

Harmonising the Many Tongues Within: A Pentecost Exploration of Internal Family Systems

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Abstract

Internal Family Systems (IFS) is a therapeutic approach to the human psyche that recognises a multiplicity of sub-personal “parts” in response to life’s ebbs and flows, resulting often with the obfuscation of the core personal Self. This article brings IFS into dialogue with theological anthropology by situating the IFS understanding of the parts-and-the-Self against the backdrop of dominant theological and psychological models of the human person and by an initial engagement with pentecostal spirituality, in particular, recent developments that foreground the Day of Pentecost narrative as a foundational theological resource. We suggest both that IFS can inform the nascent and embryonic exploration of a pneumatological anthropology on the one hand, and that spiritually oriented practitioners of IFS can be further undergirded with theologies that are holistic, embodied, and engaged on the other hand.

Keywords: Acts 2; Internal Family Systems; Pentecost; pneumatological anthropology; theology and psychology

Introduction

Internal Family Systems (IFS) is a therapeutic and psychospiritual model of transformation that approaches the human psyche, including an authentic Self understood as the seat of human consciousness, through an awareness of multiplicity (as sub-personal “parts”) and creativity as core to life. IFS therapy is practised in response to a person’s traumas that have resulted in an internalised experiential polarisation and the obfuscation of the Self. This article brings IFS into dialogue with theological anthropology by situating the IFS understanding of the parts-and-the-Self against the backdrop of dominant theological and psychological models of the human person and by an initial engagement with pentecostal spirituality,¹ in particular, recent developments in the pentecostal

¹ Unless part of a proper noun, *pentecostal* is not capitalised as we use such adjectivally. We are aware that pentecostal counsellors (so-called formerly) therapists, and, more recently, scholars have been working on articulating approaches to their efforts more intentionally rooted in the spirituality and theology of the movement, going back now almost a generation, e.g., incipiently, Marvin G. Gilbert and Raymond T. Brock, eds.,

academy that foreground the Day of Pentecost and Spirit-outpouring narrative as a foundational theological resource.²

We elucidate this exploratory dialogue in five steps: first, briefly sketching extant theological and psychological models of personal multiplicity, and second, introducing the basics of the IFS framework. Third, we present the Pentecost narrative in Acts 2, including suggesting the interpretive amenability of this passage to modelling theologically and pneumatologically the nurturance of authentic Selfhood that in turn allows, fourth, comment on various characteristics from the IFS model that resonate with themes present in the Day of Pentecost account as it empowered the Early Church to become witnesses and agents of healing in multiple languages. As our thesis is that the Pentecost narrative of the outpouring of the Spirit can be reimagined also as a process of personal Self manifestation, we conclude, finally, with suggestions for how these efforts can inform the embryonic exploration of pentecostal perspectives on theological anthropology and initial possibilities for IFS practitioners who desire to integrate pentecostal (in particular) and theological (in general) resources in their work and, by so doing, reclaim and renew Spirit-led praxis that has the potential not only for personal healing but also communal shalom and social transformation.

One final word about our subject positionalities is needed, given this is an initial (to our knowledge) exploratory conversation between pentecostal

The Holy Spirit and Counseling, 2 vols. (Hendrickson, 1985-1988), and the extensive work of John Kie Vining, e.g., Vining and Edward E. Decker, Jr., eds., *Soul Care: A Pentecostal-Charismatic Approach* (Cummings & Hathaway, 1996), and Vining, ed., *The Spirit of the Lord Is Upon Me: Essential Papers on Spirit-Filled Caregiving—Theological Foundations* (Cummings & Hathaway, 1997); to more recently, Stephen Parker, “Psychological Formation: A Pentecostal Pneumatology and Implications for Therapy,” in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Formation*, ed. Diane J. Chandler, CHARIS: Christianity and Renewal—Interdisciplinary Studies (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 48-67, and Geoffrey W. Sutton, *Counseling and Psychotherapy with Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians*, 2 vols. (Sunflower, 2020); not to mention also the emergence of the pentecostal journal *Salubritas: An International Journal of Spirit-Empowered Counseling* in 2021. Our work in this paper is not oblivious to these achievements but presumes a more expansive and exploratory pneumatological starting point, one we hope our colleagues in the pentecostal space will find at least provocative, if not also helpful.

² It is important to note that the literature on the Holy Spirit and counselling/therapy has also been growing over the last generation, not only by pentecostal practitioners/scholars from (earlier) John Kie Vining, *Spirit-Centered Counseling: A Pneumascriptive Approach* (Cummings & Hathaway, 1995); to (more recently) Haley R. French, “Counselling in the Spirit: The Outworking of a Pneumatological Hermeneutic in the Praxis of Pentecostal Therapists,” *Practical Theology* 10, no. 3 (2017): 263-76; but also among those more broadly evangelically (not to mention also ecumenically) oriented, including John H. Coe and Todd W. Hall, *Psychology in the Spirit: Contours of a Transformational Psychology* (IVP Academic, 2010); and Siang-Yang Tan, *Counseling and Psychotherapy: A Christian Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Baker Academic, 2022), ch. 16. Our pneumatological efforts, as should be clear, are, for this exercise, strictly delimited to engaging the Pentecost narrative via a theological hermeneutic.

