

God Acts!

A Pentecostal Perspective on Special Divine Action

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present article is to outline a pentecostal model of special divine action by combining the work of Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith and the pentecostal theologian Amos Yong. The past discussions in SDA can be characterized by a lack of pneumatology. Pentecostalism, on the other hand, is strongly committed to the active work of the Holy Spirit in the world today, beyond the Spirit's work in general providence. Thus, pentecostalism, with its pneumatological nature and commitment to SDA, will present us with a view of SDA which gives the Spirit a fitting role. If the pentecostal position proves itself a viable option in its conversation with the sciences, it will serve as a fruitful perspective.

Keywords: Special divine action, pentecostalism, James K. A. Smith, Amos Yong, science and religion

INTRODUCTION

Central to the pentecostal¹ social imaginary is the belief in the supernatural activity of the Holy Spirit in the world today, manifested in charismatic acts such as glossolalia, divine healings, prophecy, and signs and wonders. Furthermore, it is believed that God is intervening in the world by responding to prayers, e.g., by healing sick bodies by laying on of hands (Yong, 2008, s. 963). Pentecostals are unapologetic in their firm belief that God acts in the world in special ways. Yet, modern natural science does not seem very hospitable for belief in superstition and/or the supernatural. For some, such belief seems outdated and belonging to a pre-modern worldview (Sæther, 2015, s. 243). Faith and science are often presented as standing in opposition to each other. Due to this, modern-day pentecostals may feel a tension; does the belief in “miracles”, which is at the very core of their faith, require that science be discarded?

Simultaneously, theologian David Fergusson has claimed that the traditional accounts of divine providence lack a distinct pneumatology (Fergusson, 2018, s. 90).² Similarly, the divine action discussion has suffered from its lack of attention given to the Holy Spirit (Ritchie, 2019, s. 301). Thus, with pentecostalism’s pneumatological emphasis, if pentecostalism achieves to establish itself as a viable option in its dialogue with the sciences, it will bring an invaluable contribution with insight from a unique perspective in the discussion of divine action. This paper will outline a pentecostal view of special divine action. This will be attempted by synthesizing the work of Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith³ and the pentecostal theologian Amos Yong,⁴ whose work seems especially fruitful for this purpose. Smith and Yong, although different scholars share similar ideas, and their work can profit from a closer conversation between the two. The cue to combine both of these works can even be found in their own writing, where they both draw from each other.⁵ What will emerge is a pentecostal view of special divine action that is specifically “pneumatological” and “eschatological” in its nature (Yong, 2011, s. 73).

¹ We will be adopting the term “pentecostalism” with a lowercase “p”. Lowercase pentecostalism simply is an inclusive term encapsulating the shared commitments of the whole “Pentecostal-Charismatic Movement,” not limited to but also inclusive of classical Pentecostalism or the early Pentecostal denominations. This term is explained by James K. A. Smith and adopted by pentecostal scholars such as Amos Yong, see Smith (2010b, s. xvi-xvii) and Yong (2011, s. 1).

² Fergusson writes from a reformed and western church perspective, as he traces the standardized accounts of providence back to the likes of Augustin, Boethius, Aquinas, and Calvin. Here, a recognition of the Spirit’s work in relation to providence has been lacking. A telling example is that Calvin, who is so often labeled “the theologian of the Holy Spirit”, only refers providential acts to the Father in his writings. See Fergusson (2018, s. 89-90). On the other hand, the statement is not as easily true of Orthodox theology, or certain strands of modern theological approaches, such as process theology and eco-theology, where the Spirit is given a more prominent role.

³ Some might find it odd that a paper on pentecostalism would be based on Smith, as it can be questioned whether or not he is a pentecostal today. However, in the writings used here, Smith himself makes it clear that he writes “as a pentecostal scholar working unapologetically from a pentecostal worldview” (Smith, 2010b, s. 87).

⁴ Another possible way of constructing a pentecostal model of SDA can be seen in Keener (2011). However, as his model of miracles is different from that of Yong and Smith, he will not be the topic of this article.

⁵ E.g., Smith (2010b, s. 101). Smith even dedicates his book to Amos Yong. They have also coedited a volume on Science and the Spirit, highly relevant to the purpose of this article (Smith and Yong, 2010).

Special Divine Action, What's the Problem?

The problem of special divine action is a central issue in the conversation between science and theology (see McGrath, 2010, s. 93-101). Wesley J. Wildman defines special divine action (SDA) accordingly, "Special divine action (SDA) is specific providential acts, envisaged, intended, and somehow brought about in this world by God, possibly at particular times and places but possibly also at all times and places" (Wildman, 2004, s. 37). Wildman's definition makes it clear enough that there is a relation between the doctrine of providence and SDA. The doctrine of providence accounts for how God acts *in, with, and through* the created world by means of *sustenance, concurrence, and governance* (Plantinga, 2008, s. 369-371).⁶ Yet, according to philosopher Alvin Plantinga, "We can think of divine action that goes beyond creation and conservation [i.e. general providence] as special divine action" (Plantinga, 2008, s. 371).⁷ SDA is, thus, intertwined with the doctrine of providence.

