Studying Pentecostalism is important because it provides insights into how people practice religion, how they understand the divine, and how they experience spirituality. Pentecostalism has also had a profound impact on global culture and society, influencing the development of music, art, and literature, as well as political and social movements. As a global movement with adherents from diverse cultural, social, and economic backgrounds, Pentecostalism can shed light on the processes of globalization, the creation of new cultural identities, and the diversity of religious experiences and beliefs around the world, while also revealing common themes that connect them. Overall, studying Pentecostalism can help us to better understand religion, culture, society, and the human experience.

Did you notice? The paragraph above was entirely computer-generated, in less than a minute and with no editing at all. ChatGPT is impossible to avoid these days; how could I not begin my editorial here? Like so many, I have thoroughly enjoyed playing with this tool these past months. At first, it seems so eloquent and versatile. Will we still need scholarship in the future? The hype in media and universities would certainly have us believe that big change is coming.

One of the more entertaining flaws of ChatGPT is its propensity to invent and summarize inexistent publications. I have even seen this crop up in a recent (and promptly rejected) PhD application! The reason for these false citations is, of course, that ChatGPT is nothing but a linguistic probability machine. Large language model AIs are trained on a set of tokens, such as words or three-character sequences. They simply “learn” what tokens are likely to follow one another. Such a primitive model, when trained on vast amounts of text, can simulate surprisingly intelligent responses. In a way, these AI models record and reproduce
what Foucault called “discourse”: a regularity in the dispersion of human articulations.

This propensity to mimic and reproduce established discourse is why I do not believe these AIs will ever replace good scholarship. At best they will help democratize linguistic ability. At worst they will flood the internet with regurgitated text (for other AIs to train on, as if in a giant feedback loop). Originality will elude this kind of language model, at least until a better approach to AI has been found. This is where good research will retain its niche.

The problem of reproduced discourse versus original research is not a new one for our subject. With so much “established” knowledge about Pentecostalism, the standard concepts sometimes get in the way of studying what people actually do and how they affiliate. Michael Wilkinson and I have just published an edited volume (with AI art on the cover …) that seeks to challenge the homogenizing “denominational template” of Pentecostal Studies.¹ In thirty-six chapters the book emphasizes instead the global divergence, hybridity and flows beneath what scholars call Pentecostalism.

Similarly, the four articles in this volume of PentecoStudies seek original ways for analysing and producing Pentecostal theology. Joel Daniels proposes that insights from Tiantai Buddhist philosophy enable a more fluid conceptualization of the Holy Spirit and the Pentecostal movement as a whole. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu studies how the metaphor of the eagle has begun to guide and shape vernacular theologies and personalities. John Onelum considers how mimetic theory may help elucidate the affective dimension of the so-called “prosperity gospel”. And Leonardo Alves shows how contextual, everyday hermeneutics shape Pentecostal beliefs among migrants. I hope you enjoy reading this issue, and do keep the original research coming!

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