

Pentecostal Scholarship and Scholarship on Pentecostalism: The Next Generation

Amos Yong

The Society for Pentecostal Studies (SPS) is in the midst of a discussion regarding its nature, purpose, and identity. There are many important facets to this conversation and the following represents only one member's (my own) perspective. Let me comment on three interrelated issues.

First, almost from its beginnings (1972) the Society's self-understanding (as defined explicitly in the Constitution) of "Pentecostal" has included "charismatic," in recognition of the fact that the work of the Holy Spirit includes the streams of renewal in the mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and other churches and movements around the world. This "charismatic" dimension of Pentecostal studies should not be under-emphasized. This issue of the journal features the 2012 presidential address by Roman Catholic scholar and theologian Jeff Gros. Not only is Gros the third Roman Catholic to have served as the president of our Society (behind Ralph Del Colle in 2003 and Anthea Butler in 2005), but his church represents one of the most vibrant sectors of the global renewal movement in the majority world. Henri Gooren's article on the charismatic renewal in the Latin American Catholic Church also foregrounds a topic that will only be of increasing importance in the years and decades to come. As the "encounter" between Pentecostalism and the Catholic Church spills over beyond the formal Pentecostal-Catholic dialogues (which results have always been featured in the pages of this journal), we will see much more of a cross-fertilization and cross-pollination of Pentecostal studies and Catholic scholarship. We members of the Society ought to resist any "pentecostal" reductionism in light of this vigorous Catholic charismatic dimension.

Yet, upon further reflection, the sociological and even phenomenological scope of this broader charismatic ethos gestures toward the wider world of indigenous churches and movements that scholars recognize look, sound, and act pentecostal or charismatic but retain neither of these names in their self-identification. That is in part why my colleagues and I here at Regent

University have adopted the nomenclature of “Renewal Studies,” which creates conceptual space for the fact that even as pentecostal denominations are in many circles becoming passé, and even as the charismatic renewal is undergoing metamorphoses in multiple directions, there is this burgeoning global Christianity that is at least phenomenologically “pentecostal” and “charismatic.” While I am not advocating a name-change to the “Society of Renewal Studies,” scholarship on the worldwide pentecostal-charismatic movement is effectively that of the global *renewal* movement (as we understand that here at Regent). The point is to keep in mind that the scope of “pentecostal studies” continues to expand.

Second, there is a question about how the Society is situated in our precarious space “between” the churches (within which many of us worship and serve) and the academy. When the Society was originally formed, it was designed to provide a setting for the emerging group of scholars who were also confessionally pentecostal to convene, share their research, and prod one another on in their work. This was especially important given the then broader academy’s generally unfriendly, suspicious, and even hostile attitudes toward Pentecostal studies. Yet within this matrix, throughout its first forty years, one of the reasons the Society has not adopted any theological or doctrinal statement as a prerequisite for membership is its recognition that there ought to be room for discussion of important matters such as those pertaining to the Oneness-Trinitarian divide. As befitting a movement which is essentially understood by its spirituality rather than its discursively articulated dogmatics, the “oneness” of spirit that held this generation of pentecostal scholars together may have been best exemplified in its opening plenary worship sessions. Pentecostals who found they could sing, pray, and praise together were thus also enabled (even empowered!) to engage in difficult theological and doctrinal discussions (also debates) about important matters. The history of this opening worship event has been one of the defining features setting the Society apart from other scholarly venues such as the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) or the American Academy of Religion (AAR).

I, for one, have found the Society invigorating precisely because of this “confessional” aspect of its annual meeting, which, at the same time, retains the inherent ecumenism of the spirituality of the movement. I fully agree that while it is important to strive for scholarly “objectivity” in any discipline or field of inquiry, there are different ways to accomplish these tasks. Some of them are best exemplified in the AAR/SBL, and many of us have membership and are active participants in those sites. But the SPS provides a unique forum that facilitates a more holistic expression of the inextricable nature of human

hearts and minds and we ought to do what we can to preserve this distinctive ethos. In the past, one of the ways in which this was constitutionally registered was through adoption of the World Pentecostal Fellowship's (WPF) statement of purpose. In part because the latter has also now been revised (not to mention that the WPF has, in addition, since changed its name to the Pentecostal World Fellowship — <http://www.pentecostalworldfellowship.org/>), it is important that the SPS revisit its mission statement. The key here is that members of the SPS need to continually discern what it means to maintain a confessional environment yet not turn the Society into an ecclesial or parachurch organization. This is not to say that the work of the Society and its members do not serve the church. Surely scholarship that is God glorifying will be for the church, in a prophetic sense if not an edifying one (or both!). In short, the goal has to nurture scholarly rigor (as these are measured in part in the wider academy) but yet promote a rich spiritual milieu within which such work can be informed and also flourish. In our present cultural context, all scholars should recognize the functional equivalent of confessionalism, broadly construed, and ideological commitments. Moving between SPS and AAR/SBL is not about stepping from a value-laden society into a value-neutral one, but emphasizing one set of commitments over another.