Christians have traditionally believed that God acts in special ways that are separate from general providence, i.e., SDA.⁸ However, given the rise of the natural sciences, the world is conceived to be a closed causal nexus (Gilkey, 1962, s. 144-145; Plantinga, 2008, s. 373-374, 376-380). Therefore, questions such as how God could act in the special ways portrayed in the Bible without "intervening" or disturbing the causal order or using Hume's language, "violating the laws of nature," naturally arose (Abraham, 2018, s. 10).⁹ Moreover, how ought we to speak about God's "acting" and "speaking"?¹⁰ Various answers have been given with varying success.¹¹

In the wake of Langdon Gilkey's (1962) influential article "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," many have thought that the answer to the question of special divine action is to be located in how we think about human agency and its analogical relevance for divine action (Abraham, 2018, s. 12). However, theologian William B. Abraham, who has written a monumental four-volume work on divine agency and action, has pointed out that the question of divine action is more complex and nuanced. He says, "there is no one problem of divine action or divine agency; there is a cluster of issues that overlap in complex ways and that require both careful delineation and reintegration if we are to make progress." (Abraham, 2017, s. 13).¹² This paper will not be able to address all of these questions, and that will not be the purpose either. This paper has a more modest goal: to see what contribution a pentecostal worldview may bring to the divine action conversation. Abraham notes that in the question of divine action, it is important to note, "Who is the God of divine action?" (Abraham, 2017, s. 9). Answering this question, pentecostalism will be well-equipped to give proper attention to

⁶ For further treatment on the doctrine of providence see Webster (2009, s. 158-175).

⁷ Although his definition of SDA helps to illuminate the relationship between general providence and SDA, it needs to be noted that his position distinguishes itself dramatically from the one articulated in this article. Plantinga raises critiques about whether or not it is possible to speak of non-interventionist models of SDA at all. See Plantinga (2008).

⁸ For helpful definitions of both general and special divine action see Göcke (2015, s. 24-25).

⁹ For a further set of problems relating to special divine action see Göcke (2015, s. 28-31).

¹⁰ This is one of the fundamental questions posed by Gilkey, see Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," 145.

¹¹ These questions have been the motivation behind the Divine Action Project funded by the Vatican Observatory and the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences at Berkeley. For a survey of this project see Wildman (2004). For other proposed solutions to the problem of special divine action see Plantinga (2008); Göcke (20015); Alston (1990); Russell (1997). More relevant, another pentecostal perspective is given by Keener (2011).

¹² The fact that Abraham has written four volumes on this topic is itself an indication of the complexity of the issues pertaining to divine action.

the Spirit's, the third person of the Trinity, work in divine action, a dimension that is often underemphasized (see Ferguson, 2018, s. 90). Thus, it is relevant to say something first about what constitutes a pentecostal worldview.

Pentecostalism as “Worldview”

Pentecostalism emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, as the result of the revival led by the Afro-American minister William J. Seymour in an abandoned church building, and former stable, at Azusa Street in Los Angeles in 1906 (Synan, 1997, s. 97).¹³ The Azusa Street Revival became a hot topic because of the accompanying characteristic supernatural signs that were attested to happen. Today, the initial Azusa Street Revival has spread significantly, and the “pentecostal experience” has for long found its way even into the mainline denominations.¹⁴

On the question of divine action and its relation to science, Amos Yong notes that the pentecostal movement developed at a time “when science contributed to the parting of ways between what we now call fundamentalism and modernism” (Yong, 2011, s. 2). Pentecostalism was a conservative response to the liberal tendencies of modernist theology (Mardesen, 1991, s. 43), and it sided with fundamentalism (Yong, 2011, s. 2). This eventually led to an “anti-intellectualism” among the first generation of pentecostals. However, pentecostals’ engagement and attitudes toward science have been changing, although not without tension (Yong, 2011, s. 2-10).

While there have been recent advances in constructing a pentecostal systematic theology,¹⁵ it is common to categorize pentecostalism as a “spirituality,” rather than a set of doctrinal commitments (Albrecht and Howard, 2014, s. 235). Building on the notion of a pentecostal spirituality, James K. A. Smith argues that what is distinct about pentecostalism can best be categorized as a “worldview” or a “social imaginary” (Smith, 2010b, s. xvii-xviii; 12; 26-29). Most central to the pentecostal worldview is what Smith calls, “a position of radical openness to God, and in particular, openness to God doing something *differently* and *new*” (italics original, Smith, 2010b, s. 33).¹⁶ There is an expectation in pentecostalism that God will do the unexpected, and that God will intervene in the world. Thus, “At the heart of pentecostal spirituality... is a deep sense of expectation and an openness to surprise” (Smith, 2010b, s. 33) This openness to God is closely tied with a “plausibility structure of a mystical world,” which differentiates from the modern naturalistic worldview at important junctions (Smith, 2010b, s. 34-35). And, this commitment to surprise, a mystical world, and God’s action is the reason for pentecostals’ belief in the ongoing charismatic ministry of the Spirit (Smith, 2010b, s. 38). Thus, we might say that an affirmation and expectation of SDA is at the heart of pentecostalism.

