



# Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy

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The past several decades have seen a renaissance in Christian philosophy, led by the work of Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, William Alston, Eleonore Stump, and others. In the spirit of Plantinga's famous manifesto, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," James K. A. Smith here offers not only advice to Pentecostal philosophers but also some Pentecostal advice to Christian philosophers.

In this inaugural Pentecostal Manifestos volume Smith begins from the conviction that implicit in Pentecostal and charismatic spirituality is a tacit worldview or "social imaginary." Thinking in Tongues unpacks and articulates the key elements of this Pentecostal worldview and then explores their implications for philosophical reflection on ontology, epistemology, aesthetics, language, science, and philosophy of religion. In each case, Smith demonstrates how the implicit wisdom of Pentecostal spirituality makes unique contributions to current conversations in Christian philosophy.

## **Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy Details**

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## Brant says

Smith gives words to my charismatic cries. Well articulated and unapologetic! Fantastic work.

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## David Holford says

I had read *Desiring the Kingdom* and I had intended to get to this book eventually, after reading more of Smith's other work. I'm glad I didn't wait. After defending the idea a pentecostal philosophy with Christian philosophy, Smith sets out a framework for a pentecostal worldview ("pentecostal" having a lower case "p" to include various strands of charismatics).

Having established this very plausible framework, he then explores key ideas that are (consciously or not) or should be found in pentecostal ontology and epistemology. He also explored where penecostalism fits within the philosophy of religion, and the inadequacies of received PoR models to integrate it, primarily because they concentrate entirely on beliefs and not believers. Likewise, there is some groundbreaking exploration of philosophy of language with regards to glossolalia.

Part of the role of this book is to put pentecostalism on the philosophical map to be studied and taken seriously. However, if pentecostal pastors who have to intellectual wherewithal to grasp it will take it on board, it could also have a substantial impact on pentecostal theology.

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## Ian Caveny says

What constitutes the fundamental departure between the Pentecostal and the world around him? Is it simply an openness to the supernatural? or is it a more radical gulf, involving a wholesale rejection of Cartesian dualisms and the malaise of modernity? Or, to put the question in a slightly different way, paraphrasing James K.A. Smith's opening chapter in *Thinking in Tongues*, What hath Charles Taylor to do with Azusa Street? It turns out, far more than any of us had ever expected.

Following the themes traced out in his groundbreaking *Desiring the Kingdom*, James K.A. Smith uses the insights of postmodern philosophy to investigate the lived theological and philosophical claims inherent in pentecostal (lower-case "p") worship and practice. The result is more than just a sum of enlightening observations, ranging from the proximity of pentecostal worship and sacramental liturgy to the political implications of pentecostalism's embodied worship; it is an intellectual labor of love. More than in his other projects, I felt I could hear the pentecostal, tongue-speaking heart of the author reverberating with a deep conviction, with the joy of manifesting to even a doubting Christian theological and philosophical the glories of pentecostal practice.

It is ... a revelation.

All pentecostals knows that they stick out like a sore thumb in the context of other believers. This is

something that any one of us could tell by a multitude of stories. But putting a finger on precisely what makes the difference is a little more difficult than simply "we speak in tongues, they don't." In fact, there is sometimes (and this can be dangerous if given a head) an underlying sense of a seismic difference, a significant gap between our experiences of Christianity. Some pentecostals disavow non-pentecostal manifestations of faith altogether because they cannot seem to reconcile their supernatural experiences with other believers' relatively tame ones.

What James K.A. Smith does in this book, and what he manages so successfully to portray, are the inner-logics of pentecostal belief that are carried alongside pentecostal practice, even if those things are not explicit in pentecostal dogma. This leads to some fruitful, some intriguing, and some surprising conclusions. For instance, the embodied nature of pentecostal worship in-itself communicates something of an anti-Gnostic, anti-Cartesian set of values: the pan-en-theism of the Spirit of God moving within His Creation, as opposed to the simplistic dualisms maintained by those who "deny the flesh." When thought through on the terms of its own logic, this embodiment should lend itself to a radical commitment to bringing the Spirit's voice to this-worldly concerns.

In this manner, as Smith observes, there is a strange overlay between pentecostal practice, liberation theology, and Catholic social teaching. There is a confluence of thought here. And, yet, because of the ways pentecostals have been socially absorbed by broader evangelical political concerns (in America, at least), sometimes the effects of our social witness is deadened.