theology and psychotherapy, in particular IFS. Although situated within and informed by the pentecostal church and tradition – one of us (the elder) remains a credentialed minister within a pentecostal denomination while the other (the younger) considers himself a pentecostal minister within the Disciples Church – we use “pentecostal” and “after Pentecost” synonymously, recognising that all Christian faith and theologising proceeds from both Incarnation and Pentecost events, while also realising that some are more formally affiliated with those churches deriving from or related to the Azusa Street revival and self-identify as “pentecostal” in ways that other Christ-followers do not.³ Further, and perhaps more importantly for this essay, recognising that, as will be charted momentarily, psychotherapeutic models have developed out of a long history of seeking scientific respectability even as they have shied away from engaging specifically with religious and even theologically informed perspectives, we are well aware that psychotherapists (at least of the non-religious sort that have dominated these ranks until more recently) may well be suspicious (at worst) or wary (at best) about the possibility of deriving any valuable insight from our efforts, even if one of us (Aizaiah) is a Level-2-trained IFS psychospiritual practitioner and recognised as an inaugural Internal Family Systems Leadership Fellow with the Foundation for Self-Leadership. And yet our own theological explanations function at levels distinct from that of the psychological domain; on the one hand respecting what is said psychologically and therapeutically by those researchers and practitioners, even while on the other hand carefully pursuing tentative correlations between and translations back and forth across that sphere and the domain of theological explanation.⁴ Most importantly in terms of our positionality caveats, we are not suggesting in what follows that IFS is either superior to other therapies or should be exclusively deployed, but only attempting to initiate dialogue, particularly among those open to or desirous of theological perspectives for therapeutic practice and vice versa. Our primary goal is to bring pentecostal theology and scholarship into dialogue with the pluralistic foundations of IFS specifically, and with psychotherapeutic approaches to human wholeness more generally, even as we hope that what we might have to offer will also resonate with IFS practitioners who are spiritually interested or curious (from across and beyond Christian spiritualities), if not also with other therapists open to religiously and theologically informed models.

Dominant Theological and Psychological Models of Self-Multiplicity

The multiplicity-within-the-Self approach central to IFS is not without precedence in both theological and psychological domains. Within the former

³ For more on our pentecostal but also after-Pentecost theological construction, see, e.g., Amos Yong, *Renewing the Church by the Spirit: Theological Education after Pentecost*, Theological Education between the Times (Eerdmans, 2020) and *Mission after Pentecost: The Witness of the Spirit from Genesis to Revelation*, Mission in Global Community (Baker Academic, 2019), esp. ch. 1.

⁴ This is a theology-and-science model worked out by Amos Yong in *The Spirit of Creation: Modern Science and Divine Action in the Pentecostal-Charismatic Imagination*, Pentecostal Manifestos 4 (Eerdmans, 2011), esp. ch. 2.

arena, theologians across the centuries have grappled at least in part with the implications of the Pauline reference in the farewell segment of the First Epistle to the Thessalonians: “May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your *spirit and soul and body* be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 5:23, italics added).⁵ The debate has revolved partly around whether the spirit and soul are understood as synonymous, thus, when combined with the self-evident body, resulting in a *dichotomist* or dual perspective regarding human nature, or if the spiritual and the soulish or psychical (or psychological) are also distinct, which, when added to the body, concludes towards a *trichotomist* or triadic view instead. Yet since even the dichotomist notion admits that spirit-soul are akin to two sides of one reality – e.g., the latter “facing” inward and the former opening outward, even towards the horizon of transcendence – this and the trichotomist views grant there are various facets to the human psyche, or that such is at least not fundamentally reducible to any one feature. As Jesus himself granted, “the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt 26:41; Mark 14:38). Whereas modern theological anthropologies have been more dualistic (in one or other more dichotomistic trajectories),⁶ more recent approaches (to which we gravitate) have tended to place emphasis either on more holistic models on the one hand or more relational approaches on the other.⁷ The latter have been not only resourced by robustly trinitarian and incarnational theological models – thus non-monadic human creatures are created in the image of a triune deity, for instance – but are also more amenable to reconsiderations of self-multiplicity that we are inviting.

Arguably, the field of psychology has been navigating self-multiplicity since its modern inception. If the founding father of modern psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud himself, posited that the personal self or soul was constituted by the id, ego, and superego, these have been developed and expanded even as its multiple construction has been either complemented or supplemented, even paralleled, by alternative construals. Whereas Canadian psychiatrist Eric Berne (1910-1970) has advanced the Freudian scheme via his Child-Adult-Parent ego-states proposal (mapping upon Freud’s triad), the formulation also of various historic theories of psychological multiplicity – e.g., Carl Jung’s complexes (unconscious clusters of personal emotions, memories, wishes, etc.), Abraham Maslow’s syndromes (differentiated and yet integrated personal complexes), and Gordon Allport’s traits (dynamic and habituated dispositions) – means we now have many models to help us think about personal and self-plurality.⁸ In fact,

⁵ Unless noted otherwise, all scriptural references will be to the New Revised Standard Version.

⁶ Including contemporary pentecostally inspired accounts for a holistic dualism like that of Matthew Churchouse in *The Spiritual Soul: New Pentecostal Insights on the Human Being* (Wipf and Stock, 2024).

⁷ E.g., Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Westminster John Knox, 2001), representing the latter, and Brad D. Strawn and Warren S. Brown, *The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology, and the Church* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), along the former avenue.

⁸ Ch. 1 of David Lester, *A Multiple Self Theory of Personality* (Nova Science, 2010),

over the last generation, additional theoretical frames and practical cartographies have been proposed to consider and perform self-multiplicity in terms of adaptability to life situations, identity conflicts and development, intermittent (albeit persistent over time, episodes of) altered states of consciousness, and ongoing adaptation to social and other roles.⁹ Further comments on these developments in two diverging directions would be beneficial for our purposes.