Furthermore, the pentecostal worldview is categorized by “An ‘enchanted’ theology of creation and culture” (Smith, 2010b, s. 12). There is a spiritual realm, a layer of reality that is real, yet not visible to the eyes. This is what constitutes the enchanted view of creation

¹³ It needs to be noted that scholars have criticized Synan for being too Americentric, noting that there were multiple “Azusas” or “pentecosts” around the globe during the first decade of the 20th century, e.g. the Welsh revival in 1904-1905 or the Mukti revival in India in 1905. See Anderson (2014).

¹⁴ Thus, it was coined the “third type” of Christianity by Lesslie Newbegin. See Wainwright (1997, s. 289). See also Synan (1997, s. 220-278).

¹⁵ See for example Vondey (2017) and Cartledge (2014).

¹⁶ See also the notion of play in relation to pentecostal theology (Vondey, 2017, s. 13-14).

(Smith, 2010b, s. 40).¹⁷ Hence, pentecostalism refuses any reductionistic model of creation (Yong, 2011, s. 11).

Additionally, pentecostalism gives ample attention to the Holy Spirit. And, integral to the notion of an enchanted creation is the pentecostal emphasis on the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, beyond the Spirit's work in general providence. According to the pentecostal scholar Wolfgang Vondey says, "The heartbeat of Pentecostal spirituality is the experience of the Holy Spirit made possible by the event of Pentecost" (Vondey, 2017, s. 18). Furthermore, he says, "Pentecostal theology is both pneumatic (as the experience resulting from the encounter with the Spirit) and pneumatological (as reflection on that experience)" (Vondey, 2017, s. 18). Given the pentecostal worldview, and the primacy of Pentecost as a theological symbol for pentecostalism, Pentecost presents a characteristic hermeneutic that is utilized by pentecostals. Peter, at Pentecost, interpreted what happened in Jerusalem, through a radical "*hermeneutical courage*," (Smith, 2010b, s. 22) as the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy (Acts 2:14-16). This so-called "this is that" hermeneutic is central to Pentecostalism (See Vondey, 2017, s. 16). It constitutes a paradigmatic stance of daring to interpret an event in light of Scripture, saying "this is that," and, thus, offering a "*counterinterpretation of the world*" (italics original, Smith, 2010b, s. 24).¹⁸ According to Smith, this pentecostal hermeneutic and worldview demands a hearing in the academy, and I would add in the divine action debate, "precisely because implicit within pentecostal practice is a take on our being-in-the-world" (Smith, 2010b, s. 25). The uniqueness of the pentecostal worldview is captured by Yong (2011);

pentecostals are spiritually and, in some respects, supernaturalistically oriented, but they are engaged with these dimensions of reality through the concreteness of their embodiment, the sensitivities of the affections and emotions, and the rationality (not rationalism) of the experiential, empirical, and pragmatic orientation (s. 11).

With pentecostalism's unique voice and take on the world, the shifts of the sciences away from its positivistic and reductionistic tendencies (McGrath, 2010, s. 68-71; Yong, 2011, s. 12, 32; Göcke, 2015, s. 30-33), and the closed causal nexus (Russel, 1997, s. 49-58), the time is ripe for a fruitful conversation between pentecostalism and the sciences on the question of divine action.

PENTECOSTALISM, SCIENCE AND THE PROBLEM OF SPECIAL DIVINE ACTION

As seen above, at the core of a pentecostal worldview is an openness to God's ongoing and continued action in the world. This is present in the pentecostal emphasis on the charismatic working of the Spirit in the church today. According to Smith, "the community *expects* the unexpected and testifies to events of miraculous healing, divine revelation in tongue-speech,

¹⁷ Amos Yong also speaks of pentecostalism in terms of a worldview. Just as Smith speaks of a pentecostal worldview consisting of a radical openness to God and an enchanted creation, Yong uses different words to speak of the same concepts, namely a worldview that is "interventionist and supernaturalistic" (Yong, 2008, s. 964).

¹⁸ Peter did not accept the prevailing explanation coming from the "world," that the disciples were drunk on new wine (Acts 2:13), but offered his own "counterinterpretation."

divine illumination, prophecy, and other ‘supernatural’ phenomena” (Smith, 2010b, s. 86).¹⁹ This type of action that the charismatic ministry of the Spirit represents is indeed “special”. So how might pentecostals account for such phenomena? Is there a particularly *pentecostal* model that can account for SDA? And, will such a model give proper attention to the Spirit?

