia, in part to be closer to the great revival led by the then obscure Pat Robertson. There, we went to special Bible study sessions for charismatics, held in the basement of a Lutheran church on nights when the room wasn’t needed by Alcoholics Anonymous. (The Lutherans were the only Protestants in town who cared so little about theology that their scorn for us was only social rather than cosmic. For just this reason, of course, we regarded the Lutherans with limitless contempt, while in their basement we studied the grounds of their damnation.) The leader of these Bible study groups was a brilliant and somewhat unsettled man who by day worked as an engineer for International Harvester and by night set up as the Moses Maimonides of the greater Tidewater area. He had flip charts that would have impressed Ross Perot. He also had a radical argument: God could not possibly be omniscient. The Old Testament, he said, clearly showed God acting in stories, stories that, like the concept of free will itself, made no sense unless God

doesn't know the future. If God does know the future, including your own decisions, then narrative time is illusory and only in farce can you be held responsible for your decisions. (Like most modern fundamentalists, he was deeply committed to a contract ideal of justice.)

Every Wednesday night without fail, as this man wound himself through an internal deconstruction of the entire Calvinist tradition, in a fastidiously Protestant return to a more anthropomorphic God, foam dried and flecked on his lips. For our petit-bourgeois family it was unbearable to watch, but we kept coming back. I remember feeling the tension in my mother's body next to me, all her perception concentrated on the desire to hand him the Kleenex that, as usual, she had thoughtfully brought along.

Being a literary critic is nice, I have to say, but for lip-whitening, vein-popping thrills it doesn't compete. Not even in the headier regions of Theory can we approximate that saturation of life by argument. In the car on the way home, we would talk it over. Was he right? If so, what were the consequences? Mother, I recall, distrusted an argument that seemed to demote God to the level of the angels; she thought Christianity without an omniscient God was too Manichaean, just God and Satan going at it. She also complained that if God were not omniscient, prophecy would make no sense. She scored big with this objection, I remember; at the time, we kept ourselves up-to-date on Pat Robertson's calculations about the imminent Rapture. I, however, cottoned on to the heretical engineer's arguments with all the vengeful pleasure of an adolescent. God's own limits were in sight: this was satisfaction in its own right, as was the thought of holding all mankind responsible in some way.

Later, when I read Nietzsche on the resentment at the heart of Christianity—the smell of cruelty and aggression in Christian benevolence—I recognized what that pleasure had been about. In my experience, resentment wasn't just directed against Power. It was directed against everything: the dominant cadres of society, of course, parents, school, authority in general; but also God, the material world, and one's own self. Just as the intellectual culture of religion has an intensity that secular versions lack, so also Protestant culture has an intricate and expressive language of power and abjection that in secular life has to be supplied in relatively impoverished ways. The world has not the least phenomenon that cannot, in Christian culture, be invested both with world-historical power and with total abjection. You are a soldier of the Lord, born among angels, contemplated from the beginning of time and destined to live forever. But you are also the unregenerate shit of the world. Your dinner-table conversation is the medium of grace for yourself and everyone around you; it also discloses continually your fallen worthlessness. Elevation and abasement surround you, in every flicker of your half-conscious thoughts. And the two always go together.

People often say, as though it's a big discovery, that Christians have a finely honed sadomasochistic sensibility. But this doesn't come close to appreciating religion's expressive language for power and abjection. The secular equivalents, such as Foucauldian analysis, have nothing like the same condensation. I realize this every time I read Jonathan Edwards: •

The sun does not willingly shine upon you to give you light to serve sin and Satan; the earth does not willingly yield her increase to satisfy your lusts; nor is it willingly a stage for your wickedness to be acted upon; the air does not willingly serve you for breath to maintain the flame of life in your vitals. . . . And the world would spew you out, were it not for the sovereign hand of Him who hath subjected it in hope. . . . The sovereign pleasure of God, for the present, stays His rough wind; otherwise it would come with fury, and your destruction would come like a whirlwind, and you would be like the chaff of the summer threshing floor.

You almost expect the next paragraph to be a manifesto for ecofundamentalism. Not even the final paragraphs of *The Order of Things* contain a more thorough distrust of everything in the human order. American religion has lost much of that antihumanism, even in the fundamentalist sects that rail against the "religion" of secular humanism, but they retain the imagination of abjection. And the abjection can be exquisite:

The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation, at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood.

In the film version the role of *you* will be played by a trembling and shiftless Keanu Reeves. Stuff like this can displace almost any amount of affect because of the strobe-light alternation of pleasure and obliteration: "It is nothing but His mere pleasure that keeps you from being this moment swallowed up in everlasting destruction." *Nothing but pleasure*, indeed. When I read this my blood heats up. I can hardly keep from reading it aloud. (Maybe that comes from hanging out with Oral Roberts.) The displacement and vicarious satisfaction provided in consumer culture is, by contrast, low-budget monochrome.

