Steven Félix-Jäger


Félix-Jäger has blazed a trail for Pentecostals with this unprecedented study. Indeed, creative as they historically are, why haven’t Pentecostals engaged the arts and aesthetics more intentionally? Originally his dissertation at Glyndŵr University (2013), in this book Félix-Jäger throws “all-in” with both Postmodernism and Pentecostal pneumatology.

On the former, Félix-Jäger provides a brief historical accounting of what Postmodernism is: a condition more than a carefully derived position (citing Vanhoozer). Yet it is a condition that makes room not only for Pentecostals to engage art and aesthetics from their own cultural location(s), but also one that should make room for a distinctly Pentecostal aesthetic. Because Postmodernism is about axiology and not about either metaphysics or epistemology, Félix-Jäger believes there is now intellectual and cultural space for a Pentecostal Christian worldview in the arena of contemporary art, “The relativistic assumptions of postmodernism welcome the Pentecostal voice to join the conversation,” (66). He realizes that the Postmodern world is not interested in ultimate truth claims and so he cautions that “Pentecostals objective assertions must be graciously dogmatic” (122). Indeed, he carefully qualifies that there is room for the belief that beauty is objectively real, but only as that belief rests in faith. There is no reason for Christians or Christian intellectuals to be unnecessarily off-putting to their secular interlocutors.

Concerning Pneumatology, Félix-Jäger avers that Pentecostals approach reality with both “expectancy and encounter” (92, citing Warrington). It follows in Félix-Jäger’s thinking that Pentecostals should be open to encountering, and then to discerning, the inspiration of God’s Spirit in art produced by non-Christians. The Spirit collaborates with the humanity of diverse peoples (he follows Guthrie and McElroy hereon) in a way that makes them into the “fullness of who we were created to be,” (88). Specifically for a distinctive approach to art and aesthetics, Félix-Jäger proposes that Pentecostals firstly view art as a charism, but only so long as “it is in service to God, and not to religion. If art serves religion, like in the Exodus of the golden calf, it can become idolatry,” (139). Secondly, following Suurmond he encourages Pentecostals to view artisanship as play. Play, because it “is irrational and supralogical” (158), has no intrinsic purpose and so a doorway is opened up for grace. Out of grace, and for no functional purpose, God created the universe to shine forth his glory. Similarly, Pentecostals can encourage and engage the arts in a playful manner, not so much to teach as to share. On this point he elevates Makoto
Fujimura, an artist (recently hired to head Fuller Seminary’s Brehm Center for the Arts) whose abstract work is produced not to teach but to be contemplated; Fujimura paints not to suggest answers but rather to seek guidance. Similarly Pentecostals, Félix-Jäger implies, would do well to use art to engage culture and stimulate thoughtful conversation rather than to proselytize or advertise their faith.

There is so much that Pentecostals will find informative and commendable in this book. Félix-Jäger offers the reader a succinct historic overview of painted art. He repeatedly works his themes through Pentecostalism’s pneumatological lenses: eschatology, charisma, relationship, anthropology, and mission are each employed to carry his arguments. He takes account of much recent Pentecostal scholarship. Moreover, he manifests a theologically ecumenical awareness: the Roman Catholic Patrick Sherry, the Lutheran Jürgen Moltmann, the Reformed Karl Barth, the enigmatic Clark Pinnock, and the Presbyterian Kevin Vanhoozer, among others, are all engaged in this groundbreaking study. There are thoughtful admonitions about how to discern the S/spiritual quality of non-Christian and even other-religion produced art. Very helpful, Félix-Jäger helps the reader understand the philosophical turn beneath why recent western art has turned so consistently toward the subjective and the avant-garde. There are even twelve photographs that illuminate the particularly nuanced details made throughout the book.

Yet for all my admiration, I have a question and a looming trouble-spot. First the question. If a criterion for discernment of the Spirit’s inspirational effect in artwork is that it serve God, not religion, how is it that Félix-Jäger wants Christians in general, and Pentecostals in specific, to seriously and even theologically consider the artwork produced by artists in other religions? By his own parameters, would not that rule out all non-Christian religious art? This is especially perplexing given that he carefully and repeatedly argues that artists must be examined as members of their own sub-cultures. Since those artists see themselves as resolutely serving their own god(s) and/or religious communities, communities that have no correlation with the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition, it seems Félix-Jäger has rather painted himself into a corner: their art is idolatrous. Seriously, I doubt he would agree, but that is the edge of the formative gang-plank toward which he walks us.

Then there is a confusing trouble-spot. The central aim of Félix-Jäger’s book is to ground his philosophical aesthetics. Thus, he rightly seeks an ontological foundation (Ch. 2). His yearn thereon is appropriate. Aesthetics truly is a topic today that frequently slithers with no constraints. For their part, twentieth and twenty-first century Pentecostal theologians have sought anchors rooted in God’s revelation for their theology: biblical narratives, the person and