That dichotomy / tension is one present throughout the book. Pentecostal practice, in-itself, reveals some key theological revelation or point for philosophical reflection; Pentecostal thought (as it is commonly seen in the American context) is often at odds with its own practiced / embodied logic. In some ways, at least for me, *Thinking in Tongues* is helping me understand some of the socio-political realities around Pentecostal and Charismatic movements and their political pre-commitments that are, nevertheless, contested by their own spiritual worship practices.

Altogether, this book is extremely helpful and a useful starting point for further theological / philosophical work. The final chapter engaging *glossolalia* with Searle's speech-act theory and Marcuse's understanding of the reality principle (etc.) was exceptionally thrilling and feels worth an entire book on its own. As a Christian theological and philosophical reader, it felt so refreshing to have an author breathe to life the pentecostal world I know so well. In some real sense, reading *Thinking in Tongues* reminded me of all the things I love so deeply in pentecostalism, and why, even to this day, I still pray in the Spirit.

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### **Luke Dubbelman says**

Great Book!

All the essays in this book are good, but especially ch.3 and 4 on a pentecostal epistemology and ontology.

This does not need to be read in order, just read the essays as they interest you.

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### **Jason Clark says**

A book for any pentecostal/charismatic who wants to understand the place of that tradition in current conversation about philosophy. Also a compelling read for those enamoured with post-modern philosophy who have given up on being charismatic, giving them some hope.

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## **John says**

Outstanding book bringing together serious philosophy with us diluted Pentecostal experience.

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## **Steve says**

What has Azusa Street to do with Geneva or even Amsterdam? Is it possible to integrate pentecostal and Calvinist or even neocalvinist views? Smith maintains that it is and with this manifesto he tries to do just that.

Reformed charismatic is obviously not an oxymoron. However, most Reformed charismatics tend to be pietist in outlook. Smith writes from a neocalvinist perspective, a perspective that rejects pietism but embraces a transformational perspective on culture and society. Smith taking his cue from Alvin Plantinga's seminal paper 'Advice to Christian Philosophers' here issues advice to pentecostal philosophers; advice that comes with more than a neocalvinist assist. Smith makes no claim to being exhaustive or comprehensive but claims to be offering an outline, a manifesto.

I must confess that the Pentecostal/ charismatic perspective sketched by Smith here is one I don't fully recognise - I wish that it were. I left a charismatic house church two decades ago because it was dualistic and had a tendency towards neo-gnosticism; if Smith is correct things have changed over the years. Smith's program[me] for pentecostal philosophy strangely warmed my heart. He identifies five 'key aspects of a pentecostal worldview'; aspects which owe much to neocalvinism:

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. Affective, narrative epistemology
5. An eschatological orientation to mission and justice.

To each of these I would shout a loud 'Amen, preach it!' If this is pentecostal philosophy, then give me pentecostal philosophy! Smith has ably shown that a charismatic neocalvinism is a viable option. Pentecostalism is often caricatured by an escapist world-denying mentality, one that stresses the heart over the head, emotions over the rational and is profoundly anti-intellectual. Smith has adequately demonstrated that it need not be.

In chapter 3, the longest in the book, he sketches a pentecostal epistemology, making a good case for understanding it as resonating with a "'postmodern' critique of autonomous reason" (p. 52). It is not antirational, but antirationalist (p. 53). His 'core claim is that 'pentecostal worship constitutes a kind of performative postmodernism, an enacted refusal of rationalism' (p. 59). I love the way he describes a Pentecostal epistemology as being 'more like dance than deduction' (p. 82).

Chapter 4, subtitled 'Science, Spirit, and a Pentecostal ontology', takes a look at a pentecostal contribution to metaphysics. Smith maintains that a pentecostal ontology is one of 'radical openness and thus resistant to closed, immanentist systems of the sort that emerge from reductionistic metaphysical naturalism' (p. 88). He describes it as an 'enchanted naturalism' and contrasts it with reductionistic naturalism and naive

supernaturalism. He views naturalism as a spectrum from the reductionistic naturalism of Dan Dennett to the interventionist supernaturalism of naïve pentecostalism, passing through non-reductionistic rationalism of Arthur Peacocke, and Philip Clayton and the enchanted or non-interventionist supernaturalism advocated here by Smith. This is a rich typology and one that will bring clarity to the discussions on naturalism(s). Smith is arguing for a supernatural materialism that contests the natural/ supernatural distinction. Here he draws, perhaps predictably considering Smith's previous works, on radical orthodox's 'participatory' ontology (p. 100).