On the one hand, theories of self-multiplicity have been long considered in relation to certain psychological and psychiatric disorders. Dissociative identity disorder (DID), for instance, is understood as a fragmented condition involving the expression of multiple personalities (known as *alters*) in a single individual almost, even if not always, sequentially, that has lent itself to such theorisation. Historically, the challenges experienced on this front have been mapped by researchers as shared between the individual and his or her significant (familial, employment, and relational) others, not only generating a personal sense of psychotic confusion and even of oppressive dysfunctionality but also inhibiting social interactions.¹⁰ In the individualistic context of the modern West, multiple identity expressions have thus been experienced as problematic when personal integrity is undependable in social contexts, moral responsibility is not taken or easily assignable, and legal liability needs to be assessed, among other issues.¹¹

In non-Western, including Asian, contexts, there are the additional challenges that DID expressions have been understood as the manifestations of unwelcome (often spiritual) presences and personalities alien to the self. Unsurprisingly, then, psychologists not only have sought to rethink personal multiplicity away from the purely negative terms that have predominated among psychiatrists who treat dissociative identity disorders (DID) – formerly, towards the end of the prior century, pathologised as multiple personality disorders – but have also reconsidered such manifestations as existing across a full spectrum of selves: from alternate states of consciousness through amnesia, mood fluctuations, daydreaming or sleepwalking, déjà vu experiences to depersonalisation tendencies and partial DID, and, on the more problematic end, extending to possession experiences and also complex and poly-fragmented DID.¹² In short,

provides an excellent synopsis of these and other theories of self-multiplicity.

⁹ Beginning with Jon Elster, ed., *The Multiple Self* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹⁰ See John O. Beahrs, MD, *Unity and Multiplicity: Multilevel Consciousness of Self in Hypnosis, Psychiatric Disorder and Mental Health* (Brunner/Mazel, 1982), esp. chs. 5–7.

¹¹ See Jennifer Radden, *Divided Minds and Successive Selves: Ethical Issues in Disorders of Identity and Personality*, Philosophical Psychopathology: Disorders in Mind (MIT, 1996).

¹² E.g., Rita Carter, *Multiplicity: The New Science of Personality, Identity, and the Self* (Little, Brown, 2008), ch. 6, and James Fadiman and Jordan Gruber, *Your Symphony of Selves: Discover and Understand More of Who We Are* (Park Street, 2020), ch. 12. One theologian has begun to re-theorise and re-theologise DID in relation to self-multiplicity models, including IFS: e.g., Samuel J. Youngs, “‘Ask, Wish, and Believe Through Another’: Dissociative Identity Disorder and a Renewed Doctrine of *Fides Aliena*,” in *Disability Theology and Eschatology: Hope, Justice, and Flourishing*, ed. Preston McDaniel Hill and Aaron Brian Davis (Lexington, 2025), ch. 7.

whereas a generation ago the multiplicity of DID was considered mostly in pathological terms, today there is greater awareness of both the fluidity of these states and how these overlap with expressions of multiple selves across the broad scope of human experience.¹³

On the other hand, not as pathologically focused but also consistent with longstanding reactions to the so-called iron cage of rationalist modernity that has sought to streamline, routinise, and mechanise human sociality,¹⁴ since the last quarter of the previous century there have been growing numbers of explorations of human selves less as singular individuals and more as differentiated pluralities.¹⁵ Foregrounded here is that our sense of cohesiveness is much more fuzzy than clear. In some circles, notions of subpersonalities and subselves derived from the archetypal unconscious, internal conflicts, and fantasy roles, among other (early-) life experiences, have persisted,¹⁶ with the latter (subselves) understood as the “relatively autonomous and organized set of psychological processes in the mind (such as thoughts, emotions and desires) that co-exists with other similar sets.”¹⁷ The language of subpersonalities or subselves, however, often begs questions regarding higher levels of personal and psychological integratedness, leading others to emphasise instead notions of multiple co-conscious webs of mental conditions. In this latter scheme, the earlier articulation of *co-consciousness*, while lengthy, is helpfully illuminative for our purposes:

The existence within a single human organism of more than one consciously experiencing psychological entity, each with some sense of its own identity or selfhood relatively separate and discrete from other similar entities, and with separate conscious experiences occurring simultaneously with one another within this human organism ... We are not just a cohesive self, but also a composite of many aspects, facets, or parts which have their own personalities and ongoing experience simultaneous with one another and with the overall self. Liking the whole mind to a group of individual people, each part has its own conscious experience but may know that of other individuals only indirectly, by its effects. Relative to one individual, the others could be considered “unconscious.”¹⁸

In principle there is an unlimited number of such parts of the multiple self, effectively (as one philosophical account puts it): “two or more distinct co-active

¹³ Clinically speaking, the jury is still out about application of IFS to those on the more delusional end of the DID spectrum; more research needs to be done in this direction.

¹⁴ As Weber analysed it, the asceticism of Puritanism was at risk of being bureaucratised in modern capitalism to produce automatons fitted into the organisational machine. Psychologists have analysed such in terms of the formalised and routinised “iron cages” of the worker/labourer; see Irvin Sam Schonfeld and Chu-Hsiang Chang, *Occupational Health Psychology* (Springer, 2017), 5-7.

¹⁵ The range of these more “postmodern” approaches have been summarised in the editors’ “Introduction: Self-Plurality—The One and the Many,” to *The Plural Self: Multiplicity in Everyday Life*, ed. John Rowan and Mick Cooper (Sage, 1999), 1-9, esp. 2-3.

¹⁶ See John Rowan, *Subpersonalities: The People Inside Us* (Routledge, 1990), esp. ch. 8.

¹⁷ Lester, *A Multiple Self Theory of Personality*, xi.

