



# PréCiS

## Winter 2022

Bringing Christian faith and science together

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**Joint First 2021 Student  
Essays by:  
Christopher West  
and Geoffrey Butler**

**Oliver Barclay Lecture  
Local Group News**



## Essay by Christopher West

(This essay is his own original work.)

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## How can science-engaged theology help the Church in its mission?

### Introduction

Sarah Coakley offers a winsome exposition of one potential aspect of a science-engaged theology in her 2012 Gifford Lectures.<sup>[1]</sup> She interrogates the gospel principle of the selfless, sacrificial activity of the one for the good of the many from the perspective of evolutionary biology, and finds this principle written into the unfolding development of the created order. She terms this principle, ‘cooperation’, and defines it elsewhere thus: ‘a form of working together in which one individual pays a cost (in terms of fitness, whether genetic or cultural) and another gains a benefit as a result’.<sup>[2]</sup> Coakley explains that science can offer a vision of this kind of intentional sacrificial activity for the sake of the whole, which can be seen - in retrospect - to have coloured the entire process of evolution from bacteria upwards. Theology, she goes on to argue, needs the graced capacity not only to cooperate with but to further this vision. This paper teases out the impact of this vision on the Church’s mission in three directions: the way in which certain historical developments might narrated and negotiated; the Church’s role in the public sphere; and worship as the public face of the Church.



Christopher West

### Historical developments

Coakley’s vision of a science-engaged theology might help the Church to jettison the kind of misguided presentism which narrates historical developments in a way that suggests they are simply presently-held ideas ‘in fancy dress’, to use Catherine Belsey’s memorable phrase.<sup>[3]</sup> For example, the apparent ‘war’ between the disciplines of science (in particular, evolutionary biology) and theology (in particular, the doctrine of creation), as expounded by some New Atheists, neglects the number of ordained scientists in the history of the disciplines, as well as the fact that the Church’s initial reception of evolutionary biology was considerably more positive than is sometimes suggested in the contemporary debates.<sup>[4]</sup> Perhaps a culture of complacent amateurism about scientific matters has existed in the Church for too long, and this has been a severe impediment to her witness to the world.

### Public sphere

Equipped with this vision, the Church might also be able to offer a credible voice in the public

sphere. For instance, this kind of science-engaged theology arguably possesses the resources needed to critique the social Darwinism associated with some contemporary appeals to 'heard immunity' in the news, which amount to nothing more than the survival of the fittest in society. Coakley's recovery of sacrificial activity might resource the Church to fulfil her function in the prophetic mode - forth-telling (as opposed to foretelling) the truth, and safeguarding the most vulnerable in society. That society can only truly flourish when it genuinely cherishes all of its inhabitants, in their individuality and in their interdependence, is an important insight the Church has to offer the world; hence the Church cannot truly flourish in her mission until she, too, treasures not only those who have been baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, but all the inhabitants of the world - and, indeed, the entire created order. The pandemic has exposed that society does not adequately reward those who do the heavy lifting in society for the common good (the frontline workers of various stripes). The Church needs to lead by example in this regard; for the Church's mission is nothing less than to demonstrate that each and every individual matters in her eyes, and - more importantly - in the eyes of Christ.

### **Corporate worship**

Coakley's vision has implications for the Church's worship too, which is her public face in the world; the Church's worship is the primary expression of her faith and theology. William Daniel helpfully draws attention to the way the Church understands 'liturgy' (popularly but

erroneously) as 'the work of the people', and suggests that a better understanding might be, 'the work of the one for the sake of the many'.<sup>[5]</sup> Daniel's serious discussion of what liturgy is, and how it is so easily mistaken for what it is not in an almost Pelagian way, is significant: this transformed understanding of 'liturgy' ties the sacrifice of thanks and praise offered by the Church in her Eucharist to the once and for all sacrifice of God offered in Christ. However, this 'liturgy' - this work done on behalf of people - extends beyond those participating in the Church's corporate worship, and includes the work done for unseen communities beyond them. A service sheet printed with the words, 'Our worship is ended; our service begins', gets to the heart of this: the gathered community receive the sacramental body of Christ in the Eucharist, and become the ecclesial body of Christ - nourishment for the world they are sent out into, with God's blessing.

### **Conclusion**

Interrogating the Church's mission - in terms of her understanding of history, her approach to the public sphere, and her corporate worship - from the perspective of the gospel-evolutionary principle of 'cooperation', as expounded by Coakley, reveals the Church's true identity - what should be its true colours. The Covid-19 pandemic has forced ecclesial communities to ask, and to face, fundamental questions about who they are (ecclesiology), and what they hope to achieve (missiology); it has also taught them that they must learn, in some way, to dwell within constraints without always assuming that human beings have the will and the resources

needed to overcome them. As soon as the Church has asked these challenging questions of herself, and allowed the possible answers indicated by Coakley’s vision to shape the hearts and minds of her members, perhaps then she will be free to live out and to demonstrate God’s way of being human in the world today.

