



CiS Student Essay Competition 2021

Name: Geoffrey Butler

Institution: Wycliffe College, University of Toronto

This paper is my own original work. It has not been submitted to a previous CiS competition. No part of it has been published, nor has it been the winner or finalist of any previous writing contest.

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.’”¹ 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.”² 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.

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

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.

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"³ 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."⁴ 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 not be attentive to such activities in nature and will be impoverished as a result."⁵ 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?

³ Calvin, J. (1849), *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, 69, Calvin Translation Society.

⁴ Pinsent, Andrew (2012), *The Second-Person Perspective in Aquinas's Ethics: Virtues and Gifts*, 33, Routledge.

⁵ Pinnock, Clark H. (1995), *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 12, InterVarsity.

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,”⁶ 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.”⁷ 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.”⁸ 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,⁹ 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

⁶ Noll, Mark A. (1994), *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 3, Eerdmans.

⁷ Yong and Smith. *Science and the Spirit*, 4.

⁸ Yong, Amos (2011), *The Spirit of Creation: Modern Science and Divine Action in the Pentecostal-Charismatic Imagination*, 25-26, Eerdmans.

⁹ Alexander, Kimberly Ervin (2006), *Pentecostal Healing: Models in Theology and Practice*, 108-109, Deo.

classical Pentecostal bodies – explains that its doctrine of divine healing “neither opposes nor competes with medical doctors.”¹⁰ 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,”¹¹ 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.

Word Count: 1,000

(Excluding Title, Notes, and Bibliography)

¹⁰ *Divine Healing (Adopted By The General Presbytery In Session August 9-11, 2010)*, August 2010, <https://ag.org/Beliefs/Position-Papers/divine-healing.>

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

Bibliography

- Alexander, K. (2006) *Pentecostal Healing: Models in Theology and Practice*, 108-109, Deo.
- Calvin, John (1849), *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, 69, Calvin Translation Society.
- Cox, H. (1995). *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, Addison-Wesley.
- Divine Healing (Adopted By The General Presbytery In Session August 9-11, 2010)*, August 2010, <https://ag.org/Beliefs/Position-Papers/divine-healing.>
- Noll, M. (1994) *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 3, Eerdmans.
- Pinnock, C. (1996) *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 12, InterVarsity.
- Pinsent, A. (2012) *The Second-Person Perspective in Aquinas's Ethics: Virtues and Gifts*, 33, Routledge.
- Smith, J. & Yong, A. (2010). *Science and the Spirit: A Pentecostal Engagement with the Sciences*, 1-4, Indiana University Press.
- Yong, Amos. (2011) *The Spirit of Creation: Modern Science and Divine Action in the Pentecostal-Charismatic Imagination*, 25-26, Eerdmans.