

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 29 | Issue 2

Article 14

4-1-2012

James K. A. Smith, THINKING IN TONGUES: PENTECOSTAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY

William J. Abraham

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Abraham, William J. (2012) "James K. A. Smith, THINKING IN TONGUES: PENTECOSTAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 29 : Iss. 2 , Article 14.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil201229226

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol29/iss2/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

or not it exploits “symbols.” As other philosophers have remarked, non-human animals have an *environment*, whereas human beings have a *world*. Our ability to think about the *cosmos*—as Ratzsch terms it—and *our place within it* is what sets us apart so radically from non-human animals. And, of course, it is this ability that is presupposed by anything deserving the name of *religious belief*. When human consciousness was first struck, with wonder and awe, by “the starry heavens above and the moral law within,” that was when truly human thought became possible. There is no mystery as to why this brought with it a capacity and indeed a propensity for religious belief, just a mystery as to how it could ever have happened at all.

Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy, by James K. A. Smith. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010. Pp. 155. \$19 (paperback).

WILLIAM J. ABRAHAM, University of Notre Dame

One of the remarkable features of the twentieth century has been the emergence of the Pentecostal Movement in its multiple variations. Birthed in part in a radical wing of the Holiness Movement in North America at the turn of the century (the etiology is much contested), it grew exponentially. By the end of the century, it was a movement encompassing perhaps half a billion adherents or a fourth of Christians in the world, second only to Roman Catholicism in number of followers. Pentecostalism has become a profoundly influential global tradition, especially in the southern hemisphere, where it often sets the tone for the religious arena. In light of this development, it is only a matter of time before it begins to show up on the philosophical radar screen. Within half a billion there is bound to be a steady trickle of folk who end up as philosophers; we can be sure that they are not all stupid. On the contrary, they are likely to add a whole new perspective to the work of philosophy over time. Moreover, Pentecostals are already showing up in philosophy classes as students; those who want to teach them successfully should take time to get to know their intellectual background in all its diversity and complexity.

One of the first philosophical treatments of Pentecostalism is provided by this fine volume by James K. A. Smith. To be sure, a book like this is likely to set many teeth on edge. Our knowledge of Pentecostalism is both underdeveloped and underdetermined; however, it is important to get beyond the standard stereotypes and caricatures. Smith is a quietly enthusiastic but very knowledgeable insider who knows his way around both Pentecostalism and philosophy. While he naturally finds his home in the Continental tradition, he is well able to speak to those formed in the analytic tradition. While much of this material has been published before, it is very useful to have it all in one volume.

The Introduction provides a witty overview of the obstacles any philosopher who writes about Pentecostalism is likely to meet in the academy. The opening essay takes off from Alvin Plantinga's famous essay on advice to Christian philosophers, but the advice here is directed to Pentecostal philosophers. The remaining essays deal in turn with elements in a Pentecostal worldview, a Pentecostal epistemology, the relation between science and a Pentecostal ontology, a Pentecostal critique of philosophy of religion, and Pentecostal contributions to philosophy of language. The book as a whole constitutes a fine opening move in the conversation between Pentecostalism and philosophy. It is a delight to read, written with verve and clarity. It is especially to be recommended to beginning students, but should by no means be restricted to them; philosophers will find much that is stimulating. The latter should take seriously Smith's claim that the arrival of Pentecostalism calls for a revolution in the methodology of philosophy of religion. We are confronted with phenomena whose apt investigation requires radical changes in conventional procedures. I predict that these will fall on deaf ears initially, but in the long run Smith is likely to be proven at least half-right.

Given the way analytic philosophy of religion is drifting into analytic theology, it is no surprise that Smith's work comes down heavily on the side of taking the particularities of Pentecostal theology and practice seriously. He chides Alvin Plantinga (inaccurately) for proposing to work out of generic theism. That said, his own generic version of global Pentecostalism includes the following desiderata: a radical openness to God, an enchanted theology of creation and culture, a non-dualistic affirmation of embodiment and materiality, an affective narrative epistemology, and an eschatological orientation to mission and justice. One cannot but wonder how far Smith is already importing into his agenda his own privileging of various options (like the preferential option for the poor). The line between description and prescription can run very thin at this point. In his own way Smith is making his own bets on how best the tradition should develop in the future. The initial naming of the significance of Pentecostalism for philosophy can have very important perlocutionary effects; Pentecostalism is constructed in a very particular way because of the philosophical perspective in play.