## References

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- [4] **Peacocke, A.** (2004), *Evolution: The Disguised Friend of Faith*, 22, Templeton Foundation Press.
- [5] **Daniel, W.** (2020), *Christ the Liturgy: Divine Agency and Human Action*, 3, Angelico Press.

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## Essay by Geoffrey Butler

(This essay is his own original work.) PhD, Theological Studies at University of Toronto

### Pentecostalism and the Possibility of a Science Engaged Theology

In a 2010 edited volume addressing Pentecostalism and the Sciences, Amos Yong and James K.A. Smith admit that, unfortunately, “when scholars or journalists think of Pentecostals, visions of laboratories or particle accelerators don’t usually come to mind. (They are) more likely to evoke images of Appalachian ‘pew jumping.’”<sup>[1]</sup> Nevertheless, the movement’s unyielding commitment to evangelism and missions has launched Pentecostalism from relative obscurity at the beginning of the 20th century to a worldwide force today, leading Harvey Cox to claim that its growth has precipitated “the reshaping of religion in the twenty-first century.”<sup>[2]</sup> One wonders how this mission might be further enriched over the next hundred years were Pentecostals to consciously consider the benefits of a science engaged theology, however. Growing up in a rural Pentecostal church with a father who was both a professional geologist and Sunday school teacher, I can attest that Pentecostal theology and the sciences do not, unfortunately, often overlap.



Geoffrey Butler

## Capacity for Conversation?

Nevertheless, as a student researching the doctrine of the Holy Spirit throughout church history, it is intriguing to discover voices from the Great Tradition addressing pneumatological issues that remain largely unaddressed by a Pentecostal movement so fixated on the Spirit. A prime example might be how his work relates to natural revelation. Consider, for example, John Calvin's claim that the "Spirit, the teacher of perfect wisdom, does not in vain invite our attention to what may be known"<sup>[3]</sup> about God through creation. Or, perhaps Thomas Aquinas whom, writes Andrew Pinsent, viewed spiritual gifts "as certain perfections of the powers of the soul... (which) have a natural aptitude to be moved (*natae moveri*) by the Holy Spirit."<sup>[4]</sup> For such monumental figures, allowing the natural world to inform one's view of theology, and vice-versa, hardly posed a problem - especially in reference to the Spirit's activity.

Indeed, a view of natural theology which presupposes the Spirit's work should serve as a catalyst for believers to view the scientific inquiry as inextricably linked to theological reflection. Clark Pinnock reminds us here why expecting the Spirit to be at work in a particular sphere is crucial. "Poor theology can hurt us," he claims, "for we will miss certain stirrings of the Spirit where we are not expecting them. . . . A person who does not expect the Spirit to be at work in the natural order, for example, will be attentive to such activities in nature and will be impoverished as a result."<sup>[5]</sup> A prime example might be the natural sciences; the missional zeal that marks Pentecostalism may only be deepened

should adherents consciously consider where the Spirit is at work in the created order. It would undoubtedly help the movement further its evangelistic endeavors, particularly to the younger generation in an era where technological advancements and scientific knowledge reach unprecedented heights.

## A New Horizon?

It is indeed unfortunate that an anti-intellectual attitude has long characterized not only large swaths of the Pentecostal world, but the wider evangelical church. In the sobering words of Mark Noll, "The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind,"<sup>[6]</sup> a statement that, while surely a generalization, could fairly describe the way many Pentecostals have approached the sciences. Nevertheless, Smith and Yong highlight the recent maturation of the tradition, noting that many of its young collegiates "have had to move beyond a narrow concern with Bible, theology, and missions in order to engage the panoply of academic disciplines, including the social and natural sciences."<sup>[7]</sup> Maybe the goal, however, should not be to move beyond theology and missions to the sciences, but to emphasize the necessary integration of them. Christian engagement with these fields, particularly among those who assume a robust pneumatology, could only be encouraged if one expected God to actively reveal truth, by his Spirit, through scientific inquiry. Yong has long called for bridging this gap, as it were, seeking "to contribute to the emerging discussion of theology of nature from a Pentecostal and especially pneumatological perspective."<sup>[8]</sup> He

calls for an approach to natural theology that is not dominated by “naturalistic discourse,” neglecting the Spirit’s work, yet does not do away with the concept altogether. While such a project might seem ambitious, it would hardly mark the first occasion a radical shift has occurred in Pentecostal thinking on science and theology. Kim Alexander, for example, has noted that the rejection of modern medicine was commonplace among early Pentecostals,<sup>[9]</sup> doubtlessly encouraged by the multitude of reported healings within their midst. Nevertheless, a 2010 position paper from the Assemblies of God - one of the world’s largest classical Pentecostal bodies — explains that its doctrine of divine healing “neither opposes nor competes with medical doctors.”<sup>[10]</sup> Thus, Pentecostal theology has long wrestled with its relationship to the sciences; this proposal, then, is simply a call to build off of prior advancements.