The philosophy of religion comes under scrutiny in chapter 4. The contemporary paradigm is that doctrine is prior to worship and that ideas trump practice (p. 111). Pentecostalism challenges this. Chapter 5 is perhaps the most explicitly pentecostal, it takes a look at glossolalia (speaking in tongues) and the challenge with which it confronts the philosophy of language. Smith side-steps the theological issues and focuses on the philosophical. This chapter provides a model for how pentecostals can do philosophy.

The book concludes with a heart-felt plea for others to take up the baton and so see, as Smith has stated elsewhere *First Things* (April 2008), pentecostals at the academic table rather being on the table as a topic of study.

Al Wolters once wrote: 'I believe that neocalvinism, if it remains true to its radical original intuition, can truly embrace the riches of other traditions, even as it shares its own with others.' Smith has done just that with this book.

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## **Jacob Aitken says**

Thesis: Pentecostal worldview offers a distinct way of being-in-the-world (Smith 25). Embodied practices carry within them a "tacit understanding" (27).

Is a Pentecostal Philosophy Possible?

Much of the chapter deals with the relationship between theology and philosophy. The difference is one of field, not "faith basis" (Smith 4). Smith gives us Five Aspects of a Pentecostal Philosophy:

1. radical openness to God, or God's doing something fresh.
2. An "enchanted" theology of creation and culture. Smith means that we see reality not as self-enclosed monads, but realizing that principalities and powers are often behind these. this entails spiritual warfare. I cringe at terms like "enchanted" because it's more postmodern non-speak, but Smith (likely inadvertently) connected "enchanted" with demons, which is correct.
3. A nondualistic affirmation of embodiment and spirituality. Smith defines "dualism" as not denigrating materiality. Fewer and fewer Christians today do this, so I am not sure whom his target is. Even chain-of-being communions like Rome that officially denigrate embodiment say they really don't mean it.
4. Affective, narrative epistemology.
5. Eschatological orientation towards mission and justice.

God's Surprise

Some hermeneutics: Smith rightly notes that "The Last Days" (per Acts 2) is connected with "today" ( 22; we accept this model in eschatology but abandon it in pneumatology). Smith wryly notes that Acts 2:13 is the first proto-Daniel Dennett hermeneutics: offering a naturalistic explanation for inexplicable phenomena

(23).

Following Martin Heidegger, Smith suggests two kinds of knowing: *wissen* and *verstehen*, justified, true belief and understanding. The latter is tacit and is at the edges of conscious action.

Per the dis-enchanted cosmos, Smith astutely points out that “There is a deep sense that multiple modes of oppression--from illness to poverty--are in some way the work of forces that are not just natural” (41). In other words, spiritual warfare assumes a specific, non-reductionist cosmology.

### Promising Suggestions

“What characterizes narrative knowledge?” (65)

a connection between narrative and emotions

Narratives work in an affective manner

The emotions worked are themselves already construals of the world

There is a “fit” between narrative and emotion

There is a good section on Pauline-pneumatological accounts of knowing (68ff). Anticipating Dooyeweerd, Paul critiques the pretended autonomy of theoretical thought (Rom. 1:21-31; 1 Cor. 1:18-2:16) and that the Spirit grants access to the message as “true.”

While I found his chapter on epistemology inadequate, he does say that we know from the “heart” as embodied, rational beings (58). This isn’t new to postmodernism, but is standard Patristic epistemology.

### A Pentecostal Ontology

This section could have been interesting. Smith wants to argue that pentecostalism sees an open ontology that allows the Spirit to move from within nature, rather than a miracle that is “tacked on” to nature from the outside. He makes this argument because he wants pentecostalism to line up with the insights from Radical Orthodoxy.

I have between 50-75 pentecostal relatives who “embody pentecostal spirituality.” I promise you that none of them think like this or are even capable of thinking like that. I do not disparage them, simply because I am not to sure Smith’s project at this point is really coherent. He wants to reject methodological naturalism (rightly) but argues for his own version of supernatural naturalism.

If Smith is successful, then he can show that pentecostalism lines up with quantum mechanics. Okay. Thus, nature is “en-Spirited” (103). While I have problems with his “suspended materiality” ontology, Smith makes some interesting points: miracles are not “add-ons.” They are not anti-nature, since “nature is not a discrete, autonomous entity” (104).

