

Whither Pentecostal Scholarship?

The overlap between people with the Spirit and people with Ph.D.s.

By Arlene M. Sánchez Walsh | posted 5/01/2004

A common topic of debate in my grad-school history classes was "who can tell whose stories?" (Postmodern historians eschew the term *history*, too loaded with leanings toward a metanarrative.) Can men tell women's stories? Euro Americans tell African Americans'? Latinos'? Asians'? Where does the authority reside? Strangely, though, one category was never debated: whether the nonreligious could tell the stories of the religious. It was presumed, if you were religious, you could *not* be trusted to tell your own story; only the nonreligious scholar could be trusted to handle such combustible material. (Somehow, when it came to religion, "objectivity" snuck in through the back door.)

It's not surprising, then, that in the recent flood of books on Pentecostalism from secular academic presses, there are relatively few by Pentecostal scholars. Where, I wondered some months ago, *were* Pentecostal scholars being published? Perhaps by evangelical presses, where secular suspicion of faith-based scholarship would not prevail. But when I examined catalogues from the academic divisions of the most prominent evangelical publishers--InterVarsity Press, Baker Book House, Zondervan, and so on--there was an obvious lack of Pentecostal scholarship. In order to understand this discrepancy, I decided to query my colleagues in the Society for Pentecostal Studies (SPS), speak to representatives of various evangelical presses, and place this evangelical/Pentecostal division in historical context.

For some, the idea of Pentecostal scholarship is an oxymoron. Pentecostals historically did not bother to develop an intellectual tradition. Most recently, Grant Wacker's exceptional work *Heaven Below* chronicles the anti-intellectual nature of early Pentecostalism.¹ In addition to supporting the idea that Pentecostalism's eschatological and missionary zeal made intellectual endeavors a waste of precious time, Wacker noted that the leaderless nature of the early movement, which eschewed being called an organized denominational entity, encouraged Pentecostal anti-intellectualism and contributed to its persistence. Buffered by a faith that insists on being Spirit-led, this tradition dies hard. Pentecostal Bible institutes were not accredited till the 1960s, and the SPS was not in operation until 1970. One Pentecostal academic told me that he has been viewed as too intellectual for the Foursquare denomination--which, he was reminded, prefers "people with the Spirit over people with Ph.D.'s."

The SPS is one place where Pentecostals, charismatics, and other scholars can meet and share their research. The society publishes a scholarly journal, *Pneuma*, where much scholarship on Pentecostalism sees its first light. When I asked why I rarely encounter the people I meet at SPS and read in *Pneuma* in print anywhere else, I received many different answers, with a consensus forming around the conclusion that evangelical presses have a theological bias against Pentecostal scholarship.

Many scholars shared the view that the legacy of Pentecostal anti-intellectualism has limited the number of scholars who are trained to write for scholarly presses, and they made the point that charismatic scholarship is a relatively new field in comparison to other Christian intellectual traditions. If it is true that Pentecostals simply are not trained for academic discourse, what contributes to this inadequacy? Writing about and worshiping among charismatics for the better part of ten years, I have noticed this anti-intellectualism firsthand and concur with the perception that it is deeply ingrained in the culture.

While I was researching and writing my book on Latino Pentecostals and working on my latest project, on evangelical youth culture, I was often peppered with questions from fellow Pentecostals. Why was I writing? Who was my audience? Was I a believer myself? Only when these questions had been answered--and the subjects were satisfied that I was not a hostile, secular academic--was I able to continue my research. But that didn't completely lay their fears to rest. The questions I was asking in my research rarely called for answers that validated faith; instead, they called for nuanced self-examination. I found many of my subjects either unprepared or unwilling to engage in that exercise. Such questions often heightened their suspicion of me, an academic trained at an Élite secular university, to the point where one informant asked me about my supposed quandary: "That must be hard, sister, to be a believer and be analytical." When I answered her, she appeared dissatisfied because I did not reflect enough tension with that false dichotomy; I did not wrestle sufficiently with my roles as a researcher *and* a believer.

My colleagues in the SPS agree that the anti-intellectualism of our Pentecostal forebears is still alive and well, but place equal blame on a perceived theological bias at evangelical presses. Some shared stories of their rejected manuscripts and

slights so offensive that they were reluctant to go on the record with them for this article. Most scholars agree that evangelical presses do not seem interested in having Pentecostals write for their academic divisions because they view Pentecostal theology as inferior.

One notable dissenter was Vanguard University's Frank Macchia, director of the Graduate Program in Religion. Macchia told me he believes that Pentecostal scholarship is beginning to find a niche in evangelical academic publishing, citing Zondervan as one receptive press. He suggested that evangelicals are increasingly interested in distinctively Pentecostal understandings of the Holy Spirit's role in salvation: "A fully Trinitarian theology that recognizes the unique economy of the Spirit has become very attractive for many evangelicals in the current theological and ecumenical climate." Macchia sees opportunities for evangelical, Orthodox, and Pentecostal scholars to work together, engaging in conversations across theological lines.

But most Pentecostal scholars are not so optimistic. Cheryl Bridges Johns, professor of theology at Church of God Seminary, wonders whether evangelical presses have any interest in Pentecostal scholarship beyond Pentecostalism as a sociological phenomenon. She noted that Pentecostal scholars have taken to publishing their own works through cooperative arrangements with presses like Sheffield Press, which publishes monographs in tandem with Johns' seminary. Johns also quoted Marx to explain how Pentecostals have "internalized their own oppression." They have begun to believe their own bad publicity, she argued, and that has affected their productivity and their confidence that they can publish at a high level of academic sophistication. Implicit in Johns' reply is that Pentecostal scholars need to commit to an ambitious writing and research agenda.

