

Margaret M. Poloma and Ralph W. Wood, Jr., *Blood and Fire: Godly Love in a Pentecostal Emerging Church* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

Margaret Poloma and Ralph Hood Jr., have designed and implemented an important sociological study investigating the role of Godly love and its social implications for Blood and Fire, an emergent Pentecostal church in Atlanta, Georgia. The objective of the study is to qualify and quantify the benevolent outcomes of Godly love, which they define as “the dynamic interaction between human responses to the operation of perceived divine love and the impact this experience has on personal lives, relationships with others, and emergent communities” (4). The theoretical framework for their sociological understanding of Godly love is the family resemblance of the work of Pitirim Sorokin and Randall Collins. Sorokin defines love according to dimensions of 1) intensity (high or low depending on the level of energy invested), 2) extensity (ranging from love of self to love of all humanity and living creatures), 3) duration (ranging from shorter to longer periods), 4) purity (considerations deriving from altruistic or egoistic concerns), and 5) adequacy (adverse consequences even if subjectively genuine). Correspondingly, Collins defines love as emotional energy produced and stored by ritual interaction between individuals, in that ritual interaction of both sacred and mundane life links together emotional energy that can be stored and recharged over time. In terms of methodology they shift from the “methodological atheism” that has dominated

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the social sciences, to a “methodological agnosticism” that allows for the possibility that religious experience of the divine is experience of a reality that cannot be examined by or precluded from social scientific investigations. In other words, Poloma and Hood argue that the scientific community must take seriously the claims of Godly love, personally experienced by Pentecostals in charismatic worship as a motivating factor in producing Pentecostals as social agents to express Godly love in love for others through service, social justice and social transformation.

Blood and Fire is an emergent Pentecostal church (broadly defined) led by David VanCronkhite, with a heritage in the “signs and wonders” ethos of John Wimber’s Association of Vineyard Churches before its separation in the late 1990s. Blood and Fire also looks to the emergent church paradigm, which focuses on the community as the locale of spirituality rather than a privatized faith. The postmodern blurring of supernatural and natural dichotomies is evident in the emphasis on testimonies of miraculous “signs and wonders,” as the church expresses its love for others by intentionally helping the poor, homeless and addicts of its community. Blood and Fire’s expression of love involves more than mere charity but includes the development of a shelter and addiction rehabilitation home for the poor and homeless. In their qualitative ethnography, Poloma and Hood witnessed the linking together of “perceived divine-human and human-human” interaction ritual that produced emotional energy, supporting their analysis of Godly love, but were frustrated by the lack of quantitative evidence. Claims of miraculous healing and

addiction recovery could not be quantitatively substantiated due to structural inconsistencies (57, 154). The rehabilitation center failed as the church's primary goal and mission, which was to provide family relations for the homeless in order to bring spiritual and personal transformation. The image of family as the basis of spiritual maturity was important rhetoric for VanCronkhite and was the basis for leadership structures in the church. Moreover, the authors witnessed the perpetuation of race and class distinctions between the church participants who were predominantly white middle class and the addiction rehabilitation residents who were predominantly older African-American males of the lower or under class.

While conducting their investigation, Blood and Fire suffered an unexpected church split, ultimately dismantling its vision to help the poor and afflicted. Poloma and Hood were able to witness the internal tensions of a charismatic community and attempt to account for the different points of view. At the core the conflict centered on VanConkhite's charismatic but sometimes erratic leadership and the financial concerns of the church board. Perhaps due to the original parameters of the study, Poloma and Hood missed an opportunity to probe deeply the tendency in Pentecostal and Charismatic communities to fragment and splinter. Tension is common in charismatic fellowships and seems to reside around a form of charismatic leadership in the southern US that is not easily explained by current sociological discussions. The rhetoric of charismatic leaders that deflect hard questions in such

axioms as “touch not God’s anointed” creates a type of hierarchy different from the rationalized hierarchies or the charismatic leaders described by Max Weber. Is it possible to speak of charismatic hierarchies? My experience in moving from the multicultural context of Canada to Florida is to witness charismatic hierarchies that are structured around a flamboyant leader, but without the egalitarian structures implicit in charisma or the rationalization that usually accompanies the development of hierarchies. Perhaps the charismatic leadership of VanConkhite speaks to an alternate power structure that needs further study.

Charismatic leadership structures notwithstanding, Poloma and Hood have offered the social scientific community a fascinating snapshot into the diverse landscape of charismatic spirituality and its effects on the social world, to suggest possible reasons for the continuation and viability of religious expression despite the voices of secularization. Their study is also important to the study of religion in all its sub-disciplines, but especially for the study of Pentecostalism. *Blood and Fire* is a book for specialists and well worth the read.

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