An Expected Openness[1]: Testifying Against James K.A. Smith's *Thinking in Tongues*[2]

David C.L. Driedger

As an eighteen-year-old I became increasingly involved with a group of Christians for both existential and hormonal reasons. I was living in a small town in the distinctly Mennonite notch of the Bible belt on the Canadian prairies, and a few of the folks in this crowd attended church in a nearby community. We decided to go to an evening service there one Friday night. It was a youth event, with an extended period of upbeat praise and worship followed by a time of prayer. When the leader asked if anyone needed prayer, I remember feeling a knot tighten in my stomach. I took that to be a sign from God, so I stood and walked forward. The man asked if I had ever been *baptized in the Holy Spirit*. I did not understand that phrase, but I had not been baptized at all, so I said no.

I was brought to a separate room where two young men joined me. I knew one of the men, and the other was outfitted in second-hand fatigues and a bandana. He projected a look that said *you don't want to know what I've seen*. They showed me verses about speaking in tongues and then asked whether I wanted to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. After I agreed, they laid their hands on me, assuring me not to worry, *even if things feel strange or sound dumb*. As they began to pray, their sentences seemed to break apart into individual words, each with its own emotional resonance and significance. Their tempo increased, and the words ceased to resemble English until they fell into a perceptible rhythm of phonetic sounds. Interspersed into this rhythm were plain English words encouraging me to join in. I concentrated and created a few sounds that I thought were not words. My companions responded. *Yes! Thank-you Jesus! Lamma shabbah sachnee sabatoo—*

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[1] I would like to thank Andrew David for his editorial input in helping to develop the style and content of this article.

[2] All bracketed references refer to James K.A. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

Having assembled a few short nonsensical bits of sound, I stopped speaking and noticed my arms tingling. Both of them slowly went numb up to my shoulders. I found myself rolling around on the floor, laughing. We all laughed together for a good five or ten minutes. It felt good. They told me I could now go home and speak in tongues whenever I wanted.

I went home and tried it. It did not work.

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As a young adult, I was taken by a friend to a small coffee shop called The Stone Table in Vancouver, British Columbia. Two musicians played solo that night, Damien Jurado and David Bazan. I can't remember a single lyric from the evening, only an image of Bazan sitting with his acoustic guitar, his head tilted back so all I could see was his unshaven neck. And from that posture he wailed.

That night left an impression on me. Something in the pacing, the congruence of body and emotion and tone, something in the glacial pressure of the whole pushed through the simplistic boundaries of how I understood Christian expression. They sang about God and without God. It was as though, God forbid, the whole world was somehow full of God's glory—and as though the inverse were also true, that the whole church was full of sin. With some pretensions of being a radical Christian, I welcomed the continued work of these artists as they stretched the church's notion of faith and life. I anticipated each new album, and then, when it was in hand, I would sit alone in my dorm room absorbed in the experience.

Over the years, Bazan, in particular, continued to push the boundaries. In time I found that I was not pushing alongside him but he was pushing me and my boundaries. I became confused. Was he *for* the church or *against* it? Was he *inside* or *outside*? And finally I encountered the track "Foregone Conclusions." The song unveils the mechanics of a Christian mind in conversation with non-Christians, the futility of argumentation, and the hard-heartedness and resolve of an unwinnable war over the soul. The song climaxes by accusing the Christian of being so preoccupied in trying to talk about Jesus that it becomes impossible to hear the Spirit "begging you to shut the fuck up." And with that, my mind hit pause. I saw the crossroads. I felt

the bind I was put in. Meanwhile, Bazan was reading the minds of his good Christian listeners who were left wondering whether his voice was now the "voice of the devil" because we "don't believe [God] talks that way." Bazan sang on, leaving me behind. Who now could arbitrate, mediate, confirm the voice of God?

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We gather Easter Sunday in the often ridiculed North End of Hamilton, Ontario. The little church-slash-community-center is located in the middle of a neighborhood covered by thin layers of filth that have settled over the decades from the steel mills lining Lake Ontario. The gathering is small, perhaps fifteen or twenty of us in total. The demographics are simple: do-gooders who had intentionally moved into the neighborhood and people who had nowhere else they could afford to move to. On the walls hang simply constructed banners from years past—a felt boulder being rolled away from a felt tomb with yellow felt rays of light beaming from the felt darkness. The air carries the sounds of worship music led and played by nonprofessionals. The lead guitarist struggles to keep time as a woman, physically and mentally handicapped from a car accident, shakes a tambourine to her own particular rhythm. A sightless man reads Braille and tells of Jesus miraculously healing the blind. The pastor leans against the wall and talks with us for a few minutes about gratitude. After the service, we offer warm and warming smiles to one another, and leave with no discernible change.