I contacted several major evangelical presses and trade organizations in order to determine if what I had heard from my SPS colleagues was at all accurate. I also took a trip to my local Christian bookstore to see where Pentecostal books are placed and how they are categorized. I contacted InterVarsity Press, Eerdmans, Baker Book House, Tyndale House, the Christian Booksellers Association, and the Evangelical Press Association, and asked them if they kept track of the denominational or faith-tradition background of their authors. None of them did. The reasons I received for this varied from a lack of interest to the work involved in creating yet another database.

When I asked the presses and associations if they knew of any Pentecostal or charismatic authors who publish specifically in their academic divisions, many, if not all the presses either did not know, referred me to non-academic popular authors, or, like InterVarsity Press, said that they tend to publish authors with a Reformed, Arminian, or Baptist focus; therefore, Pentecostals and charismatics were outside their purview. Several of the publishers stressed that they have published authors who are charismatic, but generally did not seek those authors out to write for the academic division. When I searched the websites and catalogues of those presses, apart from the ubiquitous Gordon Fee, I did not see many Pentecostal or charismatic authors who wrote for their academic divisions.

The answers that I received began to form a pattern. It is not so much that evangelical presses have problems with Pentecostal or charismatic authors, but rather they are content with soliciting and funneling those authors into categories that presumably only Pentecostals can write about. Baker Book House, for example, has a division called Chosen Books, where popular charismatic authors can ply their trade on topics such as revival, prophecy, spiritual warfare, and other assorted experientially based subjects. It is not unlike the ghettoization of ethnic minorities in the evangelical press. Overwhelmingly, authors of color write about topics that presumably they know best, but where are they when it comes to theological subjects that scarcely touch on racial or ethnic issues? Pentecostals have fallen into their own ghetto, and as they know full well, once you're in the 'hood, it's hard to get out.

Of course, evangelical presses, like their secular brethren, want to sell books. According to the Evangelical Press Association, charismatics buy more books than any other group in the vast evangelical subculture. Popular authors like T.D. Jakes, Tommy Tenney, Derek Prince, and a host of others provide the representation that charismatics have in evangelical presses. In turn, Christian bookstores carefully stock them in the section marked "Charismatic," to signal to potential buyers that this section will deal with topics that are very specific to the experiential, the supernatural--what is known in the academy as "extraordinary religion." As someone from a trade association informed me, bookstores are careful to place charismatic books in their proper section, lest they fall into the wrong hands and upset a customer. What lies behind this tension?

To be charismatic means something in evangelical circles: it is a signifier of faith, practice, and possibly theological unsoundness. Since evangelicals of all stripes are and historically have been consumed with defining and re-defining the

boundaries of orthodoxy, it should not surprise anyone that presses would take the opportunity to use their academic divisions to delineate what is and is not orthodox Christianity. This division and mutual suspicion hides a deeper division--a historic break where evangelicals and Pentecostals line up on opposite sides of what each believes is orthodoxy and orthopraxy. It sounds simplistic to say that it boils down to rationalistic-minded evangelicals trying to tie ethereal, Spirit-minded Pentecostals to the ground of historic Reformed theology, Calvinist or otherwise, and Pentecostals often yielding to the temptation to flaunt their Corinthian spirituality in graceless displays of egoism--but it may be that simple.

Indeed, rather than continuing to blame and divide, let me offer some suggestions to try to bridge this gap. Pentecostal scholars do themselves, their students, and the rest of their evangelical brethren an intellectual disservice by reverting to writing in that Pentecostal ghetto. Certainly, their research agendas and writings are strong enough for scholarly critique, and will be of great benefit to their students. After all, this generation may be the one that breaks free from the anti-intellectual fog Pentecostals have spent much of their lives walking through. Opportunities to write on the salvific role of the Holy Spirit, as Frank Macchia notes, may very well be a point of ecumenical convergence that will help ease sectarian historical legacies evident throughout evangelicalism. Pentecostal scholars are going to have to become willing to subject their history and their theology to the hermeneutics of suspicion so that not only those of us trained in secular academies will be able to lay claim to intellectual rigor.

At the same time, other evangelicals can learn something from Pentecostals, and not just in the realm of phenomenology. Presses might consider attending an SPS conference and speaking with the hundreds of scholars that attend every year from around the world. If Pentecostals often irk their evangelical friends by being steeped in the irrational, Pentecostals are equally irked at being viewed as poor country cousins. Is it possible that what evangelicals view as Pentecostals' shallowness emanates from one too many trips through the "charismatic" section of the bookstore? Such representations of Pentecostalism do not do justice to the deep scholarly work being done by the consortium at the Church of God Seminary nor to the African American and Latino scholars in the SPS who are doing exciting historical and theological work on a broad range of topics.

And evangelical presses would do well to join the secular presses and try to uncover why Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity has exploded throughout the world. Well-worn sociological theories of crisis-driven, disinherited, uneducated masses clinging to a heterodox experiential faith to make sense of their world are simplistic at best and often flatly erroneous. Sustained attention to the astonishing growth of Pentecostalism will provide a space for Pentecostal scholars to flesh out systematic theologies, sociological theories, and historical studies that can place this phenomenon in context. Evangelical presses--and, indeed, journals--should welcome the challenge.

I never engaged in those grad-school debates about who should tell whose stories. Better simply to get on with the work of giving my community a voice. Can Pentecostals tell their own stories? They have and will continue to do so. My desire is that others see this as a productive endeavor worthy of finding a place in the evangelical canon.

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¹. Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2001).