

## Book Review

*Pentecostal Aesthetics: Theological Reflections in a  
Pentecostal Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics*

**Steven Felix-Jäger**

(Boston, MA: Brill, 2015) 224 pages

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I have to be honest. I'm skeptical when I see a book or article on Pentecostal Hermeneutics or Pentecostal Church Administration. Rarely have such works convinced me that there was anything distinctive, much less unique, about how Pentecostals interpreted the Bible or run churches. "Pentecostal Aesthetics" struck me as oxymoronic. I grew up in Pentecostalism and we did not do aesthetics. I can even remember when I felt embarrassed that I was the only one in my fifth grade class to admit that my church did not use candles as part of its worship.

So, it was with a mixture of doubt and hope that I worked through Steven Felix-Jäger's recent book. He begins by recalling an event at a local church where a new painting was unveiled with much pomp and finger food. He came away disturbed: did that event reflect a healthy (Christian) perspective on art, and what criteria might be used to make such a judgment? Can we curse kitsch?

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 is entitled "Logoi: The History and Definition of Art and Aesthetics." The author "traces the history of art, and grounds the Pentecostal philosophy and aesthetics ontologically" (p. 6) Part 2 is entitled "Doxa: The Nature of Art" and "seeks to understand the nature of art within a Pentecostal philosophy of art and aesthetics," theoretically discussing issues such as beauty, imagination, and inspiration (p. 7). Part 3, "Praxis: The Purpose of Art," "uses the work of the first two parts as groundwork in order to answer the questions, what is the purpose of art,

and how should the church respond to this" (p. 7)?

This is quite an undertaking. Questions such as "What is beauty?" and "What is the purpose of art?" have been grist for the philosophical mill over the years, and are probably no closer to being answered with any consensus than when they first arose. Consequently, no one should pick up this book and expect definitive answers. One of the great values of the work, though, is that it lays out the issues and surveys how important thinkers over the years have attempted to answer these perennial questions. Felix-Jäger acknowledges at the outset (p. 8) that his study is (only) of Western visual arts. One must start somewhere, of course, but since Pentecostalism is increasingly a phenomenon of the global South, further work will have to extensively broaden the discussion.

Felix-Jäger states that his second chapter, entitled "An Ontological Foundation," is "the heart of the book and directly deals with my thesis statement that a global Pentecostal philosophy of art and aesthetics must be ontologically grounded" (p. 7). Two questions will be attended to, he says, in this chapter:

1. What sort of aesthetic system would welcome Pentecostalism?
2. What should Pentecostals adopt as an aesthetic system?

Of course, an ontology of Pentecostal aesthetics will first have to address an ontology of "Pentecostalism." what exactly *is* a Pentecostal? Drawing from a number of Pentecostal scholars,

Feliz-Jager, who recognizes that a better term is probably “pentecostalisms,” proposes three core motifs found in Pentecostalism “at present” as the basis for a working definition. The first is “Globalism.” Drawing on the work of Michael Wilkinson, the author proposes that Pentecostalism (uniquely?) reflects a truly globalized phenomenon, in which all particular forms both influence and are influenced by all other particular forms. The second is “Experiential Spirituality,” with experience (from William James) being defined as “a mystical, and unexplainable (or hard to explain) encounter when one feels a loss of control and attributes the power to God or something divine” (p. 53). The third is “Pneumatology,” a distinctive understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer and the church.

Feliz-Jarez sees the opportunity afforded by the postmodern predilection to allow any group its distinctive tribal perspectives; Pentecostals must be allowed their own aesthetics. But even if we grant, for the sake of argument, these defining Pentecostal motifs, the more challenging work lies ahead of us. Do Pentecostals have a distinctive view of beauty? Could one discern that a painting was the work of a Pentecostal? This is where matters become more difficult. The author proposes that some art has inherent value and revels playfully in the creative and expressive nature humans share with the Creator. Other art is functional and, in a Christian context, can be called art “of redemption,” testifying to the kingdom of God in some way. Pentecostal art is often “eschatological” in nature, reflecting a foretaste of the coming kingdom and bringing hope to the hopeless.

Given the diversity among Pentecostals and the legendary difficulty of defining “art” and “beauty,” this work could only get the aesthetic discussion rolling. But when, as Feliz-Jarez admits, “any work by a Pentecostal is Pentecostal art” (p. 145), one must wonder just how far we can get. He also acknowledges that any aesthetic must be “relativistic,” meaning that Korean Pentecostal artmaking will be quite different from that of American Pentecostals (p. 74). I suspect, as well, that it is the *Korean*, not the *Pentecostal* factor that will be more telling in the art. Other issues are more problematic. If the artist is a “faithful pentecostal,” the art will be eschatological (p. 196). This strikes me as mightily ironic. Compared to a century ago, Pentecostals today are much less “eschatological;” the expectation of the eschaton so pervasive then is rarely found today. Yet, with the loss of eschatological fervor, Pentecostals have developed a concern for the aesthetic. Frank Bartleman, of Azusa Street fame, might have said something of this nature: “Given the shortness of the hour, we do not have time for museums.”

I have minor gripes about form. There were numerous typographical and grammatical errors (“lead” often instead of “led”). And I literally screamed when I found *twelve* instances of he/she, his or him/her on only *two* pages (175-176). Surely there is a better way to be inclusive.

I commend the book to you. It is an engaging and informative introduction to an important field.