The Enchanted World of Pentecostalism – Creation “en-Spirited”

As seen, the pentecostal worldview affirms a belief in an enchanted world. This means that there are dimensions to the ontology of the cosmos beyond what might be grasped through the lens of a microscope or scientific studies. Pentecostalism is by its nature pneumatic and pneumatological (cf. Vondey), but, furthermore, there are also other spirits and spiritual forces in addition to the Holy Spirit. This suggests an “enhancement” of the “natural” world of modern science (Smith, 2010b, s. 39).

Smith argues that such belief in the supernatural, both suggested by the attitude of openness towards God and the view of an enchanted world, has profound “ontological implications” that will affect a pentecostal engagement with the sciences (Smith, 2010b, s. 86). The sciences, so it is argued, reject any supernatural explanation of causality *de facto* as interventionistic. Implicit in such a view of science is a notion of an autonomous cosmos, existing by itself as a closed causal nexus. This view of the autonomous creation is shared by “non-interventionist theists, interventionist theists, deists, and metaphysical naturalists” (Ritchie, 2019, s. 312). Thus, according to Sarah L. Ritchie, “[They] all presume that nature’s default ontology is one that excludes divine action” (Ritchie, 2019, s. 312).²⁰ However, such an ontology is not shared by pentecostals such as Smith and Yong (Ritchie, 2019, s. 309; Smith 2010b, s. 97).

According to Smith, a pentecostal worldview suggests that we should not by any means assume that the cosmos is “closed” or in any way autonomous.²¹ Rather, a pentecostal worldview offers a specifically pneumatological view of the God-world relationship, where the whole cosmos is, what Smith calls, “en-Spirited” (Smith, 2010b, s. 103). In this, Smith argues for a different ontology, based on the notions implicit in the pentecostal worldview. The cosmos is to be regarded as upheld by the active presence of the Holy Spirit (Smith, 2010a, s. 45-46; Ritchie, 2019, s. 302-303),²² and itself participating in the Spirit (Ritchie, 2019, s. 308, 314). The cosmos is not a closed causal nexus. Rather, the laws of nature should be regarded as “the Spirit’s faithful regularity” (Smith, 2010a, s. 46). The ontology can be summarized in the following statement:

According to this pentecostal ontology, nature is always already en-Spirited. Thus it begins from a picture of creation that emphasizes the Spirit’s essential and dynamic presence in nature. This nuanced, dynamic ontological picture makes it possible to account for both the *regularity* of natural processes and the *special* action of the miraculous (*italics original*, Smith, 2010b, s. 103).

¹⁹ Although some would argue that supernaturalism is anti-naturalism, Yong argues that supernaturalism “requires a fairly robust view of nature governed by physical laws to begin with” because if there was no “natural” the “supernatural” would not “stand out... to evoke astonishment” (Yong, 2008, s. 964).

²⁰ Smith makes a similar argument, see Smith (2010b, s. 95-97).

²¹ Smith (2010b) is hesitant of using the word “open” to describe the universe, as opposed to “closed”, because “it still seems to presume a picture of ‘nature’ as basically autonomous but open to intervention by God from the outside” (Smith, 2010b, s. 102). Rather the Spirit is already present in creation.

²² Ritchie argues that Smith’s pneumatological naturalism has great similarities with panentheism, see Ritchie (2019, s. 302-303).

This pentecostal view is advantageous because it leaves the universe open for God to act in a non-interventionist way.²³ Because the Spirit is already present and working in the whole cosmos, intervention is not a fitting term for divine action. Instead, Smith opts for a different set of words when speaking about SDAs. Rather than understanding SDA as interventions, these actions are understood “as especially intense ways in which the Spirit is active and present within nature” (Smith, 2010a, s. 46).²⁴ He uses a language of intensities and “sped-up” modes of the Spirit’s presence in creation. This is beneficial because “God doesn’t have to “enter” nature as a visitor and an alien; God is always already present in the world. Thus, creation is primed for the Spirit’s action” (Smith, 2010b, s. 102).²⁵

Does Science Exclude the Enchanted World of Pentecostalism

But is this view of nature as “en-spirited” sustainable in conversation with the sciences? It is important for answering our thesis to establish whether or not pentecostalism succeeds in presenting itself as a viable option in conversation with the sciences. However, this is not necessarily a straightforward endeavor. On the one hand, early on, pentecostalism was influenced by fundamentalism in its rejection of modern science and its anti-academic tendencies. Therefore, there has been a failure on the side of pentecostalism to engage in conversation with the sciences (Yong, 2011, s. 2-11).