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I began this review essay with personal testimonies. Following James K.A. Smith in *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy*, I offered them without context, allowing them to stand on their own so they might form a sort of "irreducible" contribution for understanding a belief structure or worldview (xxiii).They were to linger, strike, or fail on their own accord. As I develop my position below, I will give them more context, because it is in the realm of testimonies that the integrity and validity of Smith's arguments ultimately hang.

The stated goal of *Thinking in Tongues* is to promote the agenda of a distinctively pentecostal approach to philosophy (151). In doing so, the author acknowledges that what he offers is a sketch, even a "cartoon" (xxv). However, rather than an astute sketch that demarcates key relationships and clarifies issues with simplicity and exaggeration, Smith's cartoon ends up looking more like mascot for a minor league team trying to turn pro. Until now the image of the team (pentecostalism) has been flat, predictable, and poorly fitted in its costume. But with his cheering, Smith transforms what appeared shabby into something gritty, and then backs his revitalized mascot with a host of dazzling and sexy European cheerleaders that have boosted other dominant teams of philosophy. For this reason, I suspect the book may well feel like a VIP pass to philosophy's Big Show for young pentecostal-minded (spirited?) students, though how it will be met by larger audiences is less clear.

To be fair, Smith does subtitle his first chapter, "Advice to Pentecostal Philosophers." There is no question as to his intended target audience. It is in the remaining chapters where he elaborates his paradigm and offers preliminary engagements within various fields of philosophy. After advocating for the place of pentecostal philosophers, the author builds up his argument. Chapter two demonstrates how the practices of pentecostal spirituality reflect an openness to the surprise of God that can destabilize entrenched traditions and patterns of thought. This leads to a particular epistemology outlined in chapter three that is not grounded in disembodied Reason but is developed contextually within the narrative framework of scripture and testimony (or worship more broadly). Chapter four engages modern science and suggests an alternative to the traditional debate between naturalism and supernaturalism. In the final two chapters Smith tests out his paradigm. He presents a critique of the philosophy of religion in chapter five, calling on this discipline to pay more attention to the practices of religion. Then in chapter six he offers a contribution to the philosophy of language, using glossolalia as a test case.

The basic framework for this project is set forth early on (summarized on page 12). Smith begins with a postmodern critique of the Enlightenment, characterizing the Enlightenment as establishing a foundational and objective rationality by which all truth can be evaluated. He argues that

strands of contemporary and postmodern philosophy have come to see that, contrary to this perspective, we humans function with a prior affective posture toward the world that conditions how we think and reason. We are constituted by prior formations and beliefs (e.g., a worldview or spirituality) before we engage with philosophical ideas. This critique is important for two reasons.

First, Smith takes the relationship between beliefs and rationality as an admittance ticket for pentecostals to the philosophical conversation: "The crucial implication here is a certain levelling of the playing field: if everyone operates on the basis of a worldview, and all worldviews have a basically confessional status, then a specifically Christian or pentecostal worldview has as much right to come to the scholarly table as any other" (29). Second, framing the conversation in this manner, as a postmodern philosophical critique, flows into Smith's prospective project for a pentecostal contribution to philosophy.

I want to focus on what I consider key to this project, namely the question of whether or not a pentecostal spirituality offers a "radically open" engagement with the world (epistemologically and ontologically). This openness forms the centerpiece of Smith's view of pentecostalism (33), and our response to Smith's overall contribution will likely be determined by how we interpret this claim.

Epistemologically, this openness emphasizes an affective form of knowledge, a knowledge that is prior to objective reason and is formed ritually, bodily, and narratively. In this way, personal testimonies, the laying on of hands, speaking in tongues, kneeling at the altar, emotive music, and hand raising all create layers that reflexively mould an orientation toward the world. It is these modes that create new possibilities prior to and outside the parameters of Enlightenment reason. Ontologically, this openness points toward an enchanted understanding of the material world. Smith hesitates to speak of supernaturalism, a term suggesting a dichotomy between the natural and the divine that he does not feel represents a pentecostal worldview. Instead, in broad alignment with Radical Orthodoxy, he regards the entire material world as sustained and infused by God's Spirit; as such, it remains ready for the surprising and creative work of our participating with God. This is what Smith calls a noninterventionist view: "A 'miracle' is not

an event that 'breaks' any 'laws' of nature, since nature does not have such a reified character; rather, a miracle is a manifestation of the Spirit's presence that is 'out of the ordinary' (referred to as 'sped-up' or more 'intense' in another context); but even the ordinary is a manifestation of the Spirit's presence" (105; parenthesis added).

