



The interplay between the material and non-material pneumatology in Pentecostalism: a pneumatological Pentecostal theology of materiality

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Abstract

Pneumatology also known as the theology of the Spirit within the Pentecostal movement is one of its fundamental teachings. This theology has been studied from both the non-material and material perspectives. This article looks at the possibility of bringing both the non-material and the material pneumatology through Pneumatological imagination. Pneumatological imagination in the works of Amos Yong and the Pentecost narrative in Lukan-Acts demonstrates that the coming of the Spirit has both material and non-material significance. The Holy Spirit although coming from the Father (divine) dwelt among the humane resulting in tangible works such as tongues of fire, mighty wind, and language of nations (xenolalia). Therefore, a pneumatological imagination is relevant for bringing together material and non-material pneumatology in an integrative way. This understanding is important for the development of the Pentecostal pneumatological theology of materiality. Such a Theology must be grounded in the indwelling of the non-material Holy Spirit. But at the same time be able to result in the material pneumatic experiences in the life of the believer. This theology engages the creation including fellow human beings. The aim is to demonstrate the relevance of this theology in the understanding of material Pentecostalism.

Keywords: Materiality; material religion; Pneumatology; Pentecostalism; theology; Pentecost narrative

Introduction

Scholars interested in the “material religion” such as Houtman and Meyer (2012); Plate (2015); and Morgan (2018) argue that the understanding of religion does not only lie in studying religion as a system of belief but also as the material. In other words, religion cannot be understood only by the philosophical understanding of the doctrinal beliefs about humanity and life in various religious groups but also by the embodied and the material things. Plate (2015:4) points out that “lately there is an interest in the exploration of religion as a material entity by considering the arts, ritual performances, body, and other material things”. It is this exploration of the material that helps bring a better understanding of the non-material. In other words, the material religion is not dismissive of the non-material but rather seeks a better understanding of religion from the materiality point of view. This means the call for the material religion is not a call to do away with the non-material but rather to enrich one with the other. In material religion, religion is explored not only by reflecting on the belief systems but how human beings interact with the objects in their religious practices (Newcombe & O'Brien-Kop 2021). Furthermore, since there are a variety of belief systems within various religious groups, the material is necessary for distinguishing between these varieties and diversities. Therefore, although religion did start from a philosophical understanding, lately, it is necessary to acknowledge its materiality as argued by Plate (2015). The material plays a role in articulating the non-materiality of many religious groups that exist in the postmodernist and pluralist world.

Given the above, the materiality of religion according to Plate (2015:4) can be defined as:

An investigation of the interactions between human bodies and physical objects, both natural and human-made; 2) with much of the interaction taking place through sense perception; 3) in special and specified spaces and times; 4) to orient and sometimes disorient, communities and individuals; 5) toward the formal strictures and structures of religious traditions.

This means that in the materiality of religion, the interaction of the spiritual and physical remains important, one does not replace the other. This interaction is not limited by time and space but is rather continuous. Therefore, material religion should not be misconstrued as a mechanism for the stagnancy of religion. In this interplay, Hutchings and McKenzie (2016:7) add that “material religion seeks to explore the details of individual encounters with the body of the saint, looking for historical and contemporary records that might help us to imagine the emotions, experiences, and sensations of petitioners”. This makes material religion a relevant study within the disciplines of theology, aesthetics of religion, anthropology, history, and to a certain extent physiotherapy. But such relevancy must look out for the continuous interplay between the material religion and the non-material religion.

This article builds on the argument made by the scholars interested in material religion cited above to argue that pneumatology within Pentecostalism is not only understood from the non-material but also from the material. This calls for the possibility of pneumatology which is engaged in the interplay between the material and the non-material. This argument is built to develop a Pentecostal pneumatological theology of materiality. To do so, I have divided this article into five main sections. In the first section, I discuss the non-material and the material pneumatology by looking at previous studies on the subject. This section aims to look for the possibility of merging the two in an integrative way to continue the interplay between the material and the non-material. In the second section, I introduce a pneumatological imagination as a theoretical framework for this article using mainly the works of Amos Yong but also reflecting on the Pentecost narrative in Lukan-acts. The third section seeks to demonstrate through the pneumatological imagination that pneumatology is not only studied or understood from the non-material but the material as well. Both the elements of material pneumatology and non-material pneumatology will be explored. The fourth section is dedicated to the development of the Pentecostal pneumatological theology of materiality. I will argue here that this theology is expected to manage the interplay between the material and non-material. This theology should be built on the non-material Holy Spirit while recognising its material manifestations at the same time. I will in the last section, demonstrate the relevance of this theology in the understanding of material Pentecostalism.