On the other hand, scientists have often outright denied the supernatural claims of the pentecostal worldview and the enchanted world. Smith puts it this way, “The price of admission to the dialogue [between science and religion] would seem to be giving up extravagant claims to supernatural phenomena of just the sort that are central to pentecostal spirituality and practice” (Smith, 2010b, s. 89). Thus, for pentecostals, the “price” of entry to the conversation with the sciences seems too high. However, Smith has argued that the “price of admission has been illegitimately inflated” (Smith, 2010b, s. 105). This is because *science* itself does not claim that the world is either open or closed (Yong, 2008, s. 966). Science itself is an institution that gives us scientific data, but it does not itself interpret that data. Scientific theories, however, represent interpretations of what is observed, as pointed out by Alister McGrath (2010, s. 52). Thus, it is fair to say that the question of whether the cosmos is closed or open is a matter of worldview (Smith, 2010a, s. 38-39).

Naturalism is the view that there exists nothing beyond matter and is thus strictly anti-supernatural (Smith, 2010a, s. 40-41).²⁶ Matter is “all there is,” according to the naturalist.²⁷ Thus, “insofar as science necessarily assumes naturalism as its basis, pentecostal supernaturalism is ruled out of court” (Smith, 2010a, s. 39-40). However, it is not necessarily the case that science “necessarily assumes naturalism.” Smith suggests that it does not. We need to properly distinguish between the assumptions held in the *worldview* of metaphysical naturalism and the institution that science is (Smith, 2010a, s. 42). That the universe is a closed system is not itself

²³ Further, it is beneficial because it refuses the “implicit deism” of some theistic views of the God-world relationship, as well as dualistic ones. See Smith (2010b, s. 99).

²⁴ Furthermore, Smith argues that general providence and special divine action are not mutually exclusive. See Smith (2010b, s. 45).

²⁵ In a similar vein, Yong says, “It is the existence and activity of God that sustains the laws of nature rather than the other way around” (Yong, 2008, s. 974).

²⁶ Smith distinguished between reductionistic, non-reductionistic, and methodological naturalism, where only the latter is compatible with pentecostalism. For a broader definition of Naturalism as a worldview see Sire (1997, s. 52-73).

²⁷ Smith, “Is There Room for Surprise?” 40.

a “scientific finding,” but a “pre-scientific claim” (Smith, 2010a, s. 42). Given that the question of whether the world is an open or closed system is a question of worldview and not a scientific question, we might conclude that pentecostalism is not ruled out by science.²⁸

Furthermore, Smith argues that the very kind of supernaturalism rejected by all naturalists (i.e. the dominant view amongst scientists) is an interventionistic naturalism, which we have seen above is not necessarily true of the pentecostal worldview. Rather, he argues that implicit in a pentecostal worldview is a naturalism best described as a sort of “*nom*interventionist ‘supernaturalism’” or more precisely an “en-Spirited naturalism” (Smith, 2010b, s. 95-97).

Thus, its perspective is a valid one.²⁹ And, having established that science itself does not rule out the pentecostal worldview and the enchanted world, it is now appropriate to further consider the pentecostal contribution to the divine action debate.

SPECIAL DIVINE ACTION AND THE PROBLEM OF REGULARITY

While science itself may not exclude pentecostalism, there is one more issue that any perspective on SDA needs to do away with. This is what Smith has coined the “regularity thesis.” He says, “The success of science is predicated on the regularity of natural law, which in turn *requires* a ‘closed’ universe that exhibits law-like regularity. No regularity, no science” (italics mine, Smith, 2010a, s. 43-44). This is the idea behind Hume’s critique of miracles (Abraham, 2017, s. 10). Therefore, the “regularity thesis” probes a problem for any view of SDA as interventions on the laws of nature, as interventions tinkers with the regularity.³⁰ This issue has motivated a search for non-interventionist models of SDA. Before we address a pentecostal response to the regularity thesis, we will first turn to some of the more well-known models within the science-and-religion conversation.

The Divine Action Project (DAP) funded by the Vatican Observatory and the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences at Berkeley, California, was created for attempting to formulate responses to issues such as this one (Wildman, 2004). Yong finds that the most promising strain of answers given within DAP comes from what he has termed “non-interventionistic (special) objective divine action” (NIOSDA) (Yong, 2009b, s. 124).³¹ These attempts are objective and non-interventionistic because they are trying to locate a causal joint. The quest for the causal joint is the effort to investigate possible “open spaces” within the cosmos that God can act through without intervention (Yong, 2009b, s. 124-125). It’s important to note that these open spaces, which NIOSDA are trying to locate, are not subject to a “God of the gaps” critique, because they are ontological rather than epistemological “gaps” (Yong, 2009b, s. 125).

²⁸ Elsewhere, Smith (2010b) also argues that the supernaturalism rejected by naturalists is an interventionist kind of supernaturalism. However, according to Smith, that is not a fitting description of the pentecostal worldview. Rather, he argues that implicit in a pentecostal worldview is a naturalism best described as a sort of “*nom*interventionist ‘supernaturalism’” or more precisely an “en-Spirited naturalism” (italics original, Smith, 2010b, s. 95-97).