About the same time that we were going to hear the holy prophet of International Harvester, my mother made a new church friend, Frankie. Frankie was very butch. She was sweet to me, but visibly seething toward most of the world. Her sidekick Peggy, however, was the devoted servant of everybody, making endless presents of macramé before finally opening her own macramé store in a strip mall. Frankie, Peggy, and my mother

belonged to a circle of women who held Bible studies in one another's living rooms (furnished in Ethan Allen early American, most of them), swapped recipes, came to each other in trouble, and prostrated themselves in the power of the Holy Spirit together.

I remember watching the way they wept together, their implicit deference to Frankie, their constant solicitation of one another's sufferings. Most of them worked. All were unhappy in the family dramas to which they nevertheless held absolute commitments. None of them liked her lot in life. They would pray in tongues while vacuuming the shag carpet. When the bills could be paid, it was because Jesus provided the money. In church, weeping in the intense but unfathomable love of Jesus, they repeated certain gestures: head slowly shaking no, eyes closed above damp cheeks, arms stretched out in invisible crosses, the temporarily forgotten Kleenex clenched in the hand. (Because Pentecostals exalt weeping and catarrh so much, I still associate the smell of tissue with church.)

At the time I remember thinking that this social-devotional style, in which I was often a half-noticed participant, had a special meaning for these women. Not that it was a mere displacement or substitute for an articulate feminism; my mother and her friends felt, I'm sure, that Jesus spoke to them on more levels, and deeper ones, than did the feminism they had encountered. But certainly the redemption of Jesus compensated sufferings that were already framed by women's narrative. Think about the consequences of having fundamental parts of your life—gender, especially—filtered through fundamentalism's expressive language of power and abjection. In their descriptions of the love of Jesus—undeserved, devastating benignity—one heard always the articulation of a thorough resentment of the world and themselves, but also of hitherto unimaginable pleasures, and of an ideal that was also an implicit reproach against their social world. It was not lost on me that we migrated to more extreme versions of Protestant fundamentalism as my mother saw more and more clearly her dissatisfaction with the normal life to which she was nevertheless devoted. Even now, her sons have left home, three husbands have been reluctantly divorced, her friends have parted ways, and she's had to go back to teaching school—but Jesus still pays the bills.

C. S. Lewis once complained that English pictures of Jesus always made him look like an adolescent girl; I think this was and is part of the appeal, for me, for my mother's friends, and for Lewis, whose desire for a butch deity said more about his own queeny tastes than about the Jesus we continue to reinvent. As Harold Bloom has pointed out in his recent book *The American Religion*, many American Protestants, particularly Southern Baptists, have essentially reduced the trinity to Jesus. "He walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am His own," as we always sang. During

this hymn, I would look around to make sure no one noticed that these words were coming, rather too pleasurably, from my mouth.

Jesus was my first boyfriend. He loved me, personally, and he told me I was his own. This was very thrilling, especially when he was portrayed by Jeffrey Hunter. Anglo-American Christian culture has developed a rich and kinky iconography of Jesus, the perma-boy who loves us, the demiurge in a dress. Here, for example, is Emerson's Divinity School Address of 1838: "Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being there. . . . He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, 'I am divine.'" Well, it's fun to exclaim, "I am divine," and Emerson's point is that we all should. But he does some extra fantasy work in this picture of Jesus the happily ravished, Jesus the perpetual jubilee of sublime affect. Jesus, it seems, is coming all the time. This wouldn't make him good for much *except* being a fantasy boyfriend. With spikes in him.

Since the early days of Methodism, of course, it has been commonplace to see enthusiastic religion as sexual excess. In a characteristically modern way, writers such as Lacan and Bataille have regarded all religion as an unrecognized form of sexuality. Bloom, in *The American Religion*, writes that "there is no way to disentangle the sexual drive from Pentecostalism." He calls it "somasochistic sexuality," "a kind of orgiastic individualism," a "pattern of addiction," "an ecstasy scarcely distinguishable from sexual transport."

There's something to this, but I worry about putting it like that. You can reduce religion to sex only if you don't especially believe in either one. When I learned what orgasm felt like, I can't say that the difference between it and speaking in tongues was "scarcely distinguishable." It seemed like a clear call to me. And the two kinds of ecstasy quickly became, for me at least, an excruciating alternative. God, I felt sure, didn't want me to come. And he always wanted to watch.

The agony involved in choosing between orgasm and religion, as I was forced to do on a nightly basis, is the sort of thing ignored by any account that treats religion as sublimated, displaced, or misrecognized sexuality. At the beginning of *Two Serious Ladies*, the great Jane Bowles novel, one little girl asks another to play a new game. "It's called 'I forgive you for all your sins,'" she says. "Is it fun?" asks the other. "It's not for fun that we play it, but because it's necessary to play it." This, undoubtedly, is just why religion is so queer; it's not for fun that we play it.

What I think critics like Bloom are trying to say, against their own an-erotic reductivism, is that religion makes available a language of ecstasy, a horizon of significance within which transgressions against the normal order of the world and the boundaries of self *can be seen as good things*.

