

## Somatic pneumatology

Horne, Faith van

DOI:

[10.1080/27691616.2024.2329546](https://doi.org/10.1080/27691616.2024.2329546)

License:

Creative Commons: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND)

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Horne, FV 2024, 'Somatic pneumatology: A Pentecostal contribution to feminist liberation theology', *Journal of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity*, vol. 44, no. 1, pp. 39-53.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/27691616.2024.2329546>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

### General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

### Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.



## Somatic pneumatology: A Pentecostal contribution to feminist liberation theology

Faith Van Horne

**To cite this article:** Faith Van Horne (2024) Somatic pneumatology: A Pentecostal contribution to feminist liberation theology, *Journal of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity*, 44:1, 39-53, DOI: [10.1080/27691616.2024.2329546](https://doi.org/10.1080/27691616.2024.2329546)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/27691616.2024.2329546>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 18 Mar 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 207




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Somatic pneumatology: A Pentecostal contribution to feminist liberation theology

Faith Van Horne 

Department of Theology and Religion, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

## ABSTRACT



This article presents a somatic pneumatology, defined as a theological approach in which embodied encounters with Christ through the Holy Spirit in worship form a basis for critical and constructive work. Arising from pentecostal feminist theology, this somatic pneumatology is a vital resource for women's empowerment to subvert patriarchal structures, demonstrating positive personal and social consequences. A somatic pneumatology highlights and corrects limitations in liberation feminist theologies that do not account for ecstatic, embodied worship praxis in theological construction, instead deeming such praxis 'otherworldly' sublimation that upholds patriarchal power structures. Marginalization of embodied worship as a basis for theological construction stems from an understanding of power that struggles to account for the role of ecstatic religious experience in empowering women to work for social justice. A somatic pneumatology reveals and corrects this blind spot, offering an important contribution to feminist liberation theology.

## KEYWORDS

Feminist theology;  
pentecostal theology;  
somatic pneumatology;  
liberation theology; ivone  
gebara

## Introduction

Feminist Pentecostal theologians have primarily incorporated resources from outside their own traditions to critique and correct oppressive and patriarchal practices within them. Constructive work that can speak to a broader ecumenical audience is still in its early stages, but scholars are breaking new theological ground.<sup>1</sup> Due to a delayed entry onto the feminist theological scene, distinctly pentecostal resources that enrich and even challenge ecumenical feminist frameworks have remained limited. This article offers a contribution to this emerging field by naming a *somatic pneumatology*, originating from Pentecostal women's experience and expressed in Pentecostal feminist academic work.

**CONTACT** Faith Van Horne  [fxv020@student.bham.ac.uk](mailto:fxv020@student.bham.ac.uk); [faithvanhorne@gmail.com](mailto:faithvanhorne@gmail.com)  Birmingham  
Research Park, 97 Vincent Drive, Birmingham B15 2SQ

<sup>1</sup>Stephenson, "Feminist Theologies," 392–396.

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

‘Somatic pneumatology’ refers to a theological approach in which embodied encounters with Christ through the Holy Spirit, resulting in physical, affective and social transformation and narrated through individuals’ and faith communities’ testimonies, form a basis for critical and constructive work. This somatic pneumatology reveals and corrects an underlying binary within feminist liberation theologies regarding just engagement with power: namely, an assumed oppositional relationship between the emotive embodied worship praxis characteristic of pentecostal traditions and empowerment for engagement in liberative justice. At the heart of this binary lies a privileged understanding of immanentism, in which divine empowerment is understood to originate and arise from within selves, individually or collectively. This understanding of power within feminist liberation theologies marginalizes worshippers’ named experiences of empowerment received from a transcendent source (God, known bodily and affectively as Christ through the Holy Spirit). Pentecostal and charismatic women do not name their embodied experiences of empowerment as originating from within individual or collective human selves. Empowerment is instead experienced tangibly, within the body, as being received from a divine source while ‘standing outside of oneself, the literal definition of ecstasy.’<sup>2</sup> I argue that an over-privileging of immanentism within strains of feminist liberation theology that marginalize ecstatic Christian worship as a theological resource is intertwined with Western academic assumptions that are themselves in need of critique.

Using the frame of somatic pneumatology, this article seeks to make explicit the assumptions surrounding feminist liberation theologies of immanent embodied empowerment, demonstrate how these assumptions marginalize the voices of women who name transcendent empowerment through ecstatic embodied worship as a vital aspect of personal and social liberation, and offer a constructive response. I support this argument by applying a somatic pneumatology to an immanent liberation feminist characterization of ecstatic embodied worship, with an example from ecofeminist theologian Ivone Gebara. While Gebara’s intention is to combat fundamentalist tendencies, her equation of ecstatic worship with fundamentalism fails to account for pentecostal women’s testimonies of divine ecstatic embodied empowerment and demonstrated social liberation, within their own contexts. The somatic pneumatology these women narrate, and which research demonstrates to be effective for social liberation, offers a strong critique to a perceived immanent understanding of power relations that excludes ecstatic embodied empowerment through worship as a factor. I conclude that a somatic pneumatology should therefore be recognized alongside other liberation feminist theologies, not in opposition to them.