## An Invaluable Contribution

Allowing pneumatology to serve as a catalyst for integrating science, theology, and mission demonstrates potential not only for Pentecostals and Charismatics, but those of diverse Christian traditions, all of which recognize the Spirit’s sovereignty and divine personhood. Therefore, perhaps in time Pentecostal reflection on this matter might prove to be a valuable ecumenical contribution. While expressing hope that his work “may be a means by which we bear witness to the wondrous works of God in the Pentecostal encounter with science,”<sup>[11]</sup> Yong nonetheless acknowledges that such a project is still in its

infancy among both theologians and scientists of his tradition. However, it is one worth pursuing further, not in spite of Pentecostalism’s commitment to missions, but precisely because of it. If allowing us to perceive God’s existence and, to an extent, his attributes, in the natural world is the work of the Spirit, one could make a substantial case for Christian engagement with the sciences on this basis alone. Indeed, they should be engaged on the assumption that the Holy Spirit will reveal truth to us through them, allowing believers to use scientific inquiry as a point of contact in reaching the world with the message of Christ.

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- Cox, H.** (1995). Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century, Addison-Wesley.
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# Nominations are open for the CiS Oliver Barclay Lecture 2022



Christians in Science sponsors an annual “Oliver Barclay Lecture” in memory of Dr Oliver Barclay who was the driving force behind the establishment of The Research Scientists Christian Fellowship, the predecessor of CiS, and who was keen to encourage the next generation of effective communicators on Science and Faith.

The lecture is awarded to a promising young individual, usually under the age of 35, who has demonstrated an ability to communicate effectively on issues relating to Science and Faith. The chosen individual, who will normally be an active UK-based scientist, will present a short lecture on the topic of their choice at the annual Autumn Conference.

CiS members are invited to nominate an early career scientist for the annual award. **Closing date of midnight 31st March 2022**

Additionally, if you would like to be considered for this lectureship, (self-nomination) please contact secretary@cis.org.uk to discuss further.

**Full Details and Criteria are available on our website - [www.cis.org.uk](http://www.cis.org.uk)**

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**Yong, Amos.** (2011) *The Spirit of Creation: Modern Science and Divine Action in the Pentecostal-Charismatic Imagination*, 25-26, Eerdmans.

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[1] **Yong, Amos and Smith, James K. A.** (eds) (2010), *Science and the Spirit: A Pentecostal Engagement with the Sciences*, 1, Indiana University Press.

[2] **Cox, Harvey** (1995), *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, Addison-Wesley.

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[11] **Yong**, *The Spirit of Creation*, 25-26

# LOCAL GROUP NEWS

## BRISTOL

Friday 21 Jan, 7.30pm: *Being human – Am I just my brain?* Speaker :Dr Sharon Dirckx

Location: Christ Church Clifton, BS8 3BN

For more information contact Andrew Halestrap  
ahalestrap@hotmail.com

## DUNDEE

For more details on Dundee events please contact  
christiansinsciencedundee@gmail.com

## EDINBURGH

For more information please email  
cisedinburgh3@gmail.com

## HARROW

For details of future events in Harrow please contact  
Revd Lyndon North - revlnorth@aol.com

## IPSWICH

For more information about future events please  
contact Dr John Ling - jjling@btopenworld.com

## IRELAND

For more information, please contact Dr Neville  
Cobbe - neville.cobbe@yahoo.co.uk

## MANCHESTER

Thursday 27 Jan at 7.30pm: *Chance and Necessity:  
On the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology*

Speaker: Dr Neville Cobbe. Location: online - check  
CiS website. For more information please contact  
sec.cismanchester@yahoo.co.uk

## NORWICH

Please contact sfnorfolk1@gmail.com for more  
details.

## OXFORD

For more information, please contact Diana Briggs  
at diana.briggs@wolfson.oxon.org

## READING

Please email Dave Law to discuss restarting this  
group at dave@readingatwork.org

## SHEFFIELD

For more information please email  
rhoda.hawkins@sheffield.ac.uk

*Details of all events  
are also available  
on the CiS App and  
at [www.cis.org.uk/](http://www.cis.org.uk/)  
events.*

**If you wish to  
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Group in your  
area, please get  
in touch with  
Stephanie, our  
Development  
Officer, at  
do@cis.org.uk**



## SOUTH WEST

For more information on events please email  
cissouthwest@gmail.com

## SOUTHAMPTON

For information about the group please email Peter  
May (southampton@cis.org.uk)

## ST ANDREWS

For more information about the undergraduate  
group, please contact Dr Andrew Torrance  
(abt3@st-andrews.ac.uk). For more information  
about the postgraduate group, please contact Dr  
Rebecca Goss (rjmg@st-andrews.ac.uk).

## SURREY

For information please contact Joy Perkins at  
joyeperkins@googlemail.com

## TYNESIDE & NORTHUMBERLAND

For information on Newcastle events, please contact  
Bill Clegg at bill.clegg@ncl.ac.uk

## WEST MIDLANDS

For more information please contact Godfrey  
Armitage on g.n.armitage@warwick.ac.uk

## WORCESTER

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## YORK

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