

**A Response to Bill Oliverio's
“Theological Sources for a Pentecostal Christian Humanist Movement”**

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Oliverio's paper raises what is, at its core, an existential question for global Pentecostalism at the present historical moment. Now that Pentecostalism has grown from a marginalised sect into a movement comprising nearly two-thirds of a billion adherents worldwide, the pressing question is how to combine its historic emphasis on the transformative power and love of the Holy Spirit with rigorous human intelligence in the service of a fractured world's flourishing. This, I suggest, is the deeper question animating Oliverio's proposal.

Oliverio's argument begins with Saint Francis of Assisi's blessing, "May the Lord give you peace," a phrase that at first appears simple, even trivial, but which Oliverio shows to embody a significant theological posture: Francis does not seek to control, impose a rigid religious programme, or reduce the other person to an object to be persuaded, managed, or manipulated. Instead, he stands before another human being in what Buber (1970) termed an "I–Thou" encounter, recognising a holy mystery already at work in that person's life. In Peterson's (1989) language, this is a posture of *prevenience*: the acknowledgement that God's grace and Spirit have already arrived in the room beforehand, are always taking the initiative, and are already at work in a person's life long before we arrive with our arguments or answers.

This posture of prevenience becomes the interpretive key for Oliverio's proposal. Drawing on Francis, Buber, the Sermon on the Mount, and contemporary Pentecostal theology, Oliverio offers a blueprint for a Pentecostal Christian humanism built on three pillars: Spirit-baptised love, human flourishing, and intellectual seriousness. He casts a vision of Pentecostal communities known for embodying divine love, pursuing the flourishing of all people, and engaging faithfully with the world's knowledge.

In response to this vision, I offer three reflections intended to extend the conversation and deepen the articulation of Oliverio's proposal.

1. The Immanent Telos of Human Flourishing

My first reflection concerns the core immanent goal, or telos, of human flourishing. Oliverio's emphasis on human flourishing is central and, I believe, correct. My concern is with how this emphasis is sustained. Specifically, how it remains tethered to the transcendence to which Oliverio has already tied it.

Human flourishing is among the most heavily contested concepts in contemporary society, and different communities define it in radically incompatible ways. Consumer capitalism defines flourishing as material acquisition and financial abundance; therapeutic culture defines it as autonomous self-actualisation and personal emotional comfort; nationalist movements define it in tribal and exclusionary rather than universal terms.

Oliverio's framework already anticipates part of this problem by explicitly tying flourishing to alignment with divine transcendence, and this qualifier matters. My concern, however, is not that the term “flourishing” is undefined but that, historically, Christian humanisms have drifted from their own stated transcendent commitments. As Taylor (2007) documents in *A Secular Age*, the vertical, transcendent anchor of communion with God has repeatedly been eclipsed by the horizontal pursuit of “flourishing”—not for lack of a definition, but for lack of durability. Naming transcendence at the outset does not, by itself, guarantee that transcendence survives contact with institutions, funding pressures, and the slow work of generational transmission. My caution, then, is not with the theology but with the sociology of what tends to happen to humanisms over time.

The healing at the Gate Beautiful (Acts 3:1–10) illustrates the alternative. A lame man sits at the temple gate begging for alms; for material flourishing, to survive another day. Peter and John respond: “Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you: in the name of

Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk” (Acts 3:6, NIV). Luke does not separate the man’s physical and social restoration from his spiritual encounter; the two form a single, integrated reality. The man walks, leaps, and enters the temple praising God. For the Pentecostal, flourishing is never merely social, psychological, or material—it is fundamentally *doxological*. Human flourishing finds its highest expression in worship, gratitude, and the giving of glory to God; it is a life reoriented toward God. A Pentecostal humanist ethic must keep reminding the world that human life reaches its fullest expression only when lived in joyful praise, in connection with the living God.

Oliverio has already sequenced this rightly: Spirit-baptised love *before* flourishing, transcendence *before* the immanent goal. The question this raises is how that sequence might be guarded institutionally and in practice, so that it does not succumb to the kind of secular drift Taylor describes.

2. The Formative Power of Social Systems and Structures

My second reflection draws on my perspective as a sociologist of religion in digital and globalised societies, and concerns the formative power of social systems and structures.

One of the most compelling aspects of Oliverio's paper is its diagnosis of late-modern anxiety, fragmentation, and the panoptic pressure of digital devices. To make this diagnosis comprehensive, however, requires a more robust account of how contemporary social systems and structures actively form human persons, shape souls, and influence flourishing.

The primary challenge facing the global church today is not only intellectual disagreement over what flourishing and “the good life” mean. It is that the social systems and structures we inhabit already powerfully train our desires, aspirations, identities, and imaginations of “the good,” long before we ever enter a place of worship. Digital platforms do

not merely transmit neutral information; they systematically capture, monetise, and train attention. E-commerce marketplaces and consumer cultures do not merely sell products; they cultivate desire and shape aspiration. Algorithms do not merely organise content; they are engineered to monetise outrage, reward tribal polarisation, and subtly distort moral perception.

