

Book Review

Amos Yong, *In The Days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and Political Theology*
Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010. pb. xx+377.
ISBN 978-0-8028-6406-2. \$30.

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Every once in a while a book comes along which is truly pioneering and groundbreaking. Amos Yong's *In the Days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and Political Theology* is such a book, both in terms of its contribution to cementing the study of the movement within the theological academy, and providing the first systematic engagement with political theology emanating from within Pentecostalism itself.

Classical Pentecostalism is a popular religious movement that emerged during the early twentieth century and associated with the masses. Often embraced by the poor or those with a basic educational background, this popular movement has traditionally eschewed theological inquiry in favour of being led by the Spirit. For its part (and with important exceptions) until relatively recently the theological academy has tended to reciprocate, often dismissing Pentecostalism as shallow, lacking theological depth and sophistication, and generally rejecting it as a significant determinant of political behaviour.

In recent years, however, the academic study of the movement has emerged as an important and established sub-discipline of theology, known as Pentecostal Studies (also Renewalist Studies). In a short journal article Yong has traced the rise of Pentecostal Studies,¹ while

¹ Amos Yong, "Pentecostalism and the Theological Academy" in *Theology Today* (2007) 64, 244-50.

elsewhere I discuss how Pentecostalism's social and political impacts attracted the attention of other disciplines, particularly sociologists and political scientists, contributing to the rise of Pentecostal Studies.² No longer is Pentecostalism regarded as an insignificant or unsophisticated expression of Christianity, with a burgeoning Pentecostal intelligentsia (as well as non-Pentecostal scholars) producing an explosion of academic studies exploring the global history, thought, and social and political impact of their movement.

Critics of Pentecostalism have tended to label the movement apolitical (sometimes code for not espousing the right kind of politics), reactionary or politically conservative (particularly on moral issues), or politically quiescent. Other stereotypes include bunching Pentecostals with Dispensationalists and their worldview, or that Pentecostal otherworldliness contributes to a disinterest in the here and now. Yet the explosion of Pentecostal Studies in the last two or three decades has challenged such stereotypes, demonstrating how Pentecostalism is far from homogenous, theologically or indeed politically.

Yong, a talented theologian and leading figure within this new Pentecostal academic elite, synthesises these various disparate pieces of research in *In the Days of Caesar*

² "Latin American Pentecostalism and the Academy" in Calvin L. Smith, *Pentecostal Power: Expressions, Impact and Faith of Latin American Pentecostalism* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

to explore and weave a sophisticated and nuanced Pentecostal political theology from the perspective of an insider-participant. Moreover, his position within the Pentecostal academy, together with his life-long focus on highlighting and exploring a global rather than Western-centric expression of Pentecostalism, allows him to bring considerable knowledge, understanding and authority to the task.

Originally delivered as the Cadbury Lectures, University of Birmingham (United Kingdom), the book is divided into two parts. The first sets the stage by offering readers context and insight into Pentecostalism and their engagement with politics, surveying the movement's disparate experiences, shattering stereotypes and calling for a distinctively Pentecostal trajectory and methodology for engagement with the political sphere. Part 2 explores ways forward for a Pentecostal approach to politics specifically based on Pentecostal theology, rather than Pentecostals having to adopt a non-Pentecostal political theology framework. In short, Yong's aim is to encourage Pentecostal scholars to engage with the political world on their own terms, as equals, encouraging them to build a distinctively Pentecostal political manifesto of sorts, rather than engaging with political theology through a borrowed, non-Pentecostal political theological framework around which Pentecostals and their theology must adapt. In the process Yong covers issues such as political theory, political and economic structures, culture, civil society, prosperity, and so on, all within the context of Pentecostal theology. Importantly Yong's approach is global in nature, drawing on disparate Pentecostal experiences and situations to make his case.

This book is important not only because it helps cement Pentecostal Studies firmly within the discipline of theology as an academic subject

in its own right, but also because it encourages a current generation of Pentecostal scholars to engage with the political sphere on their own terms. Arguably, however, there is also a sense in which Yong (and other Pentecostal scholars), in their pioneering Pentecostal academic research, are becoming increasingly distanced from the movement's grassroots. This is not a criticism of Yong as such (there are always tensions between grassroots and elites), yet the gulf between Pentecostal elites and grassroots is inexorably widening as a generation of Pentecostal Studies scholars, keen to be accepted by and engage with the wider academy as equals have, in some cases pushed the boundaries, leading to widely publicised tensions with grassroots Pentecostals of late over several issues. Inevitably, the more Pentecostal Studies aligns itself with the academy rather than a confessional anchor point, the more this will become a problem, particularly given the movement's theological and political heterogeneity.

Ironically, perhaps this is a way in which Yong's book can help overcome such tensions. Rather than speaking of a distinctive Pentecostal political theology it might be more appropriate to speak of Pentecostal political theologies. In this regard Yong offers a useful framework, a manual, to encourage and equip Pentecostals from across the political spectrum to construct their own Pentecostal political theologies. That *In the Days of Caesar* has generated considerable discussion and debate within the Pentecostal Academy suggests it is well on the way to achieving that aim, while its reception across wider academic circles is evidence that Pentecostal Studies is being taken more seriously than ever. Yong's book is a must-read for anyone undertaking research into Pentecostalism, regardless of angle or discipline.