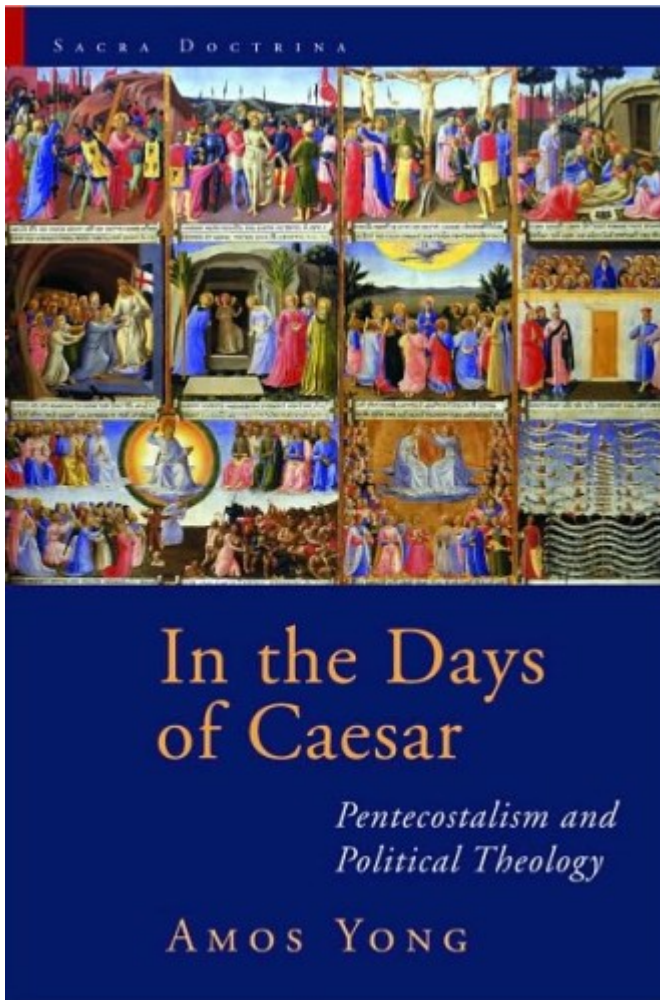


In the Days of Caesar, by Amos Yong

reviewed by [Robin Lovin](#) in the [November 29, 2011](#) issue

In Review



In the Days of Caesar

By Amos Yong
Eerdmans

In the course of the 20th century, Pentecostalism expanded from a small revival movement to a global presence comparable in its extent and variety to Roman

Catholicism or Anglicanism. Yet few people in mainstream U.S. churches know much about it, and what little they do know relates more to Pentecostal practice than to Pentecostal thought.

Non-Pentecostal Christians tend to see Pentecostalism through a sociological rather than a theological lens. Amos Yong is a Pentecostal theologian who aims to change that. With a steady output of works on Christian hospitality, global theology, religion and science, and religion and society, he furthers a dialogue between Pentecostal theology and other schools of thought that is shaped by his broad knowledge of theology and his inclusive vision of his own tradition.

In the Days of Caesar develops a Pentecostal view of Christian life under worldly powers. Yong's interpretation begins in the days of Caesar Augustus, whose rule provided the political context for the narrative of Luke-Acts, in which Pentecostalism finds its origin and bearings. A global religious movement necessarily takes different forms as it finds itself operating under different leadership and in different settings; Pentecostalism is extraordinarily diverse, encompassing Pat Robertson's American conservatism and Juan Sepúlveda's Chilean liberation theology.

Yong introduces readers to the full range of these leaders and movements with analytical clarity and without judgment. Rather than outlining a single, normative way of Pentecostal thinking, he explains how particular versions of Pentecostalism came to take the forms they have. This diversity is crucial to his theology. The multiplicity of tongues is as important to the Pentecostal experience as the unity of the Spirit, and Yong feels no need to have all Pentecostals come out in the same place politically.

The Pentecostal movement as Yong describes it thus encompasses a wider range of political theologies than denominationally organized forms of Christianity. He seeks to put all of them in dialogue with other versions of Christian political thought. All Christian thinkers, from the most conservative to the most progressive, have counterparts in the Pentecostal community, and Yong is convinced that in all cases the two sides have something to learn from each other if the dialogue can be opened.

Pentecostal theology is often taken to be primarily eschatological. The gift of the Spirit marks the "last days," and theology is supposed to anticipate imminent fulfillment. Yong, however, sees Pentecostalism as "performative." The way that

Pentecostals live out their faith under present conditions is more important to their identity than are their beliefs about what is about to happen next. Their performances may take place in the realms of politics, culture, civil society or economics. A large part of Yong's book is devoted to surveying the Pentecostal possibilities in each of these areas of human life and putting them in dialogue with the most likely counterparts from other theological traditions. For example, Yong considers the Pentecostal view of civil society in relation to John Milbank's Radical Orthodoxy, and he compares Pentecostal understandings of economic life to American Catholic thinking about subsidiarity and solidarity. The result is not only a global survey of Pentecostalism but also a compendium of postmodern Christian social thought.

Even in a book of some 400 pages, these many possibilities for dialogue can barely be introduced and can only rarely be developed. A reader without a broad knowledge of contemporary political theology is apt to feel as much a stranger among the mainstream academic possibilities as among the varieties of African and Latin American Pentecostalism. If Yong had pursued one or two of these dialogues in more detail, he might have given us a better idea of Pentecostalism as a voice in ecumenical theology. There are few Pentecostal writers with his scholarly background to develop the ideas enacted in Pentecostal ways of life.

Yong pulls a few themes together in a final chapter on Pentecostal hope. The secular world is irreducibly multiple and diverse, Yong contends, and Christians must resist political pressure to unify it prematurely. That is why he finds guidance in Catholic teaching about subsidiarity and in Abraham Kuyper's writings on the independent spheres of social life, and also why he rejects political ideologies that impose a single order on civil society and concentrate power in the hands of government. In the days of Caesar, unity exists only in hope. Perhaps that is the only place it should exist. Premature unity is likely to be politically coercive and theologically rigid. Performing the Christian life is a matter of bearing witness to hope while living with the differences. Like the Pentecost experience itself, Pentecostal political theology requires both the experience of diversity and the anticipation of unity.