

# *Pentecostal Voices in the Theology- Science Conversation*

INTRODUCTION: PENTECOSTALISM, SCIENCE, AND  
CREATION: NEW VOICES IN THE THEOLOGY-SCIENCE  
CONVERSATION

*by Amos Yong*

Each of the essays in this section, except the last one, was presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies (SPS) jointly held with the Wesleyan Theological Society at Duke University Divinity School, 13–15 March 2008. The conference theme, “Sighs, Signs, and Significance: Pentecostal and Wesleyan Explorations of Creation and Science,” reflected an earnest effort on the part of both societies to take up important questions at the science-and-theology interface.<sup>1</sup> There has been a growing realization that such matters can no longer be ignored by scholars and theologians working in these traditions.

Pentecostal and charismatic scholars and researchers, as Telford Work observes in his essay here, have worked primarily in the humanities until very recently.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, like everyone else, pentecostal and charismatic Christians within and outside the academy have lived in a world of science and have taken advantage of its various technologies as they have been developed over time. It is well known that almost from the beginnings of the modern pentecostal movement in North America pentecostal-charismatic evangelists and missionaries have embraced a wide range of telecommunications media in carrying out the mandate of the biblical Great Commission (Matthew 28:19) to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.<sup>3</sup>

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Yet there has been an absence of serious or sustained pentecostal-charismatic theological reflection on science and technology even to the present.<sup>4</sup>

The SPS annual meeting theme was designed to encourage pentecostal and charismatic scholars to begin taking up these matters. There are at least two questions involved: (1) How might pentecostal and charismatic scholars and theologians begin to engage the sciences from their own religious and theological standpoint? (2) How might the sciences inform pentecostal-charismatic scholarship and theological reflection? The following essays each address these two questions (and others) in some respect.

James K. A. Smith presented his essay at a plenary session of the SPS. He proposes a pentecostal perspective on the whole question of ontological naturalism in the sciences, even while calling for pentecostals to be open to some form of methodological naturalism with regard to the practice of science. Telford Work explores how the pneumatological perspective at the heart of pentecostal-charismatic spirituality and piety informs not only Christian ecumenical differences but also the wide spectrum of theological approaches to the sciences. His suggestion that pentecostals are more drawn to the anthropological sciences is illuminated by Craig Scandrett-Leatherman's essay on Afropentecostal ritual. An anthropologist by training, this scholar compares and contrasts the participatory epistemology of the Afropentecostal tradition with the tacit knowing described by Michael Polanyi. Also starting theologically with the Spirit (as Work does) is David Bradnick, who ambitiously asks the big-picture questions that modern physics poses regarding the origins (the doctrines of creation and fall) and the end of the world (the doctrine of eschatology) and who suggests understanding both entropy and the emergence of complexity in pneumatological perspective. Steven Studebaker's drawing from the pneumatological imagination of pentecostalism is more measured but no less important, as he proceeds both to critique traditional pentecostal (and evangelical) dualisms and to formulate an integrated theology of creation and promote an ecological theology of creation care.

My essay, the last of the set, was not presented at the conference. I include it here because it picks up where Smith's paper leaves off—the need for a pentecostal-charismatic perspective on miracles and the laws of nature—and rethinks the issues with the help of the philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce.

We present these ideas in the hopes both that other pentecostal and charismatic scholars will be drawn into the conversation and that those from outside the pentecostal and charismatic tradition will find some useful insights therein.

## NOTES

I am grateful to each of the contributors for their timeliness in revising their conference papers for publication and in responding to my inquiries. I thank Philip Hefner both for inviting a set of papers from the SPS conference for publication in *Zygon* and for being so helpful (to me as guest editor) and easy to work with. Thanks also to Don York for his help with reviewing one of the essays.

1. More than 150 papers were presented at the joint annual meeting, many of which addressed the conference theme. A wider selection of essays from the conference is being published in two volumes (Yong in press; Oord in press).

2. I trace the development of pentecostal scholarship from its beginnings in the discipline of history through biblical studies to theological and religious studies in Yong 2007.

3. From the beginnings of the movement, for example, pentecostals have availed themselves of the use of radio as a means of conducting mission and evangelism (McGee 1986, 168, 182–85).

4. For an overview of the interaction between pentecostalism and science see Yong and Elbert 2003.

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