---

<sup>2</sup>Vondey, *The Scandal of Pentecost*, 103.

## Marginalization of embodied ecstatic worship in feminist theological construction

Feminist and womanist theologians working from within pentecostalism, drawing from their own traditions' resources in their critical and constructive work, have named experiences of marginalization and misunderstanding by feminist scholars working from other traditions.<sup>3</sup> Some feminist theologians argue there are good reasons to draw a bright line between two poles of Christian theology. Rosemary Radford Ruether asserts that contemporary churches

are split between fundamentalists on the one hand, who seek to shore up an absolute worldview of fixed certainties that support patriarchal hierarchy, militarism, and free-market capitalism, and progressives on the other, who have accepted the diversity of cultures and religious perspectives and seek egalitarian justice.<sup>4</sup>

She concludes that 'no reconciliation is possible'<sup>5</sup> between the two sides.

Scholars from feminist, womanist and *mujerista* perspectives have critiqued Ruether and other white feminist theologians on several fronts.<sup>6</sup> Yet the underlying fundamentalist/progressive binary she names, and which permeates feminist theologies, has remained largely unchallenged. For example, Marvin Ellison cites Ruether's observation and names 'a traditionalist-progressive dichotomy'<sup>7</sup> at the heart of the split over Christian sexual ethics. In Ellison's view, Christian progressives live out a transformational, justice-centred ethic, as opposed to fundamentalists, who 'transmit without question or amplification ... a fixed and unchangeable truth that floats magically through history as "the Christian tradition"'.<sup>8</sup> Ellison does not offer specific examples. Yet feminist theologians who accept a fundamentalist-progressive binary tend to assume that global Pentecostal and charismatic traditions uniformly fall on the fundamentalist side.<sup>9</sup> Therefore pentecostal faith expressions and theologies (when pentecostal traditions are acknowledge to *have* a theology)<sup>10</sup> are viewed as inherently at odds with the goals of liberation feminist theologians. On this understanding, feminist engagement with Pentecostal and charismatic theologies is one-sided: coming from without, to inform and critique and correct oppressive, patriarchal structures within.

However, a diversity of voices arising from within contextualized global pentecostal scholarship challenge fundamentalist expressions and push for egalitarian justice. These include biblical hermeneutics from the African context that push for acceptance of LGBTQ+ relationships and women's rights,

<sup>3</sup>For example, see Collins, "Weaving a Web," 54; Hollingsworth, "Spirit and Voice," 189; Pierce, "Womanist Ways and Pentecostalism"; and Stephenson, "Feminist Theologies," 389.

<sup>4</sup>Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*, 223.

<sup>5</sup>Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*, 224.

<sup>6</sup>For a summary, see Pears, *Feminist Christian Encounters*, 32–35.

<sup>7</sup>Ellison, *Making Love Just*, 140.

<sup>8</sup>Ellison, *Making Love Just*, 141.

<sup>9</sup>For an example, see the passages from Ivone Gebara, detailed later in this article.

<sup>10</sup>See Archer, "A Pentecostal Way of Doing Theology."

respectively,<sup>11</sup> to Latinx theologies of social justice.<sup>12</sup> Feminist theologians drawing from resources within global pentecostal contexts are also involved in challenging oppressive structures and practices, both within and beyond church walls. And justice-centred theology is evident in pentecostal praxis as well.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, the global centre of Christianity is shifting from the industrialized West and toward pentecostal and charismatic embodied expressions of faith.<sup>14</sup> Within the United States, the percentage of churches engaged in ‘more enthusiastic and informal worship’ continues to increase.<sup>15</sup> The proliferation of embodied worship practices such as jumping, raising hands and speaking in tongues includes white mainline churches, where such practices are increasing at a rate equal to, if not greater than, Black and evangelical congregations.<sup>16</sup> A binary understanding of ecstatic embodied worship and engagement in liberative praxis would view these statistics as evidence of encroaching fundamentalism. The appropriate response would then be increased resistance. However, feminist theologians working from within pentecostal traditions understand affective embodied worship praxis as integral to, not opposed to, liberative justice.