²⁹ Smith encourages pentecostals to accept what he calls “methodological naturalism,” and to refuse the naïve supernaturalism latent in pentecostalism which tries “to be more spiritual than the Spirit” by rejecting the work of the Spirit in the mundane and ordinary (Smith, 2010a, s. 45). See also Smith (2010a, s. 44-45).

³⁰ For further problems with the concept of interventionism see Yong (2009b, 124).

³¹ Nevertheless, his own view distinguishes itself from the different NIOSDA models.

Some NIOSDA proponents have located a causal joint at the quantum level. They argue that quantum indeterminacy leaves “ontological ‘gaps’ in the world that provide ‘openings’ for divine action” (Yong, 2009b, s. 125).³² Another proposal, argued by physicist-theologian John Polkinghorne, advocated the possibility of SDA through chaotic dynamic systems in accord with chaos theory (Yong, 2009b, s. 125).³³

Pentecostalism, Special Divine Action, and the Laws of Nature

In constructing a model that can rightfully account for SDA, a pentecostal view will bring to question some of the basic assumptions shared by other models, such as those categorized as NIOSDA. DAP has usually seen the laws of nature as stipulating some kind of limitation on God’s possibility to act (i.e. the regularity thesis), leading to the quest for the causal joint. Yet, Yong finds this quest to be “futile” (Yong, 2010, s. 63). On the other hand, he points out that there is no real consensus on the laws of nature. While DAP normally holds a view of the laws of nature as “prescriptive” (Ritchie, 2019, s. 322), Yong articulates a “descriptive” and teleological view of the laws of nature that is more sensitive to a pentecostal worldview (cf. the enchanted world) (Ritchie, 2019, s. 322; Yong, 2008, s. 973-973).³⁴

This view holds that the laws do not put constraints on God’s possibility to act. On the contrary, it is God, through his Spirit, who orders and “sustains the laws of nature” (Yong, 2008, s. 973), and because they are fully subject to God’s omnipotence in serving his purposes, God is “free to supersede, alleviate, or interact with such laws as befits God’s purposes” (Yong, 2008, s. 974). Because the world is “en-Spirited” and “enchanted”, and the laws of nature should be regarded as the work of the Spirit (cf. Smith), it is fully plausible and coherent to argue that God, in doing something that might be considered “irregular” (e.g. physical healing), does not intervene.³⁵ And, because the laws of nature are the Spirit’s doing,³⁶ it cannot be called an intervention if the Spirit decides to do something outside of what he normally does.

Amos Yong, Charles Sanders Pierce, and the Teleological Nature of the Laws

Furthermore, Yong utilizes the work of American scientist and philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce (1839-1914)³⁷ to lay the metaphysical foundation for his theological view of the laws of

³² Variants of this view have been suggested by Nancy Murphy, Thomas Tracy, and Robert John Russell, see Yong (2009b, s.125). See also Wildman (2004, s. 50-54).

³³ See also Wildman (2004, s. 47-50).

³⁴ Yong distinguishes between different models of the laws of nature, such as “the Necessitarian Model,” “the Regularist Position,” and “the Antirealist View” (see Yong, 2008, s. 966-970).

For a comparison of Smith and Yong on their views on the God-world relationship see Ritchie, *Divine Action and the Human Mind*, 317.

³⁵ Although Yong recognizes that the traditional pentecostal worldview can be characterized as interventionistic, it isn’t doomed to be so. A more sophisticated and well-thought-through pentecostal position, like his own, would recognize that it doesn’t need to accept a deterministic view of the laws of nature, and because of this, a non-interventionist model, in line with the sensibilities of a pentecostal worldview, can be developed (see Yong, 2008, s. 974).

³⁶ Yong, “Natural Laws and Divine Intervention,” 973.

³⁷ For a summary of Pierce’s view on the nature of the laws of nature, see Sfondoni-Mentzou (1997).

nature.³⁸ Pierce claims that the laws of nature are “habitual, developmental, and general but yet real tendencies.”³⁹ Ritchie describes the *habitual* nature of these laws accordingly, “The laws of nature are not necessary determinants of what happens in nature, but are identifiable patterns that describe the way physical processes usually occur – they are habitual tendencies, but not ontologically static” (Ritchie, 2019, s. 322).⁴⁰ This fits well with the descriptive models of the laws of nature, such as the ones proposed by Smith and Yong (Yong, 2008, s. 977).

Moreover, according to Pierce, the laws of nature are also *developmental*, because they are themselves the result of “evolution” (Yong, 2008, s. 976). This suggests that they are caused by “chance,” but also that they “continue to evolve” (Yong, 2008, s. 977). Because the laws of nature are emergent and developing, they are teleological (i.e. they are developing in a certain direction). Pierce’s view can, according to Yong, be described as teleological and descriptive.⁴¹

Yet, Pierce does not introduce God into his scheme. However, Yong, building on Pierce’s descriptive and teleological view of the laws of nature, argues that we may theologically introduce God as the eschatological end to Pierce’s teleological view. According to Yong, this “may be theological addenda motivated by the posture of faith” (Yong, 2008, s. 978). While such an eschatological position would not be susceptible to scientific “proofs”, Yong’s position may be an example of the pentecostal hermeneutical courage to interpret real-life events in light of scripture. With Pierce laying the metaphysical foundation, we will now turn to the contribution of the pentecostal model to the divine action debate.

