

# PENTECOSTAL THEOLOGY & SCIENCE: INTRODUCTION TO THE “SCIENCE AND SPIRIT PANEL OF PAPERS”

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On November 17, 2011, the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences (CTNS) hosted the “Science and Spirit Panel” at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkley, California. The session was a look at the place of pentecostal scholarship in the dialogue between theology and science. In this ongoing, larger dialogue, recent developments in the field of renewal studies have helped pentecostal scholarship find its voice and place. These advances have opened up possibilities for the interface between science and pentecostal theology, especially new avenues involving pneumatological perspectives. A major impetus in this burgeoning conversation has been the recent research initiative funded by the John Templeton Foundation from 2005-2009: “Science and the Spirit: Pentecostal Perspectives on the Science/Religion Dialogue.” Two recent books prominent in the discussion are the volume that was the direct result of this initiative, edited by James K. A. Smith and Amos Yong, *Science and the Spirit: Pentecostal Engagements with the Sciences* (Indiana University Press, 2010), and a monograph that was an initiative by-product by Yong, *The Spirit of Creation: Modern Science and Divine Action in the Pentecostal-Charismatic Imagination* (Eerdmans, 2011). The agenda of the CTNS event involved reviews of these books by four scholars prominent in the theology-and-science enter-

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prise followed by a rejoinder from Yong. For the *CJPC* audience, we will introduce Yong and his two books and summarize the event and discussion.

Amos Yong is J. Rodman Williams Professor of Theology at Regent University School of Divinity in Virginia Beach, Virginia. His graduate education includes degrees in theology, history, and religious studies from Western Evangelical Seminary, Portland State University, and Boston University, and an undergraduate degree from Bethany University. He has authored or edited over a dozen volumes. Other books appearing in 2011 include *Afro-Pentecostalism: Black Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in History and Culture* (New York University Press), *Who is the Holy Spirit: The Acts of the Spirit, the Apostles, and Empire* (Paraclete Press), and *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Eerdmans). Beyond these accomplishments, he is widely recognized as one of the premier and pioneering pentecostal scholars able to speak on behalf of a pentecostal tradition. Pentecostalism, according to respondent Thomas Oord's, is "one of, if not *the*, most exciting conversation partners in the science-and-religion dialogue."

Yong, along with James K.A. Smith (Calvin College), served as editor for *Science and the Spirit*, a basic primer for possible pentecostal contributions to the science-and-theology dialogue. The volume is made of up of ten chapters, each written by a different, recognized pentecostal scholar. Each chapter attempts to answer a different pressing question at the intersection of a pentecostal worldview and contemporary science from a uniquely pentecostal perspective. The first part, (chapters 1-3) offers reflection on the over-

arching theological, philosophical, and cosmological issues raised in the encounter. The second set of articles (chapters 4-7) focuses on interaction with the natural sciences (physics, biology, neuroscience, and chemistry), while those in part three (chapters 8-10) deal with the human and technological sciences (anthropology, sociology, and technology). Each of the chapters begins with a biographical vignette, which provides space for registering the testimony so central to pentecostal spirituality in this engagement with the sciences, and proceeds to engage fundamental issues. On the one hand, the contributors bring scientific perspectives to bear on pentecostal Christianity, but on the other hand, pentecostal perspectives are also shown as making a difference in the theology and science dialogue.

Since the responders focused mainly on Yong's chapter entitled "How Does God Do What He Does?" (chapter 3) I will also summarize this chapter. Yong presents a new reading of many tongues as representative of the various scientific disciplines even as he seeks to develop a pentecostal theology of God's activity in light of historical Christian theologies of divine action. While part of the essay explores the more recent attempts to find God within the gaps of quantum mechanics and chaos theories, he also formulates a teleological notion of divine action, which he then correlates with a pentecostal account of eschatological divine action. The result is a constructive pneumatological theology of divine action that attempts, through the eyes of faith, to see the Spirit as the one moving the world toward its eschatological goal. This language of faith, however, does not displace science, but can be

mapped onto science and its presuppositions, hypotheses, and interpretations.