Along with other feminists, pentecostal scholars acknowledge the ways in which claims to divine empowerment have been used to uphold patriarchal power structures.<sup>17</sup> Yet in feminist Pentecostal theological constructions, the empowerment women receive from ecstatic embodied encounter with Christ through the Holy Spirit provides the basis for challenging those structures.<sup>18</sup> Rather than an otherworldly distraction from lived realities of suffering, women within pentecostal traditions who encounter Christ through the Holy Spirit self-narrate experiences of transformational life change. Beyond individuals’ stories, studies show a link between embodied pentecostal praxis and improved conditions for women, despite continuing realities of patriarchal subjugation by men in positions of power.<sup>19</sup> Yet feminist liberation theologians who focus on an immanent understanding of power relations do not take these women’s stories of transcendent liberation into account in theological construction.

Why do feminist theologians within and without pentecostal traditions seem to hold contradictory approaches to empowerment for liberation? I argue that

---

<sup>11</sup>For the former, see Nel, *LGBTIQ+ People and Pentecostals*; Sewapa, “Can a Queer Be Born Again?”. For the latter, see Gabaitse, “Luke 4:18–19 and Salvation.”

<sup>12</sup>Solivan, *The Spirit, Pathos, and Liberation*.

<sup>13</sup>See Miller and Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism* and McRandal, *Christian Doctrine and the Grammar of Difference*, 161–176.

<sup>14</sup>Yong, *Renewing Christian Theology*, 4–7.

<sup>15</sup>Roso, Holleman, and Chaves, “Changing Worship Practices,” 678.

<sup>16</sup>Roso, Holleman, and Chaves, “Changing Worship Practices,” 678–680.

<sup>17</sup>Alexander et al., *Sisters, Mothers, Daughters*; Clifton, “Spirit, Submission, Power, and Abuse”; Gabaitse, “Luke 4:18–19 and Salvation”; Qualls, *God Forgive Us for Being Women*; Stephenson, *Dismantling the Dualisms for American Pentecostal Women in Ministry*.

<sup>18</sup>Hollingsworth, “Spirit and Voice”; Johns, “Grieving, Brooding, and Transforming.”

<sup>19</sup>Hollingsworth, “Spirit and Voice.”

one reason is an over-privileging of divine immanence in liberation feminist conceptions of embodiment and empowerment. An immanent understanding of embodied empowerment can be linked to white Western theological ideals of bodily mastery, possession and control, which form the basis of academic education and knowledge production.<sup>20</sup> As such, feminists who employ immanent power frameworks may unwittingly uphold, even as they strive to combat, those ideals. This immanent view of power marginalizes scholarship that names ecstatic embodied encounter with Christ through the Holy Spirit as a necessary component of empowerment in theological construction. This marginalization cuts off fruitful ecumenical engagement with feminist scholars who share the goal of liberating the oppressed from patriarchal control. It also fails to account for the self-narration of personal and social liberation of many marginalized Christians in the two-thirds world. As such, the assumed dichotomy between ecstatic embodied empowerment and liberative justice becomes itself a justice issue.

### **Liberation feminist theologies' privileging of immanent empowerment**

Liberation feminist theological discourses privilege an immanent conceptualization of the human/divine relationship. Empowerment originating from a transcendent divine source, directed from outside toward human beings, is viewed in these theologies as upholding patriarchal, hierarchical power structures.<sup>21</sup> In other words, divine power for liberation is understood to originate from within, extending outward. Divinity that originates outside the 'immanent frame'<sup>22</sup> is understood to reflect and uphold power structures that must be resisted to effect liberation. The concept of salvation on this view refers not to something humanity receives from a divine Other, but what humans are capable of and responsible for producing. Within the Christian tradition, a soteriology that places Jesus in the role of saviour, upon whom humans are dependent for salvation, opposes this stream of liberation theology. The views of worshippers who name transcendent empowerment as central to their own embodied interactions with the divine—as encountering and receiving strength from outside and beyond human selves (literally, ecstatically)—are marginalized and dismissed. They are seen as credulous, succumbing to sublimation and/or manipulation, their lived faith at odds with feminist goals of liberation.<sup>23</sup>

Feminist theologians are not alone in dismissing the value of open displays of religious affections in worship. A 'cultural bias against religious ecstasy'

<sup>20</sup>See Jennings, *After Whiteness*.

<sup>21</sup>Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, 452–455.

<sup>22</sup>Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 539–593.

<sup>23</sup>Ivone Gebara's view of pentecostal worship, detailed later in this article, is a representative example.

permeates academic disciplines, and Western culture at large.<sup>24</sup> At best, affective embodied worship is seen as sublimation, where emotional religious expression substitutes for other embodied needs rather than addressing them.<sup>25</sup> Emotional expression in worship, when perceived as temporary release and distraction, is seen as a barrier to personal and social liberation. Ivone Gebara, a Latin American ecofeminist liberation theologian, offers an illustrative example of this, which I call an ‘ecstatophobic’ view.