Third, then, is the set of challenges related to how to accomplish preservation of such an inimitable space between churches and academy. The task force that polled the membership (as part of the Society's self-study process) found that only forty percent of the respondents favored a kind of theological affirmation as part of the ongoing consideration of the Society's self-understanding. However, the qualitative data derived from this (mathematically) minority group suggested to the task force recommendation of the following "theological statement":

The SPS is committed to faith in the God of Jesus Christ and the economy of salvation. We affirm that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at the inception of the Pentecostal movement was a work of God. We also affirm subsequent Pentecostal and charismatic signs of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit inclusive of renewal movements within the historic churches and those characterized as non-denominational. It is the mission of this society to engage in understanding from the perspective of faith and the various theological and academic disciplines the gift that the Pentecostal and charismatic movements represent for the church and its mission.

While the Society is considering this proposal (presented at the 2012 annual business meeting, discussed, and tabled), I find it an odd one in light of our shared history. Further, given that this statement is one of four within the

section discussing the objectives of the Society, I think the last sentence is sufficient. I have thus recently suggested to the Society's Executive Committee (EC) members that the EC propose to the SPS to affirm the following as point 3 of our common mission: "...to engage in understanding from the perspective of faith and the various theological and academic disciplines the gift that the Pentecostal and charismatic movements represent for the church and its mission."

The current issue of the journal includes articles that reveal the changing dynamics of pentecostal scholarship. If the first generation of the Society consisted primarily of Pentecostal scholars producing a wide range of Pentecostal studies, the ongoing development of the global pentecostal-charismatic and renewal movement has precipitated increasingly larger numbers of non-confessional scholars engaged in research on Pentecostalism (what we have called Pentecostal studies). Thomas Higgins article on the Vineyard reflects not classical Pentecostal studies but is in the genre of confessional scholarship in the historic SPS-model: research on the charismatic or renewal movement by an insider. Paul Tyson, however, is a (Catholic- and ecumenical-leaning) Australian Baptist theologian and philosopher and his piece is constructed in dialogue with Pentecostal studies, broadly conceived, while Henri Gooren's ethnographic research, as already noted, is squarely in the mode of non-confessional scholarship and conducted and reported according to widely accepted anthropological methods. These pieces reflect that the changing nature of Pentecostal studies includes not only scholarship *on* Pentecostalism (Gooren) but also scholarship *in dialogue with* — and perhaps even, arguably, *inspired by* — Pentecostal studies (Tyson). Coming at this point in time, Tyson's thesis regarding the institutionalization of the apostolic churches is particularly ironic in light of the routinization that some feel is reflected in the proposed theological statement.

I have purposefully included the conjunction "and" in the title of this editorial. Whether pentecostal scholars (however else we might self-identify) like it or not, the days of Pentecostal studies being done by confessional insiders only is long over. We have to move beyond *either* emic *or* etic perspectives; it has to be *both-and*. Thus I urged the fourth mission-purpose statement currently on the table for consideration: "To welcome among its membership all scholars and researchers who, although not sharing the preceding *faith commitments* [or, if my above proposal or something like it is adopted, then we can replace the italicized words with: "objectives" or "values"], can respect them and are interested in Pentecostal studies." Thus I also think that Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's advice (coming from one whose classical pentecostal credentials are impeccable) is helpful as we members of the Society discuss, debate, and think about

our future together. Although Kärkkäinen is addressing the specific topic of pentecostal theological education, his call for pentecostal theological educators needs to embrace a range of tensions — the four models, the four polarities, the four environments (see his article) — rather than collapsing onto one or another side of whatever spectrum, applies to our current societal conversation. How can we find ways to live fruitfully in the “between” spaces that we have carved out — between church and academic domains, between emic and etic perspectives, between confessional and academic modes of operation? I see no other way forward than to embrace these tensions and to work together to ensure that we navigate our way amidst this “between.”

I hope that enough of the rest of us will commit ourselves to this difficult but rewarding path. For those committed to the Spirit-filled life (that scholars of Pentecostalism are attempting to study!), there is no alternative for Pentecostal scholarship, despite its riskiness, than to follow after the ways of the Spirit who leads into all truth, and doing so involves hospitably inviting, rigorously engaging with, and being vulnerable to the scholarship *on* Pentecostalism that will continue to be done.

Copyright of *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* is the property of Brill Academic Publishers and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.