Yong's monograph, *The Spirit of Creation*, seeks to bring pentecostal Christianity and its robust pneumatology into conversation with the scientific disciplines. In particular, it develops the pioneering methodology and constructive proposals in the earlier book chapter. The book begins with a sketch of the past relationship and conversation between science and pentecostalism, for instance, overviewing research on the charismatic practice of glossolalia from a variety of disciplines including sociology, psychology, and neuroscience. This enables a more robust articulation of the metaphor of many tongues as providing a theological perspective on interdisciplinary inquiry. Yong then proceeds to deal with some of the major issues at the interface of the pentecostal theology and science dialogue including natural laws and what they mean for divine-human interaction, evolution, the idea of a spirit-filled creation, and overcoming naturalistic reductionism as well as material-spiritual bifurcations that occur on both sides. The constructive thrust of the volume unfolds his pneumatological and eschatological theology of divine action. Yong concludes with a chapter on a spirit-filled world (inhabited or populated by both good and bad spirits) in dialogue with parapsychology and elaborates a number of speculative theses about the universe that can further foster research and dialogue between pentecostalism and science.

Having given a brief overview of the major themes in Yong's two works, we turn to a summation of the discussion at the CTNS event. Overall, the tone

of the evening from the respondents and those in attendance was one of amicability and appreciation for the work that Yong has done and the direction in which the dialogue is headed. All four of the presenters affirmed the potential of a mutually enriching conversation in which pentecostalism can learn from science and also be a contributor. Since their contributions to the discussion are contained in the articles following this introduction, I will briefly summarize the conversation that ensued after the presentations. While a number of comments were made, three examples are representative of the exchange in response to the presentations and the ideas posed by Yong's books.

The initial comment was posed Robert John Russell, founder and director of the CTNS and professor of science and theology at Graduate Theological Union (GTU) who has been at the vanguard of the theology and science interchange over the last thirty years. From his broad base of knowledge, Russell was very affirmative of Yong and the pentecostal project he represents. For instance, he was in agreement with Yong's desire to speak about disembodied beings within the theology-and-science discussion. However, he pushed back on what he took to be Yong's overall understanding on the achievements, or lack thereof, of the divine action project as articulated in *The Spirit of Creation* (to which Yong responded that he would need to revisit that issue in light of Russell's more recent contributions). Further, Russell was not as optimistic about Yong's use of emergence theory – nor about Joshua Moritz's (the second responder) proposal to develop information theory – for thinking

about the eschatological issues relevant to the theology-and-science dialogue. So while supporting the pentecostal theology-and-science research project, he saw a need to continue to test new hypotheses and methods through which to engage the issues.

A second response representative of the conversation was from a physicist from the University of Berkley who had little background in the theology-and-science interaction (the event was advertised and open to locals in the Berkeley area). From his perspective, as a self-professed spiritual person, the whole task of pentecostalism and its engagement with the sciences was timely and worthwhile. In particular, he appreciated the types of questions that were being prompted and asked in this discussion, especially since these were questions that were not being posed within his own circles of scientists. Still these were issues that needed to be broached and perhaps they have finally found a forum.

Finally, from the other side of the spectrum, a comment was made by a GTU student who had a background in theology but not in the sciences. He was a self-professed evangelical going to school in an environment with few other evangelicals, and who had not yet been a part of such conversations in his GTU experience. More precisely, he had not encountered arenas that allowed for interactions on such topics in the welcoming manner he had experienced that evening. The introduction he received to Yong's work that night represented the possibility of greater dialogue across the two worlds he inhabited than he had realized was possible prior to the event.

These comments, as well as the following written responses to Yong's work by Thomas Oord, Joshua Moritz, Craig Boyd, and LeRon Shults reflect a genuine interest in the thoughts that one, unabashedly Pentecostal scholar has presented in an attempt to give voice to Pentecostal-charismatic experience within the wider academy. There is, of course, an array of responses to the issues raised by Yong's work. There will always be agreements, disagreements, and even some misunderstandings. The future will be bright, however, if Pentecostal-charismatic scholars continue to engage in the larger discussions taking place within the academy and do so with the excellence and yet humble provisionality as seen in *Science and the Spirit*, *The Spirit and Creation*, and the exchange that follows.