In examining Gebara, it is necessary to name my own positionality as a white American academic woman scholar writing from a British context. For clarification, I agree with Gebara’s critique of manipulative practices within some expressions of Latin American Pentecostalism that promote a prosperity gospel and do not engage with social issues. Other Pentecostal scholars have also named and critiqued these expressions, as the below discussion shows. I chose Gebara particularly because of the manner in which she portrays embodied worship practices that are representative of Pentecostal and charismatic traditions. Her view of the source and form of such ecstatic worship practices reveals the assumed dichotomy between ecstatic embodied worship and liberative social praxis that this article critiques.

Gebara has been a pivotal figure in shaping ecofeminist theologies, which interrogate the ways women have been associated with the natural world, and the connections between female/nature associations and patriarchal domination.<sup>26</sup> Writing from her context as a Brazilian Catholic nun, Gebara’s theology challenges Western masculine theologies that elevate individual autonomy and personal salvation and place God in a hierarchical relationship with humanity. Such theologies have been responsible for an adversarial view of the relationship between human beings and the rest of nature, in which resources (including other human beings) are viewed as assets to be dominated and controlled.<sup>27</sup> Her ecofeminist perspective seeks ‘another logic that wants women to be entirely the creators of their own life and of societal life.’<sup>28</sup> Here Gebara demonstrates her immanent understanding of the human/divine relationship, in which women’s creative empowerment arises from within themselves, causing outward effect. Her immanent theology does not account for a divine transcendence that originates from outside women’s selves, causing transformation within their being that can empower them to act for liberation.

Gebara shares with other liberation feminist theologians a sharp denunciation of Pentecostalism. She decries the way ‘a variety of Pentecostal groups, mixing fakery with naïve credulity and keeping people captive and enslaved

---

<sup>24</sup>Shantz, *Paul in Ecstasy*, 21–27.

<sup>25</sup>Percy, “Sweet Rapture: Subliminal Eroticism.”

<sup>26</sup>See Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*, 11–36.

<sup>27</sup>Isherwood and Clay, “Introduction.” in *Women in Christianity in the Modern Age*, 19.

<sup>28</sup>Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 161.



to so-called divine powers (and above all to their own representatives), gain more and more adherents among the poor'.<sup>29</sup> Of interest to a somatic pneumatology is the way she links distinctive worship practices with fundamentalism. Gebara portrays emotive embodied worship in opposition to liberative praxis. She decries the 'impressive growth throughout Latin America of fundamentalist, Pentecostal and charismatic religious movements. Worshipers crowd into enormous stadiums, seeking catharsis by loudly praising God, speaking in tongues, wailing, shouting, and so on'.<sup>30</sup> Positive affective results of worship are seen as distracting the poor from real-world problems:

By responding to immediate needs, [Pentecostal churches] are offering what the state and other social institutions have been unable to provide. At the same time, they reinforce the hierarchical model of society ... For an hour a day, the individual feels esteemed, has the sense of being the center of attention, or feels that the community is praying for him or her ... Instead of abandonment, there is a sense of being a child of God and a member of a paternalistic tradition, and one can anticipate the harmony of heaven.<sup>31</sup>

Positive worship affections understood as embodied encounter with the transcendent divine are linked to the disempowerment of individuals for liberative change. On Gebara's view, 'the world of religion seems to take care of just about everything. Solutions to personal problems come from extraterrestrial beings, ahistorical entities who respond only if they are invoked with fervor and insistence'.<sup>32</sup> Gebara names transcendent divinity using terms associated with disembodiment: extraterrestrial, ahistorical. Positive affections raised in worship are seen as separate from the rest of life, priming worshippers to long for a future heaven rather than work for justice on the present earth. In other words, Gebara sees ecstatic Pentecostal worship as oppositional to present, lived needs. She perceives human appeal to, and claims of connection with, transcendent divinity as evidence of an otherworldly faith that preserves oppressive, patriarchal structures.

Gebara is responding to the serious damage of 'prosperity gospel' churches and media. And she names the patriarchal submission that Latin American women have been forced to endure as a result of church leaders who use divine mandate to uphold an oppressive, hierarchical order.<sup>33</sup> Manipulation by church leaders and the upholding of patriarchal systems that avoid real-world challenges is a serious concern. It is also one that pentecostal feminist academics have addressed, including those engaging with Latin American women's experiences.<sup>34</sup> Of interest for an empowering somatic pneumatology

---

<sup>29</sup>Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 164.

<sup>30</sup>Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 202.

<sup>31</sup>Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 202–203.

<sup>32</sup>Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 203.

<sup>33</sup>Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 203.

<sup>34</sup>Hollingsworth, "Spirit and Voice"; McRandal, *Christian Doctrine and the Grammar of Difference*, 161–176.

is Gebara's equation of ecstatic embodied worship with the avoidance of lived social response to oppression and injustice.