¹⁸ Behars, *Unity and Multiplicity*, 182.

apperceptive centers ... autobiographically ... discontinuous from one another.”¹⁹

How is not such multiplicity chaotic for self-understanding and interpersonal relations? The response that this happens generally as we show up “being in the right mind at the right time,”²⁰ as might be proverbially understood, may not be sufficiently convincing. Some might still be concerned that the discontinuity between alters could be problematic, which is what therapists deal with, while others would wonder if self-multiplicity is inherent to each person in the way so characterised or only when the plurality of “selves” are inadequately cohesive. To be sure, clinical and other research will continue to debate these matters. Our posture is to see if there are theological resources that might contribute to the ongoing discussion, especially since there is widespread experiential recognition, if not explicit theorisation, of internal multiplicity. At the least, we proceed with awareness that human creativity and adaptability persist in and through however our multiple selves sometimes (or more regularly) show up, not always necessarily requiring a unitary centre of consciousness but demanding ongoing relational harmonisation.²¹

Internal Family Systems

Our own shift beyond understandings of selfhood and the human person that reify individualism or what we might call monopsychism has been helped by a model of psychospirituality created by Richard Schwartz, Internal Family Systems (IFS), which has now gone through various cultural adaptations and evolutions.²² Its basic assumptions can be summarised thus.²³ First, each of us contains various capacities for relational awareness and this interior multiplicity inherent to each person is referred to as “parts,” which describes the diverse subpersonalities, subselves, inner entities, or ego-states of each person. Second, there is also within each person (and according to some theorists, each “part”) a core “Self” that is an altruistic, wise, and empowering reservoir of life-affirming guidance which somehow is present through each person but is not reducible to an individual. Third, IFS promotes a radically non-pathologising view of the parts that innately contribute noble and good intentions to each (although often they are misguided and, through mono-sightedness, cause harm to us or others). We unpack these briefly, focusing in this section mostly on explicating the IFS perspective, saving our own theological comments before transitioning.

The first assumption describes how each person has an inherent internal “family” system that informs our actions or behaviours in any given situation.

¹⁹ Stephen E. Braude, *First Person Plural: Multiple Personality and the Philosophy of Mind* (Routledge, 1991), 90.

²⁰ Fadiman and Gruber, *Your Symphony of Selves*, ch. 3.

²¹ Léon Turner, *Theology, Psychology, and the Plural Self* (Ashgate, 2008), 179.

²² An excellent summary of the variations and contestations to the model is found in Jenna Riemersma, ed., *Altogether Us: Integrating the IFS Model with Key Modalities, Communities, and Trends* (Pivotal, 2023).

²³ We rely here on Richard C. Schwartz and Martha Sweezy, *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, 2nd ed. (Guilford, 2020).

IFS categorises these parts, innate within the family system and numbering up to thirty distinct subpersonalities/selves (even “inner people”),²⁴ broadly into three groups: “managers” who work preemptively on our behalf, “firefighters” who work reactively in response to perceived and felt threats, and “exiles” who retreat into the background, driven by fear, hurt, or shame from earlier experiences (also known as *burdens*). The former two are also known as “protector” parts that throughout the day influence a person to actions intended to shield the latter (such as being driven, a caretaker, or an internal critic) or which can be characterised also by more extreme and erratic behaviours such as addictive compulsions (e.g., binge eating or watching TV). Each part waxes and wanes, sometimes manifesting, other times lying dormant (until activated, or triggered). In short, managers and firefighters “protect” the underlying suffering – the latter through instinctive flight, fight, or freeze mechanisms, and the former often through more deliberate and longer-term resolutions – which an exiled part of us carries that has yet to meet with compassion and love. Exiled parts – for instance, the playful child within, or the imaginative youngster – often derive from wounds experienced in childhood when the young person did not have ability to handle a traumatically difficult situation and, thus burdened, becomes exiled in order to remain out of consciousness until it is safe to be dealt with and heard. Rather than regulating, medicating, or re-behaviourising therapeutic approaches, IFS seeks to alleviate inherited burdens which relate to the particular lives, families, cultures, and societies into which we have been born.

The person whose parts are unburdened will no longer be dominated by their protective or excessive behaviours but act harmoniously to guide the person in creative, loving expression, which IFS assumes is “Self-leadership.” The core Self does not dispense with the internal parts but, in some ways as their depth dimension or as the so-called “human seat of consciousness,”²⁵ allows for their collective harmonisation and the resulting thriving of the person and greater field of life. Within the IFS framework, however, the core Self is presumed as being inherently endowed with the “resources of the Self-led” and Self-energised person,²⁶ generally elaborated upon in terms of eight capacities: curiosity, calmness, confidence, compassion, creativity, clarity, courage, and connection. We will say more about these resources or capacities later, but for now, the idea in IFS is for each person to get more in touch with the Self personally, as the way towards wholeness and well-being, and move away from being “parts-dominated”:

When Self-leadership is absent or diminished at any given level of a system, the triadic structure of exiles, managers, and firefighters develops. When managers lead, firefighters rebel. When firefighters lead, managers panic. When managers and firefighters vie for leadership, polarizations abound and trauma regenerates itself in [our] development balance, harmony, and leadership.²⁷

²⁴ Richard C. Schwartz, *No Bad Parts: Healing Trauma & Restoring Wholeness with the Internal Family Systems Model* (Sounds True, 2021), 30-40.

²⁵ See Schwartz and Sweezy, *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, ch. 3.

²⁶ Schwartz and Sweezy, *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, 49.

²⁷ Schwartz and Sweezy, *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, 252.