### Tongues

We are considering “tongue-speech” as a liminal case in the philosophy of language (122). Exegetical discussions are important (and ultimately determinative), but we can’t enter them here. Smith wants to argue that tongues (T?) resists our current categories of language and emerges as resistance to cultural norms. I think there is something to that.

### T? as Phenomenology

There is a difference between signs as expression (Ausdruck) and those that do not mean anything (indications, Anzeigen). Ausdruck is important as it means something, whereas Anzeigen serves as a pointer (127, Smith is following E. Husserl). Husserl even notes that there can be signs that are not Ausdrucken nor Anzeigen. This turns on the question: can signs which do not express anything nor point to anything be modes of communication?

As many critics of Husserl note, his account of speech links communication with intention, so he has to answer “no” to the above question. Or maybe so. What kind of speech can there be that is not bound up with inter-subjective indication? Husserl (and Augustine!) suggest the interior mental life. Thus, signs in this case would not point to what is absent.

### Tongues as Speech-Act Attack

Utterances (of any sort) are performative. While such utterance-acts do convey thoughts, sometimes their intent is far more. Let’s take tongues-speak as ecstatic, private language. What does the pray-er mean to do? We can easily point to an illocutionary act of praying in groans too deep for words. We can also see a perlocutionary act: God should act in response.

### Tongues as Politics

Oh boy. Smith wants to say that tongues is a speech-act against the powers that be. I like that. I really do. I just fear that Smith is going to mislocate the powers. He begins by drawing upon neo-Marxist insights (147). However, without kowtowing fully to Marx, he does point out that Marx has yielded the historical stage to the Holy Ghost.

Tongues-speech begins as “the language of the dispossessed” (149). This, too, is a valid sociological insight. The chapter ends without Smith endorsing Marxism, which I expected him to do. While we are on a charismatic high, I will exercise my spiritual gift of Discerning the Spirits.” The reason that many 3rd World Pentecostals are “dispossessed” is because they are in countries whose leaders serve the demonic principality of Marxist-Socialism. Let’s attack that first before we get on the fashionable anti-capitalism bandwagon.

### Possible Criticisms

\*Smith, as is usual with most postmodernists, gets on the “narrative” bandwagon. There’s a place for that, but I think narrative is asked to carry more than it can bear. In any case, it is undeniable that Pentecostals are good storytellers. Smith wants to tie this in with epistemology, but he omits any discussion from Thomas Reid concerning testimony as basic belief, which would have strengthened his case.

Smith (rightly) applauds J. P. Moreland’s recent embrace of kingdom power, but accuses Moreland of still being a “rationalist” (6 n14, 13n26). Precisely how is Moreland wrong and what is the concrete alternative? Smith criticizes the rationalist project as “‘thinking’ on a narrow register of calculation and deduction” (54). Whom is he criticizing: Christians or non-Christians? It’s not clear, and in any case Moreland has come under fire for saying there are extra-biblical, non-empirical sources of knowledge and reality (angels, demons, etc).

Smith then argues that all rationalities are em-bodied rationalities. That’s fine. I don’t think this threatens a Reidian/Warrant view of knowledge. Perhaps it does threaten K=JTB. I don’t know, since Smith doesn’t actually make the argument. Smith makes a good argument on the “heart’s role” in knowing, yet Moreland



himself has a whole chapter on knowing and healing from the heart in *The Lost Virtue of Happiness* (Moreland 2006).

Smith elsewhere identifies aspects of rationality as the logics of “power, scarcity, and consumption,” (84) but I can’t think of a serious philosopher who actually espouses this.

Elsewhere, Smith says Christian philosophy should be “Incarnational” and not simply theistic (11). What does that even mean? Does it simply mean “Begin with Jesus”? Does it mean undergirding ontology with the Incarnation, per Col. 1:17? That’s actually quite promising, but I don’t think Smith means that, either. So what does he mean?

Is Smith a coherentist? I think he is. He hints at good criticisms of secularism, but points out “that the practices and plausibility structures that sustain pentecostal (or Reformed or Catholic or Baptist or Moonie--JBA) have their own sort of ‘logic’,” a logic that allows Christians to play, too (35). But even if coherentism holds--and I grant that Smith’s account is likely true, it doesn’t prove coherentism is true. All coherentism can prove is doxastic relations among internal beliefs, but not whether these beliefs are true. Of course, Smith would probably say I am a rationalist.