The materiality of pneumatology

Traditionally, pneumatology is a section of Christian theology that focuses on the study of the Holy Spirit as a non-material being. In non-material pneumatology, the Holy Spirit is invisible to the material world, the Holy Spirit is spiritual than physical. This means that the Holy Spirit is referred to as a spiritual reality than a physical reality. In this way, the Holy Spirit is understood as part of other spirits that exist in the spirit world as opposed to the physical world. The non-material pneumatology is also understood from the fact that the Holy Spirit is seen as part of the trinity resulting in a trinitarian understanding of pneumatology. The Holy Spirit cannot speak by itself but as commissioned by Christ and Christ has been commissioned by God the Father. The first council of Nicaea (325) in what is popularly known as the Nicene creed states that “we believe in the Holy Ghost”. The second council of Nicaea (381 “We believe] in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver-of-Life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spake by the prophets” Although reference to the Holy Spirit being produced by the father has been debated in Nicene

Christianity and considered one of the controversies that led to schisms in the 11th century, the point I making here is that the link of the Holy Spirit to God the father is related to the non-material pneumatology as opposed to the material pneumatology. The point is that the Holy Spirit as part of the God the Father speaks to the non-material pneumatology.

However, other scholars have also looked at the material pneumatology which others call embodied pneumatology or even the pneumatology of the body. Or what Horne (2024:39) calls somatic pneumatology refers to “a theological approach in which embodied encounters with Christ through the Holy Spirit, resulting in physical, affective and social transformation and narrated through individuals’ and faith communities’ testimonies, form a basis for critical and constructive work”. This refers to the manifestations of the Holy Spirit upon human bodies which are somehow related to Spirit baptism. These encounters and manifestations of the Holy Spirit open up for the possibility of understanding the Holy Spirit in the material sense. Therefore, the baptism of the Holy Spirit and its role during new birth or regeneration is studied from the material pneumatology point of view. In addition, there are some scholars such as Tan (2019) who argue that the Holy Spirit was also present with Jesus on the cross, making the theology of the cross part of the material pneumatology. This means that if the Spirit of Jesus living in him is the same Holy Spirit, it opens the possibility of the Holy Spirit’s presence on the cross. The same opens up a possibility of understanding the material pneumatology in line with Christology particularly the theology of the cross.

This current study acknowledges these previous studies on pneumatology with the possibility of bringing both material and non-material pneumatology in an integrative way. This means that the understanding of pneumatology as material does not automatically lead to the doing away from its non-materiality. I use pneumatological imagination to demonstrate that in the Pentecost narrative both the non-material and material elements of the Holy Spirit were present. This is important in the development of the Pentecostal pneumatological theology of materiality. This is also important in our understanding of the materiality of Pentecostalism. But also, it links with the understanding of the material religion in the previous section that the coming of the material does not do away with the non-material.

Pneumatological imagination as a theoretical framework

Pneumatological imagination as a theoretical framework is mainly found in the works of Amos Yong (2014, 2017a, 2017b 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2024). The theory was first developed by Lucien Richard, but it was Yong (2019:29; 2020a:152) who popularised it by suggesting that pneumatological imagination “provides us with a fundamental orientation to God, ourselves and the world, and renders more plausible the idea of God as present and active in the world”. Thus, pneumatological imagination has both the elements of the divine and the humane in it. In addition, the pneumatological imagination calls for an orientation to God in his immanence but also transcendence. This means that the orientation to the transcendence of God (presence and activeness) does not diminish his immanence. There are three aspects of the pneumatological imagination shared by Yong (2020a). The first aspect is the infilling of the Holy Spirit which is the foundation of the pneumatological imagination within the Pentecostal theology of the Spirit. I would like to call this first principle “spirit engagement”.

