

## Book Review

*Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy*

James K. A. Smith

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James Smith locates the Pentecostal ethos in Pentecostal practice, not in a propositional theology (p. xvii). The central philosophical thesis of the book is rooted in a critique of a certain kind of knowledge whose foundation can be found in the disembodied Cartesian ego and whose reliance on propositional logic dispassionately rejects any appeal to a Pentecostal worldview.

Smith rejects the exclusivity of access to the truth that this implies, in order to build an epistemology that has its roots in Pentecostal story and practice. His critique is concise and abounds with examples. His treatment of the “opponents” is careful and considerate with the result that the reader never feels like they have lost the thread of the discussion. Instead, one finishes the book with a good grasp of the territory of the discussion and a sense that continuing the conversation will have a substantial payoff. In sum, Smith rejects a theory of knowledge that has held sway in the West since the Scholastics that forbade entry into dialogue to those whose experience could not be reduced to coherent propositions. In reply, Smith builds a new theory of knowledge that takes a Pentecostal worldview into account.

Smith lists five features of this worldview that should be immediately recognizable to anyone who has experienced worship in a Pentecostal service. This worldview takes *radical openness to God* as its primary

feature. It has 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* (p. 12). One might see how these features would not fit a scientific rationality, yet describe the reality of some features of being not only a Pentecostal, but a radically orthodox<sup>1</sup> Christian.

Story, the narrative of Pentecostal experience, is the dominant form of expression within the epistemology Smith creates. It serves as the hermeneutic that informs and explains the social imaginary of Pentecostal life.<sup>2</sup> Smith often begins his chapters with story; he offers these narratives as substantial data in a critique of exclusively scientific worldviews. Instead of starting with knowledge, Pentecostal understanding starts with pre-cognitive being in the world with God. Smith defends this form of life by appealing to the gift of speaking in tongues as the most extreme case hermeneutics must deal with.<sup>3</sup> At the edge of understanding, speaking in tongues qualifies as legitimate speech, and Smith uses biblical and philosophical sources to place that practice within the human domain. It becomes evidence for the inclusion of a Pentecostal worldview in a theory of knowledge instead of the reason to reject that worldview out of hand though it does not comply with a scientific criteria of truth.

*Thinking in Tongues* is a thoughtful, sensitive, philosophically adept effort to include the Pentecostal worldview not only in the theological conversation long dominated by a preference for propositional thinking, but in the broader context of human studies. This book accesses trenchant philosophical critiques of many facets of modern culture and includes Pentecostal narrative engagement with God and the world as a precursor to a postmodern critique of modernity as well.

In Smith's narrative of his own engagement with philosophy as a Christian, he takes as gospel a suggestion made by Alvin Plantinga in his essay "Advice to Christian Philosophers" (p. 1, fn 1). Plantinga argues for the broadening of possible research by philosophers to include issues of Christianity and the Church. Smith takes this to mean that Christian philosophers are obligated to take up problems within the Christian community as their subject (pp. 8-9). Later in the book, when describing how Pentecostals should approach moviemaking, he argues that Pentecostal moviemakers should not be bound to make "movies about the Holy Spirit or Jesus or even explicitly" about religion (p. 83). So, either Smith is

making some kind of distinction between the calling to Christian philosophy and a subversive aesthetic project, or he thinks it is perfectly acceptable for the Christian philosopher to take on philosophical projects without the overt appearance or confession of a Christian worldview (p. 83). On this I cannot be sure. This is a minor point, since for Smith, Plantinga's encouragement is part of the narrative of his own calling. I think Smith is trying to set up the conditions for the storyteller to use any means possible to promote the truth, which includes the Pentecostal worldview—leaving people vulnerable to the move of the Spirit. That storyteller could be a philosopher, moviemaker, or any other kind of creator.

*Thinking in Tongues* is not an elementary read. Though there is insight for the average churchgoer, the philosophical material will need an adept interpreter. An undergraduate or graduate seminary would be an appropriate place to begin a discussion about the issues in this book, though a course in modern philosophical debates should be a prerequisite. To appreciate the wealth of this volume would require a great deal of background even though there is a reward for anyone willing to engage the material.

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<sup>1</sup>James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

<sup>2</sup>Smith refers to the treatment of the social imaginary found in Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). Also, Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). Smith defines the social imaginary as "a tacit, affective understanding of the world that constitutes the 'background' of our being and doing" (p. 29).

<sup>3</sup>This is an explicit reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein. The concept "form of life" takes into account the possibility of multiple, diverse, and even incommensurable ways of engaging the world. Smith uses it here to note that no one epistemology exclusively captures the entire spectrum of beliefs and truths about the world.