I argue that the equation of ecstatic embodied worship with conformance to patriarchal, hierarchical structures stems from an immanent feminist binary constructed around power relations and embodiment. An immanent feminist understanding of power, in which power is seen to exist between created beings who are tasked with its control and direction, assumes a binary response (conformance or resistance).<sup>35</sup> Because humans are embodied beings, this binary extends into bodies. Surrender to an outside power, even from a divine source, is viewed as a threat to personal bodily agency.<sup>36</sup> If this binary is correct, then churches that promote ecstatic worship practices, where worshippers name encounter with the transcendent divine as central, must be resisted in order to promote feminist ideals. However, if it is false, then the voices of those working for justice from within churches that emphasize ecstatic transformative divine encounters are being marginalized from a conversation where they are much needed. I argue the latter, based on research that incorporates the lived experiences of Latin American Pentecostal women into theological scholarship.

### A feminist pentecostal response: Somatic pneumatology

On a conceptual level, Pentecostal theology would appear to share the egalitarian goals of feminist theologians. Pentecostals understand themselves to be participants in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that began at the event of Pentecost described in Acts Chapter Two and continues to the present. However, this idealistic vision is often far from the lived realities of many Pentecostal and charismatic communities. This contradiction is known as the 'Pentecostal gender paradox'.<sup>37</sup> Yet can the presence of patriarchal authority and control of women's sexuality in different contextual expressions of Pentecostalism be enough to account for the seeming incompatibility of feminist and Pentecostal theologies, particularly with the growing chorus of feminist voices arising from within them? Theologically, the vision of Pentecost speaks against this.

Pentecostal feminists argue that there are empowering elements arising from Pentecostal practices that the binary frame employed by other feminist traditions makes invisible. Feminist and pentecostal theologies share several points of connection relating to material, embodied liberation. The latter centre the role of the Holy Spirit, encountered as the Spirit of Christ in ecstatic worship, in understanding liberation. And 'liberation' is experienced both

<sup>35</sup>Holtmann, "Introduction." in *Sisters, Mothers, Daughters*, 3.

<sup>36</sup>Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, 452–455; Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 75.

<sup>37</sup>Martin, "The Pentecostal Gender Paradox"; Dutko, *The Pentecostal Gender Paradox*, 1–2; Vondey, *Pentecostalism*, 122–124.

physically (materially) and spiritually, in contrast to an assumed binary between the two in much Western theology.<sup>38</sup> The values of ‘transformation, embodiment, and empowerment’<sup>39</sup> are shared by feminist and pentecostal theologians, and can serve as a bridge between the two. The role of transformative, materially embodied spirituality is a strong basis for connection with feminist theology.<sup>40</sup> However, the bias against transcendence as a source of empowerment in some strains of feminist liberation theologies makes for a challenging connection. I seek here to challenge this bias.

A number of scholars theologizing from a feminist Pentecostal perspective have used pneumatology as their starting point. Feminist systematic theology more broadly tends to offer limited reflection on the Holy Spirit, so a pneumatological emphasis is an important ecumenical addition.<sup>41</sup> Embodiment is a more common focus for feminist theologians, who seek to overcome the mind/body dualism which characterizes much Western Christian theology.<sup>42</sup> My own work seeks to examine how differing Pentecostal and feminist conceptions of the body influence the way that doctrines are received, critiqued and constructed. This feminist-informed Pentecostal theology of the body, or somatic pneumatology, provides a mutually enriching ground of constructive theological work. At the base of all of our ideas, ethics and decisions are our bodies. The bodies we inhabit, both individually and corporately, how we live and move in them, and the conceptual frames we have inherited for understanding them, indelibly mark how we approach issues that both feminist and Pentecostal theologians raise. A pneumatology that speaks to real-world liberation is necessarily somatic, consistent with material Pentecostal accounts of the body.

Other feminist theologians who have centred Latin American Pentecostal women’s experiences have come to a different conclusion than Gebara regarding the relationship between embodied worship and liberation. These scholars include women’s accounts of how their embodied experiences of worship have empowered them to work for their own liberation. Ecstatic worship for these scholars is integral to theological critique and construction, not in opposition to them. For example, studies of Pentecostal women in Colombia, Brazil and Latina women in the United States have shown increases in women’s autonomy and authority both publicly and privately, as a direct result of their ecstatic worship practices.<sup>43</sup> These scholars do not downplay the real experiences of patriarchal control that women in global Pentecostal contexts face. However, ecstatic embodied divine encounter has been shown as an antidote to oppression,

---

<sup>38</sup>Vondey, “Embodied Gospel.”

<sup>39</sup>Hollingsworth, “Spirit and Voice,” 190.

<sup>40</sup>Hollingsworth, “Spirit and Voice,” 190.

<sup>41</sup>Stephenson, “Feminist Theologies,” 392.

<sup>42</sup>Peterson, “Spirit and Body,” 156.