Pneumatology is founded on the first principle that believers need the encounter with the Spirit in the same way it happened on the day of the Pentecost. This first principle of the pneumatological imagination is more non-material than material as it relates to the non-material Holy Spirit. The second aspect is what Yong (2020b:155) calls the “sensory engagement” which relates to the bodily reaction upon the life of the believer which only comes because of the infilling of the Holy Spirit, the first element of pneumatological imagination. Therefore, the pneumatological imagination results in the physiological, psychological, and emotional domains which makes it more material, but I must reiterate that this is possible because of the encounter with the non-material Holy Spirit. This is where pneumatological

imagination becomes relevant in the interplay between material and non-material pneumatology. The last aspect of pneumatological imagination as shared by Yong (2020a:155) is called “environmental experience” as the encounter with the Holy Spirit results in experiences that are related to the environment. I would like to call this third aspect, a “creation engagement”.

Pneumatological imagination is very much connected to the Pentecost narrative also known as the Pentecost festival in Lukan-Acts because it is believed that the day of the Pentecost marked God’s active presence in the world. Acts 2:1-4 states:

1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a noise like a strong, blowing wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw something like flames of fire that were separated and stood over each person there. 4 They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they began to speak different languages by the power it gave them.

On the day of the Pentecost, the Holy Spirit in the non-material form sent by the Father comes and dwells in the human bodies (the material). Therefore, the Pentecost narrative is the epitome of the pneumatological imagination in the sense that the presence of the Holy Spirit made the presence of God in the world more material. It is from the Pentecost festival that the material performances emanating from the encounters with the non-material Holy Spirit occur among the early church believers (Yong 2020a:155). Pentecostals believe that these material performances are continuous, meaning, the believers in the 21st century engage in the same material performances in the same way the early church did in the 1st century. In other words, Pentecostals believe that each time believers are baptised in the Holy Spirit the experience will result in material evidence. Pneumatological imagination as emanating from the Pentecost narrative is relevant to the study of the interplay of non-material and material pneumatology. This is premised on the knowledge that the coming of the Holy Spirit results in the material evidence as happened to the believers in the early church results in material evidence.

Another important aspect of pneumatological imagination as demonstrated in the Pentecost narrative is that the contact with the Holy Spirit (non-material) resulted in tangible works such as tongues of fire, wind, and the language of the nations. It is this aspect of the pneumatological imagination that makes the orientation with the creation possible. The same is an orientation with the material as emanating from the orientation with the non-material. In the words of Yong (2017b:134):

The pneumatological imagination allows us to focus more explicitly on asking normative and material, questions about the various powers in the world-whether divine, natural, human, demonic, or otherwise; central to the normative aspect of the pneumatological imagination is normativism-the rejection of a positivistic and materialistic interpretation of power in the universe in favor of an approach that recognises power is not devoid of moral or spiritual values and disvalues within the cosmological and natural processes of the world.

Yong (2017b) opens up the possibility of pneumatology which is not only concerned with the supernatural but how the supernatural power of the Spirit can be utilised for the engagement with the world, meaning the material. Therefore, a pneumatological imagination is an orientation on the Holy Spirit that is engaged with the world and the different activities in it which makes the Holy Spirit both non-material and material. Hence, the Holy Spirit in pneumatological imagination does not only engage the spirit realm but also the physical or cosmological realm as asserted by Yong (2017b). This makes a pneumatological imagination a critical approach to pneumatology that is not only concerned with the spiritual but also the physical. This is important in Pentecostal theology, as early Pentecostals were only too

concerned with the spiritual and neglected the physical. Pneumatological imagination is not only concerned with the “spiritual imagination” but also the “physical imagination”. This implies that it is not only a “non-material imagination” but also “material imagination”.