Healing is possible because for IFS, “The Self cannot be damaged and does not need to develop [except perhaps in cases with those with severe brain damage] ... Similar to a good, attuned parent, the Self seems to know what each part needs.”²⁸ The Self can do much when trusted and consulted, since the Self “sees the big picture and, in addition to patience, persistence, and the eight C-words [qualities], it practices playfulness and nonattachment.”²⁹ In these senses, Self-leadership is the primary goal of IFS. When a person is Self-led, that person is compassionately connected to their internal world and accompanied by the wisdom of their parts.

The third and final assumption is that our internal world is inherently good, and that each part is valuable to a person. People are often at war because of their internal conflicts and thus perceive their parts as evil or as the problem. Instead, IFS proposes that all parts mean well and simply need to be reintegrated into harmony through the Self to capture the wisdom they possess. The radical non-pathologising way of IFS creates a compassionate and open curiosity within a person to relate to their inner world with care and kindness.³⁰ This could also be described as a radical hospitality that rejects no movement but rather seeks to understand and connect to it. Of course, if a part is acting extreme or overwhelming to the inner system, it is helpful to have another being nurturing or boosting Self-energy, to restabilise and to ask the part to communicate differently so it can be better understood. Through the guidance of the Self, there is now the possibility of cultivating internal harmony through two primary ways: through “unblending” and “unburdening.” *Unblending* happens when the Self comes into connection with a part that has become controlling, extreme, or impulsive. Through curiosity and compassion, the part relaxes, is heard and understood, and often transformed from being less agenda-led to more open and spontaneous. When the person’s parts have been tended to through the Self, they naturally find harmony within the greater system and become (re)integrated (with the other parts) as an important facet of wisdom within the person. *Unburdening* is a restorative capacity of the Self that happens when the Self tends to the unresolved suffering and/or pain that an exiled part may be carrying. The Self has innate wisdom to relate to the part in a way where the latter can share what the deep needs or longings are and then to respond with love. When this happens, the part is unburdened and the person (the overall internal system) is now free to live creatively and more fully.

The IFS community is less concerned about theorising the Self-and-parts and more motivated with the therapeutic praxis of bringing greater harmonisation to the family system. In this respect, IFS practitioners see other psychological theories of multiple selves as supporting their basic notion,³¹ even if there are

²⁸ Schwartz and Sweezy, *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, 272, 277.

²⁹ Schwartz and Sweezy, *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, 279.

³⁰ Richard C. Schwartz and Robert R. Falconer, *Many Minds, One Self: Evidence for a Radical Shift in Paradigm* (Trailhead, 2017), chs. 7-8, apply IFS also to multiple and dissociative identity disorders, seeking to depathologise these diagnoses via a constructive dialogical approach to these inner voices, experiences, and parts.

³¹ E.g., Schwartz and Sweezy, *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, ch. 2, and Schwartz and Falconer, *Many Minds, One Self*, ch. 6, both identify how IFS draws on but also

important differences related to therapeutic practice. Yet, and this needs to be stated, if the above account seems a bit too anthropologically or psychologically optimistic about the nature of human persons, IFS practitioners do their work precisely because they realise that sometimes (if not oftentimes), parts-led agency is problematic for those persons and others around them. Then, if there remain concerns that Self-leadership is too humanistic, that is where our own theological commitments might register the work of the divine Spirit – so that the Self is filled with the Spirit and allows for “I to no longer live but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20), for instance – even if we still on this register are wary about conceptualising this interface too interventionistically. In other words, while we are intrigued by the possibility of foregrounding personal Selfhood as constituted by parts in a theological manner, there is no need to think that the parts, even if created good (as the Genesis narrative clearly indicates), cannot be malformed or harmful, even if their redemption (to use theological language) might be reconstitutive rather than eliminative of such multiplicity. In what follows, we seek to theologise IFS from our after-Pentecost perspective, and then, act practically in light of how IFS considers the resources nurturing the core Self.

Dialogue with Theology after Pentecost

Pentecostal theology is not monolithic, even as some of us who are pentecostal theologians advocate for doing theology after Pentecost instead, in part because that is consistent with the commitment of pentecostal spirituality to bear witness to the living Christ, and in part because pentecostal theologising otherwise multiplies vigorously in too many directions vis-à-vis the many churches in their global expressions for any claims regarding theological cohesiveness to be (easily) defensible.³² Our own after-Pentecost perspective, then, prompts a fresh consideration of IFS in light of the Lukan account.³³ Such an exploratory psychological re-reading of Acts 2 could proceed along the following three interrelated lines.³⁴

diverges from many of the multiplicity models we discussed, and many others we did not include, in the previous section of this essay.

³² Two decades ago, Amos could publish a book with a more grandiose understanding of a global pentecostal Christianity, e.g., *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Baker Academic, 2005), which usefully charts a moment in the emergence of pentecostal (academic) theologising when we could still speak of such in the singular.

³³ Our turn to the Book of Acts specifically is further elaborated on in Amos Yong, *Who is the Holy Spirit? A Walk with the Apostles* (Paraclete, 2011).

³⁴ Until now, the closest either of us have come to what might be considered psychological exegesis is in Amos's prior thinking about what he then called “The Social-Psychology of Sin: A Pentecostal Perspective,” Faith & Science Conference plenary lecture, Evangel University, Springfield, Missouri, September 23, 2016, the published version of which was “Sin, Science, and the Spirit: A Pentecostal Reading of Luke-Acts,” in *Reading St. Luke's Text and Theology: Pentecostal Voices—Essays in Honor of Roger Stronstad*, ed. Riku P. Tuppurainen (Wipf and Stock, 2019), 159-72, reprinted in Yong, *The Hermeneutical Spirit: Theological Interpretation and the Scriptural Imagination for the 21st Century* (Cascade, 2017), ch. 7.

