Book Review


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The author of In the Days of Caesar is professor at the Regent University School of Divinity in Virginia Beach, and a licensed minister of the Assemblies of God. He has acquired a reputation as a Pentecostal systematic theologian, committed to bring the specific contribution of Pentecostal and Charismatic renewal (which he globally calls “pentecostal” with a programmatic uncapitalized “p”, with an emphasis on classical pentecostalism) into the academic theological discourse. A prolific writer, he deals with pneumatology, the Bible, disability, ecclesiology, creation, theology and science, global and contextual pentecostalism and, in the present case, pentecostalism and political theology.

Yong’s book on pentecostalism and political theology, the publication of the Edward Cadbury Lectures delivered at the University of Birmingham (UK) in 2009, is an important book in a number of ways: It analyses, qualifies and supports theologically the possible and real political contribution of a tradition that is highly diverse and, not rarely, at odds with academic theology. The author himself counts that he had thought for long that “being pentecostal and being political were contradictory” (p. xvii). While he succeeds well in contradicting this prejudice, he rightly goes beyond government and statecraft into “the political” more widely speaking, referring to “human life in the public square” (p. xix). Yong speaks, initially, for and to his own constituency. Also, this is a contribution meant for the “church ecumenical” and the broader theological academy, not only correcting stereotypes but presenting genuine insights in a constructive way. Finally, it seeks to pay attention to the ever-growing presence of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches and movements in the Global South, in Africa, in Asia and in Latin America. An enormous amount of literature has, naturally, gone into such a broad argument, and has been well used. Referring to the theologians and theological schools commonly discussed in the North (such as Tillich, Niebuhr, Hauerwas and Radical Orthodoxy), but also harvesting authors of the old tradition (such as Augustine), makes good sense and facilitates interaction with those who work with the same authors in other perspectives. Still, it would be desirable that more literature from the South could be included.
and engaged, including, for instance, Latin American Liberation Theology and its new developments, but also attempts of cultural and inter-religious dialogue in African and Asian theologies.

Part I sets the stage, first, in mapping the “Pentecostal body politic” as it presents itself phenomenologically. Special attention is given here to pentecostalism in the global South, given that it is there that lies pentecostalism’s “centre of gravity” (and, I add, Christianity’s as a whole). Important features are the enormous diversity of the phenomenon, both theologically and in practice, the fact that pentecostalism has reached predominantly the “socially and culturally disenfranchised” (p. 6), the longing for citizenship and the intensity of religious experience. The next chapter surveys the field of political theology since ancient times until today, culminating in Carl Schmitt’s “Political Theology” and his critics. The third chapter presents Pentecostal resources in method and hermeneutics, emphasizing the “Fivefold Gospel” that will serve as the basic structure in the second part of the book: Jesus as savior, sanctifier, Spirit-baptizer, healer and coming king. Yong stresses that this means both being Jesus-centred and Christocentric, Christ being the Messiah anointed by the Holy Spirit. Not surprisingly, the biblical focus is on the Lukan scriptures, the Gospel and Acts. This is the traditional emphasis of Pentecostal theology, but it also seeks to elaborate further a pentecostal ecclesiology, locating the church in its wider social, economic, and political context, which has a bearing on the church’s self-understanding. In doing this, Yong harps on about his hypothesis of “many tongues, many political practices” (p. 109), which he sees as the distinctively pentecostal contribution to a Christian political theology.

Part II now constructs what was prepared in Part I, following the above-mentioned classical Fivefold Gospel. Salvation is correlated with deliverance from the principalities and powers, elaborating a liturgical theology of cosmopolitical resistance, including an appreciation of spiritual warfare. Sanctification is treated in the light of Yoder, Hauerwas and New Monasticism, seeking to elaborate a theology of redeemed culture. Baptism in the Holy Spirit is correlated with the alternative civitas, as elaborated by Radical Orthodoxy, and seeks to formulate a prophetic theology for civil society. Healing critically maps the field of the Health and Wealth gospel, engages Catholic social teaching and highlights the biblical Shalom as the establishment of peace, justice and righteousness, of which earthly Shalom can only – but then should indeed! – be a foretaste. Finally, eschatology provides a critical engagement of dispensationalism and Pentecostal apocalypticism, seeking a political theology of suffering and hope. All chapters include a section on biblical resources, one on political practices and an explicitly theological one. The methodology is clearly introduced at the end of Part I, and a table helps in orientation and comparison between the five dimensions (p. 114).

This is, in the first place, a very well-written book, very clearly structured and argued, and, thus, useful for pentecostals and non-pentecostals alike, both on political theology as such and, in particular, pentecostal perspectives on it – in dialogue with a wide range of potential friends. It serves well as a textbook. Although rich in material and didactically repetitive in some aspects, it never gets boring, and brings new elements and details at nearly every page. It is
respectful, serious, modest and irenic in style while still maintaining a certain lightness. The initially pleasing perspective of “many tongues, many political practices”, however, might dilute rather than sharpen the argument. *Via media* and apophatic theology are recurrent expressions, pointing rather to a dialogical offer – important, of course, in itself within the highly competitive theological field among pentecostals, evangelicals, high church tendencies, fundamentalisms and the like – than a clear-cut proposal. As it is consciously ecclesiological, it tends to look more to the inside than the outside, saying little on collaboration with institutions beyond the church, and indeed service beyond the church that is not done with the primary goal of conversion. The church is seen rather as a community of witnesses to the world; *in*, but not *of* the world, in the key of “exile”, of a confessional theology. However, is this enough when the (re-)construction of a nation is needed, when the churches cannot remain in the opposition, but need to collaborate with others in building up, in a situation of growing religious and ideological pluralism? A new book is already in the making and might enter more thoroughly into this field, called *The Holy Spirit and the Public Square*. Having read the present volume, expectations are high.