

THE PROMISE OF PENTECOSTAL THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE

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The Pentecostal tradition offers one of, if not *the*, most exciting conversation partners in the science-and-religion dialogue. The work of Amos Yong as editor and contributor to a pair of edited volumes – *Science and Spirit: A Pentecostal Engagement with the Sciences* and *The Spirit Renews the Face of the Earth: Pentecostal Forays in Science and Theology of Creation* – amount to creative theological epicenter for what is best about Pentecostals engaging the science-and-theology interface. In what follows, I will focus on the *Science and Spirit* volume for my analysis.

I believe the Pentecostal tradition has the potential to turn the science-and-religion dialogue into a mutually transformative engagement. Such an endeavor could transform the way we think about and do science, and it could transform Pentecostalism and its theology. These are bold claims, I know. They beg for thorough justification – far beyond the scope of this essay. In rapid-fire sequence, however, I offer five reasons why Pentecostalism and Pentecostal theology can be game changers in the science and theology dialogue.

First, Pentecostals have no established canon of Pentecostal tomes and authoritative intellectuals. This may seem like a disadvantage. And in many ways it is. But this lack of an established canon allows Pentecostal scholars to draw from a diverse and rich set of re-

sources when pursuing answers to questions raised by the science and theology interface.

Those who think carefully about issues in science and theology sometimes tire of appeals to authority. I can't tell you how many times I've heard scholars quote Aquinas that grace perfects nature rather than destroys it, for instance! Of course, appeals to authority sometimes have their place. None of us exists in a vacuum, and the science and religion fields have a number of authoritative voices from which it can draw. I happen to like some of what Aquinas says, for instance. And there are many scientific voices of authority we must heed. But Pentecostals have greater freedom to think afresh about issues. And such fresh thinking is always needed in the complex field of work that reflects on the interface between science and theology. There's more to be said than what Aquinas said 800 years ago.

Second, Pentecostal theology emphasizes the surprising, unpredictable, and miraculous. Pentecostals often say "God is doing a new thing," and they expect to encounter the unexpected. Let's call this the "Pentecostal hermeneutic of surprise."

While science requires nature be in some ways consistent, as a set of domains, science is, in principle, always open to discovery and surprise. The science-and-theology dialogue is complex enough to be always in need of some promising new proposals. An obvious example here is those events Pentecostals call "miraculous." The conversation about miracles might prompt scientists to think more carefully than David Hume about how to account for the extraordinary. And it might prompt Pentecostals to think more carefully

about what they deem supernatural or interventionist. I'm excited about James K. A. Smith's proposal in his essay in *Science and the Spirit*. Jamie argues for the "the possibility of the 'miraculous,' not as interventions of the 'natural' order or as 'interventions' into an otherwise closed universe, but rather as especially intense ways in which the Spirit is active and present within nature" (46).

Third, Pentecostal theology stresses a pneumatology that says the Spirit is active in all creation. Because another of the respondents will explore this in detail, I won't develop my thoughts much here. I simply will say that pneumatology has the potential to capture the imaginations of Pentecostals as they ponder an active spirit present in all creation, imaginations that are sometimes stifled by visions of Christology that focus upon the incarnation of Jesus 2,000 years ago and visions of the Father God would create the universe long ago and in holiness remain transcendent over the created order.

The fourth reason I think Pentecostalism makes for an exciting conversation partner in the science-and-theology interface is that Pentecostalism is often at the fore of using science and technology to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The history of Christianity in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries reveals that Pentecostals often took the first steps – often risks – to incorporate media technology in their efforts. This includes the use of radio, television, Internet, etc. The reasons given for using the latest technology are often pragmatic in nature. And pragmatism can sometimes conflict with and other times promote the theological presuppositions

of Pentecostal theology. In *Science and Spirit*, contributor Telford Work worries, for instance, that pragmatists can read to glean information for use in the marketplace, cocktail circuit, home, or study – but at the expense of learning capital T “Truth” (19). A theology that rejects pragmatism *en toto* will likely be blind to how the Spirit moves throughout all creation to call forth fruit. A theology that embraces pragmatism *en toto* will likely be blind to how what some call “fruit” does not fit well in the establishment and rationale of the Kingdom of God. Pentecostalism can aide in this important exploration.

Fifth, the sheer number of Pentecostal Christians makes Pentecostalism distinctive and potentially influential in the science-and-theology interface. An estimated 250 million Pentecostals live on planet earth. In a world that increasingly seems to want democratic forms of government and decision-making, large numbers of people who have a shared vision have the potential for greater influence.

Many who work in the science and theology interface do so because they think the questions and possible solutions can affect the overall well-being of life on planet earth. They believe the common good is in some way at stake as we seek to find the most plausible answers to some question we ask about science and theology.

Those are five reasons I think the Pentecostal tradition is one of the most exciting participants in the science and theology dialogue. But I also think Pentecostalism and Pentecostal scholars face some great challenges, some of which are unique to Pentecostalism and others that may not be unique but are wide-

spread among Pentecostals. I want to mention three in particular.

First, contributors to *Science and the Spirit* and the relatively few other books on Pentecostal theology engaging the sciences acknowledge that a very high percentage of Pentecostals must be brought up to speed on what is happening in the sciences. The lack of scientific literacy is especially great in cultures around the world not largely framed or informed by the sciences. Pentecostalism grows rapidly in many developing countries, and, in most of these, science plays a relatively minor role in the shaping of the culture or collective conscious.

The second major challenge Pentecostals engaged in the science-and-theology discussion is the ability to speak well about dramatic expressions of the Holy Spirit often reported among Pentecostals. Such expressions include activities such as speaking in tongues, demonic possession, faith healing, holy laughter, words of knowledge, and predictive prophecy. I know of few non Pentecostals who are hopeful that Pentecostals can come to terms scientifically, and even theologically, with these dramatic expressions. But I am hopeful. I join Amos Yong, Jamie Smith, and other Pentecostals in the task of accounting for the wild workings of the Holy Spirit in light of a form of scientific theory that coheres with Christian theological convictions about God at work presently in all creation.

The third and final challenge is not address explicitly in *Science and the Spirit*. This challenge is biblical hermeneutics. Like many in my own holiness theological tradition, many in Pentecostalism affirm a form

of Christian Fundamentalism that interprets the Bible in ways that conflict with some of what science suggests. Because the Bible is so central to the worldview of most Pentecostals, I doubt much progress can be made in Pentecostalism generally until more Pentecostals adopt a less literalistic biblical hermeneutic.

In sum, I am optimistic about the future of the Pentecostal-science discussion. I think Amos Yong can and will play a major role in moving the discussion in fruitful ways. Amos's own essay in this book is on God's action, and his ideas help with some of the issues I have mentioned. I hope to have set the table for our time together by exploring general themes and areas for exploration in the science and Pentecostal theology interface.