In his desire to affirm materiality, Smith seems to say that any religious materiality is a good materiality. Smith approvingly notes of Felicite’s clinging to feasts and relics (36). It’s hard to see how any one “Materiality” could be bad on Smith’s account. But this bad account is juxtaposed with some good observations on the book of Acts (38) and tries to connect the two.

\*Smith says that “postmodernism takes race, class, and gender seriously” because it takes the body seriously (60). This is 100% false. If facebook is a true incarnation (!) of postmodernity, may I ask how many “gender/sexual preference” options facebook has? I rest my case.

\*Smith waxes eloquently on the Pentecostal “aesthetic” (80ff), which is basically a repeat of his other works, but one must ask, “How does faith come per Romans 10?”

\*Smith doesn’t miss an opportunity to criticize “rationalism” for separating beliefs and faith/practice, yet Smith himself seems mighty critical of those who focus on “beliefs” in their philosophy of religion (111). Smith’s attack seems ironically dualistic. Sure, most post-Descartes philosophy of religion is overly intellectual, but I do think the Reidian/Reformed Epistemology model, if wedded to Dabney’s Practical Philosophy, integrates belief and faith-practice.

It goes back to our doctrine of the soul. The soul includes both mind and will. You really can’t isolate them. Unmasking this was Dabney’s genius in *Practical Philosophy* (Sprinkle Publishing), pp. 3ff.

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### **Jonathan Anderson says**

Smith is thought provoking and frustrating. Very good insights, but I am not necessarily convinced that the vast majority of pentecostalism practice reflects his thought which seems to undermine his argument especially in light of his book *Desiring the Kingdom*. Highly recommended book.

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## **Josh Hopping says**

God used James Smith's book, "Thinking in Tongues", to give me permission to connect my mind and my heart in a way that I have never done before. Both are to be trusted; both are to be respected and used for the Glory of God.

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## **Jon says**

Outstanding introduction to a pentecostal philosophy--obviously heavy on philosophy and not a casual read. He is not posing this is a finished piece but hopes it is an initial take that is a catalyst for continued musings.

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## **Richard Leo says**

The quality of writing and thought in this book is so far above the general schlock that one tends to find is the staple in the pentecostal arm of the Christian church (think Tim Lahaye, Jerry Jenkins, John Hagee, Joyce Meyer, Joel Osteen, Brian Houston et al), that the key implications of James KA Smith's work will be lost on those who need to hear it most.

James KA Smith is the Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College and his extensive background in this discipline shines through. This book sits in the general field that discusses Christian Philosophy and Smith describes his contribution as an 'unapologetic [as opposed to an apologetic] articulation of the elements of a distinctly pentecostal philosophy' (p.xiii). From a general comparative religious ethnographic description of pentecostal worship to using (amongst many) Derrida, Heidegger, Lyotard, Descartes, Augustine and Wittgenstein he provides an analytical unpacking of the ways of thinking of this particular branch of the Christian Church. Through his use of a wide range of philosophical scholars throughout the ages, he critiques and discusses various aspects of a pentecostal philosophy towards epistemologies, ontologies and praxis in areas such as inter-faith dialogue or language.

In taking this approach, Smith manages to uncover a distinct paradox that sits at the heart of modern expressions of pentecostal Christianity. As a form of Christian expression that, in the USA and Australia at least, has tended to align itself with the more conservative forms of political, economic and social thought (think the worst of Fox News et al), this work provides a unique charge, using their own traditions and language. That Smith ultimately concludes each chapter by implicitly or explicitly directing pentecostal practitioners towards more progressive modes of thought is a challenge that, unfortunately, I suspect will be left untouched by these same practitioners. One example of this type of challenge is that he concludes his analysis of the hallmark of pentecostal thought and practice, the glossolalia, through the construct of neo-Marxism and the Derridan semiotic turn and shows how it is a form of expression that resists and transforms the dominant socio-political construct rather than aligning itself with it.

Conclusion? Finally. A book that treats its reader as intelligent and educated from the pentecostal / Charismatic arm of the Christian church.

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## **Jonathan says**

First fruits of a Pentecostal philosophy. The intuitive logic of the movement are teased out and developed into a distinct ontology, epistemology, linguistics, etc. Pentecostalism without checking your brain at the door.

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