First, whereas pentecostal theologies have rightly emphasised the speaking in other languages as central to the Day of Pentecost narrative, we call attention initially to the phenomenology of the disciples' experience. They were together, even as individuals: "... all together in one place" (Acts 2:1),³⁵ Luke records, individuated and yet in community, or communally related. They were sensing sounds and feeling winds, and then perceiving and interpreting such, "like the rush of a violent wind" on the one hand, and "tongues, as of fire" on the other (vv. 2-3), with the added italics denoting the interpretive inferences drawn from the tactile sensations. And when "filled with the Holy Spirit [they] began to speak in *other languages*, as the Spirit gave them ability" (v. 4), somehow receiving and then responding in speech, perhaps not that of their mother tongues, so to speak. Reframed thus, the narrative is open to a psychological reconsideration: what was experienced bodily, sensorially, and kinaesthetically, and how was such understood psychically, cognitively, and linguistically?³⁶ Or, to put it in the terms eventually posited, "What does this mean?" (v. 12b).

The second layer extends from the first: that the conundrum of Pentecost lies precisely in the experience of the many tongues spoken and/or heard (Acts 2:8, 11) in the native languages of those gathered "from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem" on that day (v. 5). Whether or not the individual disciples were speaking or hearing in their mother tongues or in other languages may be irresolvable, but the Lukan message emphasises that the gospel extends "to the ends of the earth" (1:8b), thereby incorporating "all flesh" (2:17a), across all cultural, ethnic, and linguistic groups of human societies. One Spirit, many cultures, languages, witnesses. Our own psychological- and IFS-inflected reading, then, suggests the multiplicity of many cultural-linguistic tongues of human communities is anticipated by the multiplicity of many internal parts of human persons, precisely since the personal is interwoven with the social, and vice versa, as the narrative so far has unfolded. In other words, social-cultural-linguistic multiplicity both overlays/supervenes on and is constituted by personal multiplicity at the level of individuals.

This leads, third, to a reconsideration of the many tongues of the Spirit as both personal and social, constituted by many parts within the personal system that parallel the many cultural-ethnic languages of human social systems. Just as the agency and witness of each people group is empowered in and through their distinctive languages, so also is the agency and witness of each disciple, enabled through their speaking in other tongues and languages. The latter are not problematic features of the human condition that need resolution but are effectively primordial to human experience and to be fully redeemed in all their plurality, even if also harmonised as a unity but not uniformity.³⁷ In IFS terms,

³⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations will be from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

³⁶ Initially formulated in Amos Yong, "Many Tongues, Many Senses: Pentecost, the Body Politic, and the Redemption of Dis/Ability," *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 31, no. 2 (2009): 167-88, reprinted in Yong, *The Hermeneutical Spirit: Theological Interpretation and the Scriptural Imagination for the 21st Century* (Cascade Books, 2017), ch. 4.

³⁷ For the argument about linguistic multiplicity as primordial to humanness, see Amos

our core Self bears witness in and through our differentiated parts, and even more effectively and clearly to the gospel having received of and from the divine breath.³⁸ Exiles do so out of being unburdened, managers from their persistence, firefighters through their reactivity.

More recently, there has been a growing theological engagement with IFS. One attempt retrieves the Pauline struggle between doing what is undesirable and not doing what is desirable (Rom 7:14-20) to observe that there is a multiplicity of bodily members (6:13) that can be harnessed by grace for divine purposes (12:3-8).³⁹ In this case, the goal to address the challenges of dissociative identity disorder, surely noble, unintentionally perpetuates the presumption that self-multiplicity is problematic and pathological. Yet we should be clear: "Multiplicity ... is not the same thing as fragmentation but remains a reality with tension. Often, naming and working with a [person]'s many different parts and self-states has the paradoxical effect of strengthening the sense of self-cohesion."⁴⁰ In fact, an alternative Pauline image, one derived from the Corinthian correspondence that locates the multiplicity of bodily parts in the pneumatic movements of the divine Spirit, would provide important theological resources to reconsider cohesiveness in terms of the plurality of charismatic gifts and expressions. We see the building up of the ecclesial body at least potentially as parallel to the ongoing emergent and non-linear path of IFS therapy.

On the one hand, working theologically, the Pentecost pneumatology might be called upon to provide some integrative function. Long before Schwartz, and even anticipating the mainstreaming of the multiple-selfhood model, theologian and therapist Elizabeth O'Connor put it this way:

The Spirit which is the Spirit of Truth will guide us into our truth, if we will ask. That Spirit will create unity within us so that all the selves are under the one Self which is grounded in the one God. When the unifying work of the Spirit goes on, more and more of the unconscious is restored to consciousness, and we move toward the fulfillment of the command to love God with the whole of us.⁴¹

This coming to consciousness involves the bearing of witness, perhaps initially through sighs and groans but gradually to full articulation in tongues otherwise silenced (exiled), taken for granted (managers), or even detested (firefighters).

Yong, "Many Tongues, Many Biocultural Niches: A Pentecostal Missiological Response to Language Endangerment and Environmental Degradation," in *Pentecostal Missiology and Environmental Degradation*, ed. Eugene Baron and Amos Yong (Langham Global, 2025), 81-105.

³⁸ See also Mary Steege, *The Spirit-Led Life: Christianity and the Internal Family* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010).

³⁹ See Jennifer Cornelius, "One Body, Multiple Personalities: A Pauline Approach to Dissociative Identity Disorder," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 56, no. 1 (2023): 91-97.

⁴⁰ Pamela Cooper-White, *Many Voices: Pastoral Psychotherapy in Relational and Theological Perspective* (Fortress, 2011), 206.