THE PNEUMATOLOGICAL AND ESCHATOLOGICAL NATURE OF SPECIAL DIVINE ACTION

Yong’s view of the laws of nature is a theological one that builds on Pierce’s teleological view. Importantly, Yong finds fertile grounds for such a view at the heart of the Christian faith, namely the resurrection of Christ. It has been common for DAP to investigate the key Christological events as loci for their discussion (Yong, 2009b, s. 127-128), and Yong continues in this tradition.

Science presents us with two possible eschatological outcomes, either a “big freeze” or a “big fry,” none of which are compatible with the eschatological hope of Christianity. For Christians, the resurrection constitutes the foundation of the Christian eschatological hope of a new heaven and a new earth, a reality foreign to the sciences. The resurrection of Christ is seen as a proleptic event, inaugurating and anticipating the coming kingdom in the present (Yong, 2009b, s. 129). According to a prescriptive view of the laws of nature, the resurrection would be impossible. However, given Yong’s view of the laws of nature as habitual and

³⁸ A pentecostal view of SDA might be compatible with and able to utilize positions such as the one proposed by Jeffrey Koperski (2020) too, but what makes Pierce especially useful for Yong is the teleological aspect of his position. A pentecostal perspective utilizing Koperski’s model would make an interesting paper but have yet to be explored.

³⁹ Yong, “Natural Laws and Divine Intervention,” 974.

⁴⁰ See also Yong (2008, s. 975).

⁴¹ It can be brought to question that Yong is actually not building on, but, rather, reinterprets Pierce’s pragmatism. It can be argued that Pierce’s view of the laws of nature as developmental is an epistemological claim (pragmatism – we know what type of knowledge works now, but not what will work in the future), rather than an ontological one (realism – a claim about reality). According to Demetra Sfondoni-Mentzou, for Pierce, the laws of nature are only real in the sense that they are “potentially real as it points to its future instantiations” (Sfondoni-Mentzou, 1997, s. 660).

developmental (cf. Pierce), upheld by the Spirit, the resurrection is a proleptic event that alters (not violates) the ontology of the laws of nature. Yong says, “In short, the resurrection gives us good reason to question nomological universality, at least as applied to the far-off future, and grants us insights into God’s intentions to restructure (re-create) the laws of nature infected by sin” (Yong, 2009b, s. 131).

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is radically different from the regularity of the human lifecycle. Instead of viewing this irregular event as contradictory to the laws of nature or as an intervention, Yong argues that the resurrection gives us grounds to believe that God has altered the laws of nature. In this way, the future recreation of the cosmos, inaugurated by Christ’s resurrection, can be understood as the telos of the laws of nature. And the Spirit, who himself stands behind the regularity of the cosmos, reorders the laws of nature in accordance with this telos.

The Christian eschatological hope in a future resurrection is grounded in Christ’s resurrection, an event that is incompatible with a deterministic view of the laws of nature but fully compatible with Yong’s view. As firmly based on the resurrection of Christ as a proleptic event, we can say that, for Yong, SDA is Christological and eschatological.

This Christological and eschatological nature of SDA, Yong argues, is best described pneumatologically.⁴² This is because the whole of Christ’s life and ministry was empowered by the Spirit, or “pneumatically constituted” (Yong, 2009b, s. 131),⁴³ and the resurrection itself has to be properly understood as an event brought forth by the Spirit (cf. Rom. 8:23, 1 Cor. 1:22, Eph. 1:13–14) (Yong, 2009b, s. 131). Thus, because the Christological and eschatological dimensions of SDA are to be understood pneumatologically, SDA itself has to be placed in its proper pneumatological context.

From a pentecostal perspective, the work of the Holy Spirit present in the life and ministry of Christ is still active in and through his church. Pentecostals’ experiences of the Holy Spirit thus provide “bottom-up” data of SDA. According to Yong, this gives “historical, liturgical, experiential, and eschatological frames of reference to rethink fundamental notions of God’s action in the world” (Yong, 2009b, s. 132). Pentecostals take the Book of Acts to be paradigmatic for the church, and Pentecost is considered an eschatological event calling the church to be empowered by the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:8) for witness “in the last days” (Acts 2:17 NIV) (Yong, 2009b, s. 132).

