



Smith, James K. A.

Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy

Pentecostal Manifestos

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Nick Norelli

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

James K. A. Smith's *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy* is the first volume in the Pentecostal Manifestos series edited by Smith and Amos Yong. Smith wants the world to know that pentecostals (note the small p by which Smith means anyone who is "radically open to the continued operation of the Spirit" [xvii]) have something to offer the philosophical enterprise by way of fresh insights and subversive critiques of some of the regnant paradigms within philosophy (and to a large degree theology). In the vein of Alvin Plantinga's "Advice to Christian Philosophers," Smith wants to encourage pentecostals by saying that they have something to offer *in their own right*, i.e., they don't need to remodel existing structures with a pentecostal flare in order to say something worthwhile.

Inherent within pentecostal spirituality, according to Smith, are certain philosophical assumptions that he takes aim at in order to articulate a pentecostal worldview, or "social imaginary," as he's fond of saying. These latent assumptions (see 12) can be summarized as:

1. A position of radical openness to God.
2. An "enchanted" theology of creation and culture.
3. A nondualistic affirmation of embodiment and materiality.
4. An affective, narrative epistemology.
5. An eschatological orientation to mission and justice.

These items are taken up in the chapters that follow. Smith draws from personal experience as a pentecostal to offer vignettes that will appear familiar to most pentecostals throughout the world in order to give a narrative base to his explication, which coincides with his understanding of the affective, narrative epistemology (item 4 above) of the pentecostal worldview, i.e., pentecostals “know” in *stories* as opposed to bare propositions. Smith highlights this point beautifully in his third chapter where he employs a vivid example of the common pentecostal practice of testimony.

Pentecostal spirituality offers challenges to existing paradigms in that it challenges a view of the world that is governed by naturalism and rationalism (items 1 & 2 above). Pentecostals expect the unexpected so that when God does something different or new it isn't explained away as impossible on the basis of violating alleged “laws of nature,” it's a worldview that questions the very bifurcation of the “natural” and “supernatural” order to begin with since pentecostals experience God as present and active *within* his creation through his Spirit. The pentecostal worldview also challenges any kind of dualism (item 3 above) that would see a radical bifurcation of physical and spiritual where the physical is bad or evil and the spiritual is good (à la Gnosticism). This is nowhere more evident than in the pentecostal emphasis on bodily healing.

The pentecostal worldview also has something to offer by way of critiquing prevalent ideas in philosophy or religion and the philosophy of language. Smith notes how the lingering rationalism, i.e., the “assumption that doctrine is prior to worship and thus ideas and propositions trump practices” (111) is resisted by the very way that pentecostals experience God in the world through their practices and rituals. He says, “pentecostal experience — and the ways of life associated with pentecostal communities — resists rationalist reduction and exhibits a way of being-in-the-world that manifests the fundamentally affective nature of the human person.” (112-13) The Cartesian notion of human beings as mere “thinking things” is undermined by a “lived experience.”

Pentecostal spirituality is most often thought of with reference to speaking in tongues. Smith wants to focus on *glossolalia* (ecstatic speech) as opposed to *xenolalia* (existing language unknown to the speaker) *because* it resists the categories of analysis currently on hand in the philosophy of language. This is seen as “philosophically productive” by providing a “limit case for available modes of philosophical analysis.” (125) He goes on to highlight what tongues have to offer the philosophy of language with three brief excursions into phenomenology, hermeneutics, and speech-act theory.

Thinking in Tongues is an imaginative and thoughtful work that I learned a great deal from. Reading it as a Pentecostal (note the capital P) I often thought that Smith's descriptions were foreign to how I *thought* about the world and my spirituality, but this is something that Smith

notes at various points in the book, that is, he's seeking to make explicit an understanding of the world that is inherent in pentecostal spirituality even if this is not necessarily expressed in pentecostal speech and thought. There's some jargon in the book that the uninitiated might struggle with, but nothing so difficult that a dictionary or slow reading of the text in context can't fix (footnotes abound and more times than not they are highly informative). I'll say that for me personally, Smith can be a bit too descriptive at times, and if I might use a well-worn cliché, the reader might lose the forest for Smith's description of the trees at points. I also got the impression that he has a penchant for waxing eloquent just because he can. In other words, it seems clear that Smith has a great command of the English language, and at times he wants us all to know it. Nothing wrong with that I suppose, but personally, I got bored with it at certain points. The name and subject indexes are helpful, no Scripture index was necessary since Scripture is rarely cited, but a bibliography would have been a welcome addition, especially for those readers who are not well versed in philosophical literature. At the end of the day I can recommend this book without reservation. I think Smith's call for pentecostals to contribute to philosophy *as pentecostals* is timely and I'm eager to see what comes from those who heed his call.