⁴¹ Elizabeth O'Connor, *Our Many Selves: A Handbook for Self-Discovery* (Harper & Row, 1971), 27.

On the other hand, working psychologically, the core Self also provides integrative functionality. Within the psychological guild, even those exploring more decentred and open models of the self have suggested that such

... does not necessitate abandoning a more “vertical” structural model; that, in fact, one achieves a fuller complexity of understanding by retaining and integrating both the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of psychic structure; and that it is the vertical dimension that ... conveys the qualities of unity, cohesion, authenticity, self-regulation, and well-being that lie at the core of the self-psychological view of the self.⁴²

However all of this might be both practised and theorised/theologised, for the purposes of this exploratory dialogue, our view, extending Schwartz, is that the outpouring of the Spirit empowers the core Self precisely in and through the loosening of the many other languages both within persons and across their (multicultural and even multireligious) communities. To be sure, our core Selves functionally are experienced as isolated, disoriented, and even traumatised, which is why Pentecost is needed (and its antecedent incarnational moments). As practitioners and therapists work to assist the harmonisation of parts and core Selves in clients, so also we as theologians consider the work of the divine Spirit to restore and renew languages, cultures, and selves. Wholeness, health, and healing come through the many tongues within and without, drawing deeply – or retrieved by the Spirit – from our core, extending externally (horizontally) through our communities, and reconciling (vertically) us with the divine.

As should be clear, our own reading of the Pentecost account vis-à-vis IFS is more exploratory than exegetical. This is an important point since, among the various models of theology–psychology interaction, there is a “biblical counselling” option that claims to be scripturally motivated.⁴³ Ours is surely scripturally informed, but less from the perspective that privileges our capacity to access the intentions of authors of texts, and more from a two-horizons framework that recognises how we engage with Scripture from various assumptions, including theological ones, derived from complexly formed interpretive traditions.⁴⁴ In a sense, ours is a pentecostal hermeneutic, although we read Acts 2 more theologically as animated by what we have long called a “pneumatology of quest”⁴⁵ than in terms familiar to that of the movement we both inhabit and navigate. And if our considerations in this section might be more recognisable to pentecostal scholars (especially those more familiar with the theological development of the pentecostal academy in the last two decades), how then might we further mine the second chapter of Acts for IFS purposes,

⁴² Steven Stern, “The Self as a Relational Structure: A Dialogue with Multiple Self Theory,” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 12, no. 5 (2002): 693–724, at 694–95.

⁴³ Nicely described in Eric L. Johnson, ed., *Christianity and Psychology: Five Views*, 2nd ed. (IVP Academic, 2010).

⁴⁴ For elements of our pneumatological interpretation of Scripture approach, see Yong, *Hermeneutical Spirit*.

⁴⁵ Going back to Amos Yong’s first book, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions*, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series* 20 (Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 32.

especially for IFS and other therapeutic practitioners, in such an exploratory manner?

Spirit-led Psychospiritual Praxis

Whereas the preceding paints in broad brush strokes to bring IFS and theology into conversation, here we delve a bit deeper by describing what a Pentecost-enhanced IFS practice could look like for those who want spirituality to be a resource for them in their commitments to healing and social change in diverse contexts.⁴⁶ While none of the below recommendations are intended in the clinical sense, we wish to spark imagination for spiritual leaders and companions to reconnect and transform their own spiritual heritage, especially through their healing efforts. To do this, we reimagine various resources or characteristics of the core Self in relation to the Pentecost narrative. Whereas in previous work one of us has reflected on how IFS can be engaged as a tool for spiritual leaders and educators seeking to embrace holistic transformation and pursue “inter-justice,”⁴⁷ here we extend such efforts in dialogue with St. Luke. Earlier, we introduced the eight Cs – capacities or qualities – of the Self and suggested that they are means through which our parts are unblended and unburdened and insisted that their renewal and revitalisation are essential for the flourishing person. Our hypothesis here is that the individual’s experience of the divine breath unblends and unburdens the wounds that parts carry and, with that, renews the many parts within so that a person can be Self-/Spirit-led. Since there is “no sequential order” to the so-called eight Cs,⁴⁸ we move, again, with the flow of the Lukan account, albeit in each case further elaborating on how these might inform our understanding of the parts in relationship to the Self and enrich especially IFS therapeutic practice.

We begin with Courage, which is about opening one’s heart to life’s uncertainty and the risk that is necessary if we are to be fully engaged. Courage is needed because our parts can be mired in fear and, when they are, they act to protect us from perceived and actual threats in ways that are closed off from the whole, our Selves. While we know that risk will vary person to person based on several factors, this quality highlights that we deal with things as they are, including looking at systems and cycles of oppression with acuity, and through divine wisdom our Selves can speak truth to power and stand in solidarity with

⁴⁶ Ours is a more specific Pentecost-elaboration of what we can find in the chapter on “Self-Led Spirituality” in Seth Kopald, *Self-Led: Living a Connected Life with Yourself and with Others* (Exploration, 2023), 101-15.

⁴⁷ We understand inter-justice as involving: “a (re)claiming of personal agency and dignity amidst the experiences of oppression and also taking time intentionally to seek out, build relationships with, listen, and take actions of solidarity with those who are experiencing different forms of systemic oppression (that is not evident to oneself because of systems of power and privilege), all the while holding the space to overcome the innate temptation to demonise and view oneself as superior to others; see Aizaiah G. Yong, “All Mixed up: Multi/Racial Liberation and Compassion-Based Activism,” *Religions* 11, no. 8 (August 6, 2020): 402 (14 pgs.), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11080402>.