While studies in SDA usually concentrate on the resurrection and other “biblical” miracles, Yong, as a pentecostal theologian, is also concerned with the possibility of the ongoing work of the Spirit. Given the pneumatological nature of the laws of nature, and the resurrection as a proleptic event giving us grounds to believe that the laws of nature are teleological/eschatological, he can confirm that the charismatic works of the Spirit in the pentecostal communities today are just as much the special divine action of God as the resurrection and other “biblical” miracles. And the charismatic work of the Spirit in the church today is similarly pneumatological, eschatological, and proleptic (Yong, 2009b, s. 132). However, it is not eschatological and proleptic in the sense of pointing to the future eschaton linearly. “Rather, the future that is announced by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit makes present the risen Christ and the hidden God, and thereby provides a foretaste of the transfiguration of the created order” (Yong, 2009b, s. 133). We can say that the charismata in the pentecostal churches today are pneumatological because they are intensified occurrences of the Spirit’s presence in

⁴² This is what makes Yong’s view distinctly pentecostal.

⁴³ It can be argued that the concept of Christ’s life as “pneumatically constituted” is vital for properly understanding Christology. This is further developed within the different strands of Christological models called Spirit Christology. See for example Habets (2010).

creation making heaven present in the world (cf. Matt. 6:10). And, by making heaven present on earth in the present they are pointing towards the future realization of the eschaton, and, thus, the charismata are eschatological and proleptic.

The Promise of a Pentecostal Model

This pentecostal view can be said to fit with the terms related to the acronym NIOSDA and is thus promising.⁴⁴ Although, in some important aspects, it's still quite different from NIOSDA.⁴⁵ First, the pentecostal view outlined is non-interventionistic because Pierce's view of the laws of nature, as well as the pentecostal worldview and the notions of the enchanted world and the "en-Spirited" cosmos, allows room for the Spirit to act without intervening. The laws of nature are not prescriptive; SDA is not violating the laws of nature, but themselves the faithful work of the Spirit.

Furthermore, it affirms the objective action of God in the world in the past, but, importantly, also in the present. Importantly, though, Yong does not seek to locate a causal joint (Yong, 2011, s. 98).⁴⁶ And, according to him, we should not expect success in doing so. We might scientifically locate the effect of the work of Spirit, but a position affirming SDA is taken by faith (see Yong, 2011, s. 98). As opposed to NIOSDA, according to Yong, SDA is only verifiable eschatologically, not scientifically. It can be said that the pentecostal view outlined above is epistemologically possible, but it is theological rather than scientific. Consequently, it remains scientifically "unproven, unprovable, and presupposed only 'on faith'" (Yong, 2009b, s. 131). The pentecostal pneumatological and proleptic view of divine action is, thus, according to Yong, "identifiable or discernible only through the eyes of faith" (Yong, 2010, s. 63). More specifically it's by looking through the lens provided by the pentecostal worldview that one can acknowledge that everything is already the work of the Spirit and that the Spirit is free to work in more intense ways. Furthermore, it is a view that is "hermeneutically informed by the biblical narrative, in anticipation of the kingdom to come" (Yong, 2010, s. 63).⁴⁷ And while it is ultimately a theological position, it may still "inform the presuppositions of scientific research, contribute to the formulation of scientific hypotheses, and shape scientific interpretations" (Yong, 2010, s. 62).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The pentecostal worldview is in the western world often ostracised and viewed with suspicion because of their regular claims of SDA. However, as seen above, pentecostals such as Smith and Yong have made a compelling case that their view of SDA is not contrary to or incompatible with science. Rather the pentecostal worldview is both coherent and rational (however, not rationalistic). This paper has argued that a pentecostal worldview, with its position of radical openness to God and its belief in an enchanted world, establishes itself as a valid option and brings a fruitful perspective to the divine action debate. Because the whole cosmos is

⁴⁴ But whether or not divine actions are truly "special", can be debated. The language of Smith (2010b), suggests that we should not be surprised by the more fantastic work of the Spirit. It's a matter of intensity, rather than special or ordinary works.

⁴⁵ Yong has himself raised serious critiques of NIOSDA, see Yong (2010, s. 56-58, 63).

⁴⁶ On the other hand, Ritchie argues that the laws of nature and the minds of (libertarian) free human agents work as causal joints in Yong's writing. See Ritchie (2019, s. 324; 328-329) See also Yong (2008, s. 981).

⁴⁷ Cf. the pentecostal "this-is-that" hermeneutic (see Vondey, 2017, s. 16).

upheld by the active presence of the Spirit, it is primed for divine action. Furthermore, the laws of nature are descriptive, and metaphysically teleological, which opens up the possibility of a unique pentecostal perspective of SDA as pneumatological and proleptic events announcing the future coming of the kingdom of God in the present and the past. Thus, the insight from pentecostalism may be invaluable for renewed attention given to the Holy Spirit in the divine action debate. Yet, the engagement between Pentecostalism and the sciences has a recent history, and thus we should expect future modifications to the view outlined in this paper as the conversation is continued and the positions are further tested and specified.⁴⁸

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⁴⁸ A possible way forward would be to bring the pentecostal biblical scholar Craig S. Keener into the conversation, who has written an influential two-volume work on miracles. See Keener, 2011.

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