The interplay of material and non-material pneumatology: a pneumatological imagination

Pneumatological imagination makes the interplay between material and non-material pneumatology possible. In the first instance, the Holy Spirit although coming from the Father dwells among the human beings in what I call “spirit engagement” or what Davies (2022) calls “Spirit oriented pneumatology”. Thus, it has both the orientation of God and the orientation of human beings or human bodies. The pneumatological imagination engages in the interplay between the non-material and material in the interconnection between God (non-material) and humanity (Frestadius 2019). The relationship between God and human beings is the relationship between the material and the non-material, the physical and the spiritual. Yong (2020a) makes a reference to God as the source of all human activity resulting in the material being dependent on the non-material for their survival. Thus, Yong (2020b) reminds us of the importance of life, and that the whole human existence depends on God the creator. But such a creator is not only transcendence in pneumatological imagination but also immanent. Therefore, the pneumatological imagination becomes a unit in which there is a convergence between the divine and the humane (Yong 2020a:156). In this instance, even soteriology is pneumatological in the sense that the plan of salvation is an act of God to reconcile himself with human beings. Thus, salvation in the context of the pneumatological imagination becomes the act of God to reconcile the material with the non-material. The day of the Pentecost in addition to the cross becomes the embodiment of such an act of salvation where there is a reconciliation between humanity and divinity. Therefore, the day of the Pentecost particularly Spirit baptism should not only be defined in the narrow encounters between humanity and divinity but also terms of the reconciliation between humanity and divinity.

In the second instance, the contact with the Holy Spirit results in the tangible works of the Spirit particularly in pneumatic experiences of the Spirit in what Yong calls “sensory engagement”. This happens mainly during the Spirit baptism. Rolon (2010) points out that sensory engagement opens up to the possibility of an engagement between pneumatology and cognitive sciences which is the relationship between the non-material and the material. Yong (2020a) acknowledges that the Holy Spirit is divine but the contact that the Spirit has with human beings can materially penetrate the human bodies. The sensory engagement is also premised on the involvement of God (the non-material) in the material world through the Spirit-filled human beings. The coming of the Holy Spirit becomes the revelation of God (non-material) revealing himself to human beings (material). Yong 2020a:156) continues to say:

If so far our understanding of the pneumatological imagination is that it is a site at which deity and humanity converge, then we can also say that such convergence encloses and encases human bodies in their fullness and complexity. This means that there is an embodied, which means also richly affective, dimension of the pneumatological imagination so that theological thinking emerges from out of, not by ignoring, the affections of human life and experience. In other words, the pneumatological imagination is emphatically not disembodied; instead, the Spirit's infilling involves wholly affective, emotional, and physiological domains.

The point made in this current study is that the convergence of the deity and humanity is mainly the convergence of the non-material and the material. But also to point out that the sensory engagement as coined by Yong makes the encounter with the non-material Holy Spirit result in material and bodily experiences.

The encounter with the Holy Spirit results in the ability of the Pentecostal believer to engage with the creation including fellow human beings in what I call “creation engagement” in the pneumatological imagination of Yong (2020a). The pneumatological imagination although we cannot dismiss its impact on individuals, also can create fellowship among believers. On the day of Pentecost, the believers spoke in xenolalia which can in this context be defined as material language meaning an understandable language that is different from glossolalia, an unknown tongue (which can be considered non-material). But most importantly, the pneumatological imagination opens up the possibility of engaging with the creation. As it happened in the Pentecost festival receiving the Holy Spirit results in tongues of fire and a mighty rushing wind which although used figuratively in the book of Acts 2, opens the possibility of engaging with nature or the environment (Yong 2020a:155). Again, we see the interplay between the non-material pneumatology and the material pneumatology in the engagement with the environment.

Davis (2022:115) says that “[t]he pneumatological imagination is, therefore, a deeply embodied, social, universal, and cosmic means of interpretation that emphasizes the divine longing to incorporate all of creation in the process of encountering the triune God”. This means that the pneumatological imagination allows Pentecostals to engage in the material world including in socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural issues in the same way that it happened on the day of the Pentecost. More importantly, Pentecostals engage the environment because of the encounter with the Holy Spirit. Yong (2020a:156) concludes that “The pneumatological imagination thus conceived is no mere individually derived intellectualized scheme but is a socio-relationally charged environment. There are biologically animated aspects of the Spirit’s work, yet these operate not in isolation but in a psycho-social manner”.