We are, in many ways, like fish trying to understand the water in which we swim. Christian spirituality has historically excelled at diagnosing personal, individual sin; today, it also needs to become better at diagnosing sinful systems and structures that deform souls. If Pentecostal humanism is to become a viable social ethic, it requires a richer *sociology of formation*—a macro-level account of how institutions, ideologies, technologies, and wider socio-economic structures shape the very humans we hope will flourish.

Oliverio's third tenet of Pentecostal humanism rightly encourages engagement with the full breadth of human knowledge. Sociologically, however, knowledge never exists in a neutral vacuum. What we take for granted as "common sense" is socially constructed, manufactured by social systems and ideologies that are themselves often flawed. These dominant knowledge paradigms package their biases as objective truth, quietly shaping desires and worldviews without our realising we are being influenced.

This raises a second question: how can Pentecostal humanism critically filter mainstream knowledge when both the ideas themselves, and the flawed systems that produce them, are taken for granted as the unquestioned default?

3. Pentecost: Communion-in-Difference

My third reflection concerns Pentecost itself. Throughout Oliverio's paper, Pentecost functions as a symbol of diversity, openness, and mutual recognition—a celebration of the

“many tongues” of humanity (cf. Yong 2003). I affirm this reading, and I appreciate how Oliverio anchors it in agape, arguing that Spirit-baptised love is the core orientation of Pentecostal humanism.

Acts 2, however, is not only a celebration of difference; it is also the story of those differences being held together by a common, shared encounter with the Holy Spirit. Contemporary societies oscillate between two toxic responses to human difference: forced assimilation, which demands submission to a single dominant cultural framework, and radical fragmentation, in which difference devolves into mutual incomprehension and hyper-tribal polarisation.

Pentecost offers a third way. Languages remain distinct, tongues remain different, cultures remain unique—differences are neither erased nor melted into a monoculture—yet they are held together in a common reality created by the Holy Spirit. In Singapore, this reality is approached painstakingly at the civic level, in a highly structured, multiracial, multi-religious society where harmony is not left to chance but conscientiously cultivated through deliberate shared spaces of encounter.

In a similar vein, I suggest that global Pentecostalism needs more than a celebration of diversity; it needs a realistic *theology of disagreement*—one that addresses how deep communion might be sustained across political and ethical disagreement, and across the pull of localised cultures, national loyalties, and histories. The future of global Pentecostalism may depend less on celebrating difference than on learning how to sustain communion across those differences.

This raises a third and final question: Oliverio’s framework beautifully reflects what Yong (2003) calls the “many tongues” principle, but when these many voices express deeply

conflicting moral and political convictions, what theological tools does Pentecostal humanism provide to preserve church unity and prevent diversity from devolving into division?

A Concluding Safeguard: Prophetic Restlessness

I would like to close by suggesting that while Oliverio's vision for Pentecostal humanism is beautifully anchored in Spirit-baptised love, it needs, to remain potent in the modern context, to be safeguarded by what I would call a *prophetic restlessness*.

Humanism at its best reminds us of the irreducible dignity of every human being. But even the most sincere, practical love risks being quietly domesticated by the status quo if our hopes are tied entirely to human-engineered strategies. When expressions of Spirit-baptised love and human flourishing are reduced to what can be managed through policies, institutions, or social programmes, they become constrained by the limits of our own designs. And our designs, however good, are never enough.

Pentecost, inherently eschatological in character, provides a vital transcendent safeguard here. Oliverio describes the Pentecostal communities of Acts 2 and 4 as sharing a “proleptic foretaste in the now of the not yet of God’s coming kingdom.” That tension of the “not yet” demands a disposition of prophetic restlessness: a holy refusal to be fully satisfied with any present arrangement. It protects Spirit-baptised love from becoming static, sentimental, or domesticated, because a Pentecostal imagination is captured by promise rather than programme. It insists that human beings can never be fully understood, or fully satisfied, apart from God’s future; it sees not only who people are today but who they are becoming through the Spirit’s transforming work.

This prophetic, restless edge aligns with the figure of Saint Francis with which Oliverio's paper began. Francis refused to impose a rigid religious programme on people: a programme

gives a restrictive human blueprint, while a prophetic imagination throws open a door to God's promised future, forcing us to confront how far our present human systems fall short of it.

A Pentecostal humanism animated by love must, therefore, remain restless. It must love the world too deeply to leave it as it is; it blesses, but it also disrupts; it points beyond our best human designs toward a transcendent reality that no current system can fully contain.

This returns us to the heart of Oliverio's paper, and to Saint Francis: the beauty of his blessing was not that it offered a programme, but that it threw open a door to possibility: "May the Lord give you peace." Oliverio's paper extends that same blessing to the nearly two-thirds of a billion Pentecostals worldwide. My closing prayer is that the Lord would give us *all* peace, and grant us three things: the grace to hold deep communion across our sharpest disagreements; the discernment to unmask the social systems that quietly deform us; and an ever-deepening desire for union with the living God, whose Spirit is still, and always, making all things new.

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