The same issue shows up in his interests in a Pentecostal "worldview" rather than, say, a Pentecostal theology. At this point one can see the impact of Dutch Calvinism in his setting or on his formation. The great advantage of this way of proceeding is that it brings Pentecostalism into a standard conversation with the academy in a serious way. It also makes clear that Pentecostals will have their own agenda to bring to the table; they will not and should not be philosophically house-trained on the way through the door. Casting the issue as primarily one of worldview rather than theology runs the risk of misreading the soteriological focus of the tradition, even though Smith is wonderfully sensitive to the issues of spirituality and religious practice.

Smith deftly explores the place of narrative in epistemology; surprisingly, one would have expected more on the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. The work of the Spirit in coming to knowledge of God is given serious attention, but placed firmly in the context of a logic of narrative and embodiment. A similar move shows up in the chapter on the relation between Pentecostalism and science. Smith explores the possibility of an enchanted naturalism or an en-Spirited naturalism rather than of any kind of interventionist supernaturalism. At this point he is fully aware that this will be a hard sell among Pentecostals. He is equally critical of those who have turned, say, to quantum physics and chaos theory to develop a vision of divine action that works within the world without violating the laws of nature. The crux, in the end, will be where he goes on the challenge of special divine action; there is not enough here to offer an evaluation one way or the other.

In his call for a change of orientation in philosophy of religion, Smith shares my own criticisms about the hegemony of "methodism" in the epistemology of religion and the failure to take with sufficient seriousness the thickness of living religious commitment. Paul Moser has called for a similar reorientation. In criticism of my own position, he worries about a lingering intellectualism that puts too much emphasis on divine revelation and its epistemic implications. In truth, both of us have no interest in reducing divine revelation to the cognitive; nor do I claim that ordinary believers will be interested in signing on to canonical theism. The latter is a term of art to capture one way of articulating the thickness of religious commitment and exploring how to think aptly from an epistemic point of view about this kind of claim. The redirection for theology is another question altogether. What is at issue in the long run is whether Pentecostalism will depend on and enrich the kind of claims about divine revelation I advance or whether it seriously calls them into question. I am betting the store on the first of these two options.

In the final chapter, Smith finally comes clean on his own identity: he is really an English-speaking Charismatic. Even so, he provides a fascinating phenomenological account of speaking in tongues. He also deploys this analysis to call into question Husserl's exclusion of gesture from the realm of expression. We have a paradigm case of how Pentecostalism challenges conventional wisdom rather than simply assimilating it. This lacuna leads him to supplement Husserl's work with the work of J. L. Austin on speech acts. At this point, as in the case of special divine action, we need more by way of example. My own reading of the phenomena would insist on a much more robust account of divine speaking (in some well-attested cases of glossolalia) and the correlative application of the analysis of Austin. The proposal as it stands is much too formal; we need material cases, where, for instance, a person utters specific messages in a language unknown to the speaker. In turn, this will require a revisiting of Smith's claims about enchanted naturalism. We also need much more work on the perlocutionary effects of glossolalia in resisting political oppression and social

injustice—an issue that Smith takes up towards the end. The historical evidence on this score is a mixed bag if one compares, say, South America with North America.

This is a splendid volume that begins a conversation that is likely to become a very important factor in future philosophy of religion. In time we can expect that Pentecostal philosophers will show up within both the Continental and Analytic wings of contemporary philosophy. If truth be told, some are already there, working assiduously as solid guild professionals. We can expect the discussion to be contentious now and then. It will take time for research themes to develop; there is likely to be concerted denial and evasion in conventional philosophical circles. At the very least, we can expect that old themes will be reworked and new themes that may radically change the landscape will be introduced. Eventually, the issues that are evoked and explored as a result of the impact of Pentecostalism will become commonplace.