Toward the Pentecostal pneumatological theology of materiality

The Pentecostal pneumatological theology of materiality must be grounded in the indwelling of the non-material Holy Spirit. This theology is mainly connected with the theology of the Spirit in orientating the believers to Spirit baptism in the non-material sense. There should be an acknowledgment of the work of the Holy Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit coming from the day of Pentecost is an important aspect of pneumatology that cannot be undermined as we move towards the balance between the material and the non-material. In other words, as we seek tangible works of the Holy Spirit, this should not be a distraction away from the essence of the Holy Spirit which remains non-material (Yong 2020a:156). This is important since receiving the Holy Spirit as it happens on the day of the Pentecost is the centre of pneumatology in the Pentecostal movement. This is the same way Jesus prepared his disciples for the pneumatological encounters with the Holy Spirit. It was important for the disciples to first receive the Holy Spirit as quoted in Acts 1:8 before they could even start to engage in the tangible works of the Spirit. Therefore, in the Pentecostal pneumatological theology of materiality, there is a caution not to rush for the material before receiving the non-material Holy Spirit. I also reiterate that the coming of the Holy Spirit does not lead to undermining the Spirit as mere material but to still recognise the Spirit’s divinity and connection with the Father. Therefore, the Spirit remains part of the trinitarian deity even if the Spirit has come on earth to dwell among human beings. Therefore, the Pentecostal pneumatological theology of materiality remains in the continuous interplay between the non-material and the material when it comes to the Holy Spirit.

At the same time, the Pentecostal pneumatological theology of materiality is developed through the recognition of the material pneumatic experiences in the life of the believer. It allows the Pentecostals not to be too only concerned with the non-material character of the Holy Spirit and be disengaged with what is going on in the world. Therefore, through a pneumatological imagination, Pentecostals can integrate the non-material works of the Spirit with the material. In other words, the Pentecostal pneumatological theology of materiality

transcends the non-material Holy Spirit into an understanding of the material aspects of an encounter with the same Spirit. But I must reiterate that this starts first with the recognition of the non-material Holy Spirit in the hierarchy of the theology of materiality. The encounter with the Holy Spirit makes it possible to have a proper grounding and rationale for the material works of the Holy Spirit. As much as it is the theology of the inner and the non-material, it is also the theology of the outer and the material. This is seen with the outward experiences of the Holy Spirit such as tongues of fire, mighty blowing wind, and the ability to speak in other languages. The fire, wind, and the ability to speak in foreign languages are all theological themes that signify the material pneumatology as a result of the encounter with the non-material Spirit. Therefore, the Pentecostal pneumatological theology of materiality is engaged with creation and has the potential to engage further in the intersections of theology and environmental or ecological discourses. The Pentecostal pneumatological theology of materiality therefore is both non-material and material.

The orientation of the Spirit in pneumatological imagination does not mean the Christological elements are absent in the interplay between non-material and material pneumatology. Baker states, "Since the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, Pentecostal theology—though pneumatologically-oriented—remains Christ-centered." After all the non-materiality of the Spirit is premised on the connection with God the Father as quoted in the Nicene Creed. The Spirit does not speak alone but as being sent by the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Pentecostal pneumatological theology of materiality is pneumatological-oriented but at the same time Christ-centric. It is fundamentally founded on the work of Christ as He is the one who prepared the disciples for the coming of the Holy Spirit (Yong 2020a:153). Therefore, the emphasis on pneumatology in the Pentecostal movement should not be misunderstood as a de-emphasis on the work of Christ. Yong (2020:160) summarises it in this way:

The pneumatological imagination is both Patrological and Christological, albeit in different respects, so that it contributes to the fully trinitarian theological vision that is central to the Christian faith. From this, the pneumatological imagination envisages the creational, incarnational, and Pentecostal interfaces between God and the world to enable understanding of and redemptive praxis amid a currently fallen existence.