<sup>43</sup>For a summary, see Hollingsworth, “Spirit and Voice,” 198–204; and McRandal, *Christian Doctrine and the Grammar of Difference*, 163–164.

not a cause. Research suggests that patriarchal control stems from institutionalized structures that *negate* the freedom worshippers report as a result ecstatic religious expression.<sup>44</sup> A re-evaluation of the relationship between ecstatic worship and material, embodied liberation is therefore in order. The somatic pneumatology of Pentecostal feminists, which recognizes embodied encounter with the Holy Spirit as a liberating factor, is part of this needed re-evaluation.

Andrea Hollingsworth notes how Latin American women's ecstatic experiences of the Holy Spirit in public worship has given them freedom to speak and begin to make changes in their personal and public lives.<sup>45</sup> Based on their experiences, she constructs a pneumatology which recognizes 'the Holy Spirit as the divine voice through which persons are empowered to find their own voices'.<sup>46</sup> Transcendent encounter mediated through ecstatic, worshipping bodies does not distract from physical circumstances of oppression. Pentecostal worship itself is deeply embodied, expressed through ecstatic speech, dance, hand-clapping and other physical practices.<sup>47</sup> Like other feminist theologies, Pentecostal spirituality's centring of concrete, embodied practice is a key factor in theological reflection and construction.

Feminist theologians name embodiment as a key component of theological construction. Yet non-pentecostal feminist theologians have shown a 'hesitancy or nervousness about incorporating contemporary Pentecostal women's ecstatic or Charismatic experiences of the Holy Spirit into pneumatological construction'.<sup>48</sup> Discourses that marginalize experiences of empowerment originating outside the self, meeting worshippers from beyond themselves, and creating changes within embodied persons, reveals a reason for this hesitancy. I suggest that the physical manifestation of the transcendent divine within the worshipping body is one source of discomfort for feminist theologians. And I further suggest that this discomfort reveals an underlying acceptance of oppressive norms of the controlled, mastered, self-possessed body within Western (white) academic theology.<sup>49</sup> Gebara is not a white feminist. Yet her work is distributed by Western academic theological publishers and disseminated for use by white feminist theologians (such as myself). Therefore it is necessary to name and critique unexamined embodied discourses that might prevent the inclusion of alternative theological models of liberation. I argue that the conception of the worshipping body Gebara presents upholds theological narratives that marginalize the role of ecstatic divine empowerment in women's

---

<sup>44</sup>Vondey, *Pentecostalism*, 125–127.

<sup>45</sup>Hollingsworth, "Spirit and Voice," 198–204.

<sup>46</sup>Hollingsworth, "Spirit and Voice," 205.

<sup>47</sup>Hollingsworth, "Spirit and Voice," 204.

<sup>48</sup>Hollingsworth, "Spirit and Voice," 191–192.

<sup>49</sup>A full unpacking of this suggestion is beyond the scope of this article. For an argument on how the ideals of the white self-sufficient male (namely mastery, possession and control) have shaped Western theological education, see Jennings, *After Whiteness*.

narrated accounts of personal and social liberation. A somatic pneumatology exposes and corrects this omission.

Womanist and Pentecostal scholarship notes the ways in which black churches have been pressured to abandon ‘heathen’ ecstatic embodied worship practices in order to become socially acceptable.<sup>50</sup> Lisa Allen links the adoption of ‘acceptable’ (white) embodied worship practices with a decrease in black churches’ engagement in social justice.<sup>51</sup> Pentecostal feminist theology is situated within this stream of scholarship that challenges ‘acceptable’ embodied discourses, giving voice to women’s embodied experiences that have been marginalized. Challenging the fear of ecstatic embodied worship that characterizes much feminist theology is therefore a necessary task in opening up embodied discourses of liberation.

On Western accounts of selfhood, power that originates from outside the self, and upon which the self is dependent, is seen as a threat to personal agency.<sup>52</sup> Yet a relational account of selfhood, which recognizes human dependence on others in shaping oneself, does not fit into this account. This view of selfhood is more representative of the non-Western contexts in which Christianity is growing. The particular role of the uncontrolled body in worship is inseparable from non-Western accounts of self and agency, and may offer insights into freedom from embodied constrictions that Western theology has closed off. For example, studies of trauma and the body show how ‘Western’ embodied worship limits freedom of movement. By contrast, ‘if you look at religions around the world, they always start with dancing, moving, singing, physical experiences. The more “respectable” people become, the more stiff they become somehow.’<sup>53</sup> A body that is ‘respectably’ controlled in worship, closed to transcendent encounter, is a body that is closed to relational divine empowerment.