Pentecostals don't get slain in the spirit just by rubbing themselves, or by redirecting some libido; they require a whole set of beliefs about the limitations of everyday calculations of self-interest, about the impoverishment of the world that does not willingly yield its increase to satisfy your lusts. In this way ecstatic religions can legitimate self-transgression, providing a meaningful framework for the sublime play of self-realization and self-dissolution. And once again, the secular versions often look like weak imitations. Only the most radical theories of sexual liberation (Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, for example) attribute as much moral importance to self-dissolution as fundamentalist religion does. (And nobody believes them anymore.) Simple affirmations of desire, by contrast, don't supply a horizon of significance at all. The bliss of Pentecostalism is, among other things, a radical downward revaluing of the world that despises Pentecostals. Like all religions, Pentecostalism has a world-canceling moment; but its world-canceling gestures can also be a kind of social affirmation, in this case of a frequently despised minority. I suspect that the world-canceling rhetorics of queer sexuality work in a similar way. If you lick my nipple, the world suddenly seems comparatively insignificant. Ressentiment doubles your pleasure.

Both my moral, Christian self and my queer, atheist one have had to be performed as minority identities. What queers often forget, jeopardized as we are by resurgent fundamentalisms in the United States, is that fundamentalists themselves are not persuaded by "moral majority" or "mainstream values" rhetoric; they too consider themselves an oppressed minority. In their view the dominant culture is one of a worldliness they have rejected, and bucking that trend comes, in some very real ways, with social stigmatization. For instance, as far as I can make out, Jehovah's Witnesses believe in almost nothing *but* their own minority status and the inevitable destruction of the mainstream.

The radical Protestant and quasi-Protestant (i.e., Mormon) sects in this country have helped, willingly or not, to elaborate minoritarian culture. Left political thought has been remarkably blind to this fact. Most of us believe, I think, that we are in favor of all oppressed minorities, and that you can tell an oppressed minority because the people concerned say that's what they are. Who gets to say, and by what standards, that Pentecostals, or Mormons, are not the oppressed minority they claim to be? This is not a rhetorical question.

One way that fundamentalists have contributed to the culture of minority identities is by developing the performative genres of identity-talk. Sentences like "I'm Batman" or "We're here, we're queer, get used to it" take for granted a context in which people are accorded the power of declaring what they are. In the world of Southern Baptists and charismatics,

people practice a genre known as witnessing, in some ways the ur-form of all modern autobiographical declarations. Witnessing might mean telling a conversion narrative or a miracle narrative in church, but it also might mean declaring yourself in suburban shopping malls. It is the fundamentalist version of coming out, and explained to the budding Pentecostalist in much the same language of necessity, shame and pride, stigma and cultural change.

In writing all of this, of course, I am stuck between witnessing and coming out. One of the most interesting things about the gap between religious and secular culture is that no matter which side you stand on, conversion or deconversion, the direction seems inevitable. Religious people always suppose that people start out secular and have to get religion. People like me don't secularize: we *backslide*. Of course, I have slid back to places I never was or thought of being, and it may be to halt this endless ebb that my mother has recently begun trying out a new paradigm: she's willing to consider me as having a lifestyle. I might prefer backsliding, but the concept of an alternative path marks progress in our relations. Meanwhile, those of us who have gotten over religion find ourselves heir to a potent Enlightenment mythology that regards religion as a primitive remnant, a traditional superstition. This has been the opinion not only of thinkers with very little religious imagination, like Marx and Freud, but even those who have given us our most profound analyses: Nietzsche, Weber, Durkheim, Bataille. (William James is a rare exception.) It's almost impossible to broach the subject of religion without taking the movement of this narrative for granted. To be secular is to be modern. To be more secular is to be more modern. But religion clearly isn't withering away with the spread of modern rationalism and home entertainment centers. In a recent Gallup study 94 percent of Americans said they believe in God. Better still: 88 percent believe that God loves them personally. Yet this is the country that has always boasted of *not* having a feudal past, of being the world's most modern nation. It's enough to make you ask: Are we sick? How did we get here from there?

I'm as secular and modern as the next person, but I doubt that these statistics indicate a residue of pre-Enlightenment superstition. And I don't think that my own personal incoherence is entirely of the linear and progressive type. Even to raise the subject of personal incoherence, identity, and rupture is to see that, in a way, the secular imagination and the religious one have already settled out of court. For both the notion of having a rupture with your self *and* the notion of narrated personal coherence are Protestant conventions, heightened in all the American variants of Protestantism. No other culture goes as far as ours in making everything an issue of identity. We've invented an impressive array of religions: Mormon, Southern

Baptist, Jehovah's Witness, Pentecostalist, Nation of Islam, Christian Science, Seventh-Day Adventist—every last one of them a conversion religion. They offer you a new and perpetual personality, and they tell you your current one was a mistake you made. They tell you to be somebody else. I say: believe them.