Therefore, the Pentecostal pneumatological theology of materiality is still very much the Christological theology as much as it is pneumatological oriented. After all the knowledge of Christ and the ability to confess the person of Christ is through the very same Spirit. This again is a testament to the interplay between Christology and pneumatology which is also the interplay between the material and non-material in the Pentecostal pneumatological theology of materiality.

Material Pentecostal theology: A pneumatological contribution

Pentecostalism as much as it is the movement of the Spirit is also a movement whereby theology is not only spiritualised but also embodied. Pentecostalism is not so much known for theoretical discourses but more in practical ways (Anderson et al 2010). The theological reflection becomes secondary to the Pentecostal practices and experiences (Archer 2007). Vondey (2017a:231) explains that Pentecostals "reach the soul not only through inward repentance and spiritual conversion, as suggested by traditional Protestantism, but through a whole range of experiences marking the personal-spiritual, individual-physical, communal, socioeconomic, and ecological aspects of the full gospel". These aspects of the full gospel are not presented only as a system of belief but also as material Pentecostalism in the context of material religion in the works of Houtman and Meyer (2012); Plate (2015); and Morgan (2018). This means that Pentecostalism like any other religious group cannot only be understood as a system of beliefs but also as a system of material things. However, the challenge is knowing

the rationale behind Pentecostalism's ability to move the gospel from just a confessional religion to becoming an embodied gospel. The interplay between material and non-material pneumatology is important for the understanding of this embodied Pentecostal movement. This is because Pentecostals understand that the encounter with the Holy Spirit should result in tangible works of the same Spirit in the same way that it happened on the day of the Pentecost. It is the same rationale for the lively liturgy in Pentecostalism where worship is defined by the clapping of hands, singing, dancing, shouting, and engaged sermon (Björkande 2024). All these material experiences emanate from an encounter with the non-material Holy Spirit as understood through the pneumatological imagination of Amos Yong.

The interplay between non-material and material pneumatology is also relevant in the understanding of the emphasis on divine healing for example. Vondey (2017b:110) explains that "Regular prayer for those sick, suffering, or dying is a standard practice among Pentecostals and range from short commands, simple prayers of faith, speaking in tongues, testimonies, intercession, to prolonged tarrying, fasting prayer, and praying through at the altar until healing is manifested". These prayers which sometimes among neo-Pentecostals are coupled with the use of objects in healing also emanate from the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, even divine healing in Pentecostal theology can be understood better in the interplay between non-material and material pneumatology. Pentecostals understand very well Acts 10:38 "how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil because God was with him". The understanding here is that the encounter with the Holy Spirit through Spirit baptism and infilling of the Spirit results in tangible works of healing the sick. This also demonstrates the continuous interplay between the non-material pneumatology and the material pneumatology.

Put differently, the interactions between these pneumatologies play an important role in the understanding of the material Pentecostal theology. Therefore, in Pentecostalism, we cannot only speak of the non-material Holy Spirit as described in the Nicene creed or speak only of the material Holy Spirit but also the possibility of the convergence of the two in an integrative way. This is the unique contribution of pneumatological imagination in the Pentecostal theological discourse.

Conclusion

This article studied the theology of the Spirit which is known as pneumatology in Pentecostalism. This theology is not distinctively Pentecostal. However, the Pentecostal movement emphasizes this theology more than any other Christian tradition in world Christianity. Previous studies have looked at pneumatology from a non-material perspective, that is, studying and understanding pneumatology as a system of belief. Others also looked at the material pneumatology referring to the embodiment of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. This article looked at the possibility of pneumatology being studied from both non-material and material sources in an integrative way. The article used the pneumatological imagination in the works of Amos Yong and the Pentecost narrative in Lukan-Acts to argue that both the material and non-material elements were present in the early church's Spirit baptism. The interplay between material and non-material pneumatology is important for the development of the Pentecostal pneumatological theology of materiality. Indeed, this theology must be grounded in the indwelling of the non-material Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. But at the same time, it should result in the tangible works of the Spirit resulting in the pneumatic experiences in the life of the believer. This theology is important in the understanding of material Pentecostalism.



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