An overly immanent understanding of power reveals a possible connection with oppressive embodied views within feminist liberation theologies. Ecstatic embodied worship has been shown to empower women to work for their own liberation as a result of narrated accounts of transcendent encounter, not in opposition to them. Pentecostal embodied worship, understood as a ‘pattern of transformative affections’,<sup>54</sup> continues to be a source of oppressed women’s empowerment for liberation. A Pentecostal somatic pneumatology challenges the limitations of an immanent account of power in other feminist liberation theologies. Recognizing the spiritual mediation of the transcendent God within physical bodies, and resulting in concrete transformation of social circumstances, overcomes the spirit/matter dualism that other feminist

<sup>50</sup>Allen, *Womanist Theology of Worship*, 75–101; Alexander, *Black Fire*, 21–22; 28–31.

<sup>51</sup>Allen, *Womanist Theology of Worship*, 75–101. I am indebted to Angela N. Parker for making me aware of Allen’s work.

<sup>52</sup>Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 75.

<sup>53</sup>Tippett, Krista, “Bessel Van der Kolk.”

<sup>54</sup>Vondey, *The Scandal of Pentecost*, 109.

theologians seek to break down.<sup>55</sup> Pentecostal feminist theologians therefore offer a necessary challenge to, and enrichment of, other feminist liberation theologies from within their own tradition's resources.

## Conclusion

This article has shown that ecstatic embodied faith expressions are not only common among marginalized and oppressed people in general. They have been demonstrated to empower women *in particular* to work for transformational personal and social change that challenges patriarchal structures. Dismissal of their lived worship experiences silences their voices in academic feminist theological work and upholds oppressive discourses of power. Feminist liberation theologies constructed for marginalized women that do not incorporate those women's own accounts of transformational ecstatic spiritual experiences risk perpetuating the cycles of silencing and marginalization that feminist liberation theologians seek to end. A Pentecostal feminist somatic pneumatology challenges this silencing and offers a constructive response.

This ecumenical response also serves a reconciliatory function. Theology done in response to a perceived Other goes against the promise of universal reconciliation that Christians are called to live into the ministry of (2 Cor 5:16–21). When a theology rests on an assumed binary that excludes entire communities of peoples' voices and experiences, what is valuable to the excluded group may be classed as ontologically unredeemable. This article has argued that feminist liberation theologians who negate accounts of transcendent embodied encounter in theological construction have engaged in such exclusion. Rather than resulting in further oppression and closing off of alternative voices, when Christians approach justice work secure in their faith in the God of Jesus Christ, they can become open to the God who transcends differing convictions.<sup>56</sup>

A Pentecostal feminist somatic pneumatology acts as an imaginative reconciling (and therefore soteriological) activity of the Triune God. It serves as a corrective to excluding and alienating tendencies in other Christian feminist traditions. Rather than an abstract or utopian view of reconciliation, feminist Pentecostal scholarship as theological reconciliation is a justice issue. Feminist theology arising from global Pentecostal traditions has been marginalized in broader ecumenical circles. A somatic pneumatology arising from pentecostal feminist theology offers a theological resource that challenges a feminist binary separating ecstatic worship from action for social justice and enriches ecumenical Christian discourses.

---

<sup>55</sup>Hollingsworth, "Spirit and Voice," 209.

<sup>56</sup>Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 292–301.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Faith Van Horne* is a doctoral researcher in Theology and Religion at University of Birmingham, UK. She is also co-director of Red Letter Christians UK, a relational organization devoted to the intersection of Christian faith and social justice.

## ORCID

*Faith Van Horne*  <http://orcid.org/0009-0001-7928-8232>

## Bibliography

- Alexander, Estrelida Y. *Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2011.
- Alexander, Kimberly Ervin, Melissa L. Archer, Mark J. Cartledge, and Michael D. Palmer, eds. *Sisters, Mothers, Daughters: Pentecostal Perspectives on Violence Against Women*. Leiden: Brill, 2022.
- Allen, Lisa. *A Womanist Theology of Worship: Liturgy, Justice, and Communal Righteousness*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021.
- Archer, Kenneth J. "A Pentecostal Way of Doing Theology: Method and Manner." *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9, no. 3 (2007): 301–314.
- Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Clifton, Shane. "Spirit, Submission, Power, and Abuse: A Response to Teaching on Female Submission and the Scourge of Domestic Violence." *St Mark's Review* 243, no. 1 (March 2018): 72–86.
- Collins, Helen. "Weaving a Web: Developing a Feminist Practical Theology Methodology from a Charismatic Perspective." In *Researching Female Faith: Qualitative Research Methods*, edited by Nicola Slee, Fran Porter, and Anne Phillips, 54–69. London: Routledge, 2017.
- Dutko, Joseph Lee. *The Pentecostal Gender Paradox: Eschatology and the Search for Equality*. London: T&T Clark, 2024.
- Eaton, Heather. *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*. London: T&T Clark, 2005.
- Ellison, Marvin M. *Making Love Just: Sexual Ethics for Perplexing Times*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012.
- Gabaitse, Rosinah Mmannana. "Luke 4:18–19 and Salvation: Marginalisation of Women in the Pentecostal Church in Botswana." In *So Great a Salvation: Soteriology in the Majority World*, edited by Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K.K. Keo, 59–76. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017.
- Gebara, Ivone. *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1999.
- Gebara, Ivone. *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002.