These claims to openness deserve to be evaluated on their own terms. In critiquing Smith's philosophical contribution, I will focus on the affective practices and particular testimonies (narratives) that shape the pentecostal worldview (xxiii, 31). Each chapter of *Thinking in Tongues* begins with a vignette of pentecostal spirituality. I appreciate the risk of including these accounts, as many other ecclesial-minded theologies are sparse if not barren when it comes to the actual testimony of church members. However, what I find surprising is the complete lack of paradox or irony in Smith's accounts of pentecostal openness. His examples of a radically open spirituality come off as a confirmation of the caricature I already have of pentecostal worship. There are boisterous musical numbers, informal church structures, sentimental testimonies, and tearful altar calls. The only real hint of irony appears when Smith says that for pentecostals "the unexpected is expected" (33). I am not denigrating these expressions or this mode of worship, but I am criticizing the notion that these forms reflect a unique mode of openness to the world. I could have written similar accounts of Pentecostal worship without ever having attended the particular churches he refers to. What Smith testifies to as internal expressions of surprise are already accounted for and anticipated by external experiences with this tradition.

Smith does acknowledge at several points that pentecostals are not immune to abusing their practices, but nowhere does he reflect on the possibility that pentecostalism's forms are scripted in a way that has little more internal variance than a Catholic Mass or virtually any other liturgy. Moreover, I suggest that the felt need for the unexpected lends itself to a much more coercive environment than many other traditions (as I describe in my own experience of being open to speaking in tongues). But more than the predictability of pentecostal worship, I argue that Smith nowhere entertains the sort of conflict and crisis of openness that David Bazan created in me through "Foregone Conclusions." What if the Lord is speaking to me in a form I implicitly reject? The sort of structured practice of the "unexpected"

that Smith gives account of may actually keep people from the openness represented in the biblical account. What would happen if someone told the worship band in full swing, or the teary woman in mid-confession, that God was telling them, *à la* Bazan, to shut the fuck up?

One of the testimonies Smith offers is of a woman who could not conceive a child (49-50). She wanted to be a Hannah, a barren woman who miraculously conceives through petitioning God (see 1 Samuel 1), but the Lord did not seem to be listening. She even became angry with the Lord. But now this woman is pregnant, and so she is a Hannah. Yes, we should be happy for her, but theologically this is not a unique account of entering God's openness. Against Smith's interpretation, I am not convinced that this is an instance of being situated in the biblical narrative (51), because to be situated in that narrative is also to have a radical break with the narrative. To be a Hannah *within* the Bible is seen in Luke's gospel, where we find the shift from the desired pregnancy of Elizabeth in old age (a traditional Hannah) to the unexpected and unsought pregnancy of the single teenage Mary. It is Mary, not Elizabeth, who is a Hannah. The biblical precedent, then, is an open and unforeseen possibility in the present. Openness is repetition in the Kierkegaardian sense, which assumes and demands a difference. This repetition can also be seen in the patristic understanding that Jesus' ministry is a repetition of Joshua's conquest.

It is the complete lack of irony or paradox that ultimately keeps Smith's project from gaining traction. I am not suggesting that there are never occurrences of openness or repetition in pentecostalism, only that I don't see pentecostalism as being particularly unique in this case. This is the point of my final witness, the portrayal of Easter worship in a small run-down church in Ontario. There was nothing particularly *pentecostal* in that account, no discernible "working of the Spirit." It was, however, as best as I can interpret the event, an intensification of God's work. It left an indelible mark upon me that both connects and breaks with what was prior and what might possibly come. In this way, it may be better to speak of the "fugitivity" of the Spirit, to borrow from Peter Dula,[3] than to speak about

[3] See Peter Dula, "Fugitive Ecclesia," in *The Gift of Difference: Radical Orthodoxy, Radical Reformation*, ed. Chris K. Huebner and Tripp York (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2010), 105-29. I refer to this account because of its emphasis on acknowledging how God does or does not

how to "structure" for openness as Smith does.

If there is, however, an open structure, it is more likely to be found in Liberation Theology than in pentecostalism (or most other confessional approaches, for that matter). I am not saying that pentecostalism and Liberation Theology are incompatible. In fact, Gustavo Gutiérrez's framework of beginning from a "pre-understanding"[4] seems to share some similarities with Smith's affective or bodily approach. However, I maintain that Liberation Theology is better equipped to speak of openness because of its posture toward the powers of the world, which demands an ongoing reorientation outside of internal interests.

Although Smith makes several insightful observations relating strands of contemporary philosophy with pentecostal spirituality, the whole project is plagued by the specter of his mascot. As he cheers on would-be pentecostal philosophers, there is no irony in the prescribed forms that are to create openness, and there are too many references to the "staid" (a favorite term in the book) academic community and how it would have a hard time handling the "raucous" and "gritty" pentecostals. I am all for the promotion of more rigorous and diverse forms of thought and expression in the church, but the notion of enforcing the rights of pentecostalism to some elite academic table does not seem likely to bear good fruit. Don't worry about the mascot, just play the game.

David C.L. Driedger is Associate Minister at First Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

appear to be working at times in the life of the church. This sort of acknowledgement is missing in Smith's account.

[4] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. Cardid Inda and John Eagleson (New York: Orbis Books, 1973), 3-4.