- Hollingsworth, Andrea. "Spirit and Voice: Toward a Feminist Pentecostal Pneumatology." *Pneuma* 29, no. 2 (2007): 189–213.
- Isherwood, Lisa, and Megan Clay, eds. *Women in Christianity in the Modern Age (1920 to Today)*. Oxon: Routledge, 2022.
- Jennings, Willie James. *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020.
- Johns, Cheryl Bridges. "Grieving, Brooding, and Transforming: The Spirit, the Bible, and Gender." In *Grieving, Brooding, and Transforming: The Spirit, the Bible and Gender*, edited by Cheryl Bridges Johns, and Lisa P. Stephenson, 7–19. Leiden: Brill, 2021.
- Martin, Bernice. "The Pentecostal Gender Paradox: A Cautionary Tale for the Sociology of Religion." In *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*, edited by Richard K. Fenn, 52–66. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.
- McRandal, Janice. *Christian Doctrine and the Grammar of Difference: A Contribution to Feminist Systematic Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015.
- Miller, Donald E., and Tetsunao Yamamori. *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2007.
- Nel, Marius. *LGBTIQ+ People and Pentecostals: An African Pentecostal Hermeneutic Perspective*. Zürich: Verlag, 2020.
- Pears, Angela. *Feminist Christian Encounters: The Methods and Strategies of Feminist-Informed Christian Theologies*. Oxon: Ashgate, 2004.
- Percy, Martyn. "Sweet Rapture: Subliminal Eroticism in Contemporary Charismatic Worship." *Theology & Sexuality* 3, no. 6 (1997): 71–106.
- Peterson, Cheryl M. "Spirit and Body: A Lutheran-Feminist Conversation." In *Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives*, edited by Mary J. Streufert, 153–163. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.
- Pierce, Yolanda. "Womanist Ways and Pentecostalism: The Work of Recovery and Critique." *Pneuma* 35, no. 1 (2013): 24–34.
- Qualls, Joy E. *God Forgive Us for Being Women: Rhetoric, Theology and the Pentecostal Tradition*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018.
- Roso, Joseph, Anna Holleman, and Mark Chaves. "Changing Worship Practices in American Congregations." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 59, no. 4 (2020): 675–684.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family: Ruling Ideologies, Diverse Realities*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2000.
- Sewapa, Tebogo. "'Can a Queer Be Born Again?' The Experiences of the LGBTIQ+ Pentecostals at Grace Bible Church, Soweto." In *Genders, Sexualities and Spiritualities in African Pentecostalism: 'Your Body is a Temple of the Holy Spirit'*, edited by Chammah J. Kaunda, 281–303. Cham: Palgrave, 2020.
- Shantz, Colleen. *Paul in Ecstasy: The Neurobiology of the Apostle's Life and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Sigurdson, Ola. *Heavenly Bodies: Incarnation, the Gaze, and Embodiment in Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016.
- Solivan, Samuel. *The Spirit, Pathos, and Liberation: Toward an Hispanic Pentecostal Theology*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998.
- Stephenson, Lisa P. "Feminist Theologies: Deconstructing the Patriarchal Gender Paradigm." In *The Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology*, edited by Wolfgang Vondey, 389–398. Oxon: Routledge, 2020.
- Stephenson, Lisa P. *Dismantling the Dualisms for American Pentecostal Women in Ministry: A Feminist Pneumatological Approach*. Leiden: Brill, 2012.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. London: Belknap Press, 2007.



- Tippett, Krista. 'Bessel Van der Kolk: Trauma and Resilience Land in Our Bodies.' *On Being*, July 25, 2016, <https://onbeing.org/programs/trauma-resilience-land-bodies-bessel-van-der-kolk-2/>.
- Vondey, Wolfgang. "Embodied Gospel: The Materiality of Pentecostal Theology." In *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion, Volume 8: Pentecostals and the Body*, edited by Michael Wilkinson, and Peter Althouse, 102–119. Leiden: Brill, 2017.
- Vondey, Wolfgang. *Pentecostalism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: T&T Clark, 2013.
- Vondey, Wolfgang. *The Scandal of Pentecost: A Theology of the Public Church*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023.
- Williams, Rowan. *Faith in the Public Square*. London: Bloomsbury, 2012.
- Yong, Amos. *Renewing Christian Theology: Systematics for a Global Christianity*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007.