⁴⁸ Schwartz, *No Bad Parts*, 98.

those who are oppressed. Courage is not found in the absence of fear but in not allowing fear to have the final determination of how we live. This has serious ramifications for those who are already minoritised and engaging resistance to evil because it grounds us in the sense that all life is precious and we should be willing to stand against any ways of being that diminish or harm life. Courage also inspires certain parts of us to “stand up,” even as protectors, on behalf of our other parts and for the most vulnerable in our midst. The disciples’ openness to receiving the Spirit in ways that bear witness amidst the public square of the streets of Jerusalem in the time of imperial Rome can be understood as a manifestation of and an invitation (to us and others) to courageousness. Any one member could be fearful of the forces of empire (see John 2:19), but the promise of the invitation urges and extends courage.

Second is Connection, which is about acting in accordance with our full capacities of knowing including, but not limited to, our intuitions, thoughts, senses, or longings. Whereas our burdened parts often act out of their isolation, connection enables what was previously rejected within the internal family to be felt, held, and tended. Connection moves us beyond being closed or fixated on particulars, including particular outcomes that revolve around or are generated from self-interest, but instead moves us towards inclusion of (diverse) others and makes room for others to share and take lead. Schwartz writes that “when you experience Self, you naturally feel ... less isolated and lonely ... [and] more connected to humanity in general, and also to something larger and more encompassing.”⁴⁹ The disciples’ connectedness grew, spilling out from where they were gathered into the streets of Jerusalem, drawn together with others as “each one heard them speaking in the native language of each” (Acts 2:6b). While recoiling is always the instinctive response to dissonance, those who are Self-/Spirit-led persist in seeking out and attending to even the strangers in their midst.

Compassion can be seen to follow, which is not felt only for those we deem good and deserving (of our sentiments) but includes those opposed to us (or even towards the aspects of ourselves that we loathe or feel ashamed about), albeit with discernment and clarity about rejecting any forms of oppression. The Self-led compassionate person attends to, respects, and nurtures the exiled parts, even as the Self-led spiritual leader inspires us to overcome an us/them binary and sees all life as interwoven and interdependent.⁵⁰ To the degree that each of these energies or characteristics can catalyse others, so also do the disciples’ connectedness generate compassionate sensibilities, capacities to feel strange others in relationship to themselves: even though “[a]mazed and astonished,” the gathered crowd wondered: “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” (Acts 2:7-8). This is not only suggestive of Galilean alienness now resonating as familiar,

⁴⁹ Schwartz, *No Bad Parts*, 99.

⁵⁰ See also Aizaiah G. Yong, “Critical Race Theory Meets Internal Family Systems: Toward a Compassion Spirituality for a Multireligious and Multiracial World,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 40, no. 1 (2020): 439-47, <https://doi.org/10.1353/bcs.2020.0024>.

rather than remaining otherised, but also a compassionate openness to comprehending the foreign accents of these minoritised others.

Next is Creativity, which speaks to the infinite novelty and spontaneous potentiality that beings are endowed with. Creativity is intertwined with the law of divine freedom and comes with an ability to think outside the box, including inspiring Selves to participate in subversive social action that turns dominant ideologies upside down and disarms their power. In contrast, burdened parts are habituated and locked into survival strategies and are less capable of envisioning liberative responses. A creative spiritual companion will find alternative paths and solutions to issues where there is no “victory over another” (part) but rather is collaborative, cooperative, and constructive. This is not to say that pre-planning is to be avoided, but the invitation is to be open to the unexpected and unknown. Creativity is nurtured by (the embrace of) difference, seen in the disciples and the gathered crowd interacting across ethnicities and cultures – involving, e.g., citizens from foreign regions like “Parthians, Medes, Elamites” on the one hand, and also, sojourners, which Luke calls “*residents* of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene” on the other hand (Acts 2:9-10a, emphasis added). How to recognise, be with, and be informed and shaped by the differences and multiplicities within and without, so creativity can ensue, is part of the question.

Calmness, which might be one of the initial therapeutic steps – calming down – has less to do with inactivity, tone of voice, or kinesthetic relaxation but is rather about nonreactivity, beginning in relationship to the parts but then, especially, in the presence of violence. A sense of calm has to do with a sense of grounded presence and engaged restfulness, almost like Jesus asleep on the boat in the middle of a storm. Whereas our various parts can easily be reactive, calmness makes it possible for non-anxiousness to arise in any circumstance, even amidst perceived and actual violence. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan share how one of the greatest responses to violence is the nonanswer, as modelled by Jesus used when being questioned by Pilate.⁵¹ The nonanswer to violence is a refusal to submit to the adversary’s rules and resisting the evil of creating enemies and perpetuating oppositionality. Although it would be inaccurate to portray the developments of the Day of Pentecost as awash with violence, there were included, among those connected with, and for whom compassion had already been felt, “visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs” (Acts 2:10b-11a) – in each case, those “othered” because of the exertion of oppressive political power (Romans), due to negative ethnic stereotyping (Cretans, subject to prejudicial ridicule, e.g., in Titus 1:12), or longstanding adversity between the lineages of Sarah and Hagar (represented by Arabs)⁵² – to which Calmness enables ongoing interaction.

Another quality of Self is Clarity, which is about seeing the situation as it is rather than with a sense of denial, escape, or avoidance, or defending those who

⁵¹ See Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus’s Final Days in Jerusalem* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2007).

⁵² For more on Cretans, see §6.10 of Yong, *Mission after Pentecost*, 222-25.

do wrong. Even as our parts are motivated to act on behalf of those aspects of our selves they are designed to preserve, clarity allows for the arising of a more encompassing sense, one that is about meeting life with assurance, decisiveness, and acuity so that things, including the parts of the Self, can be tended to accurately and with skill. Further, our parts sometimes feel like they must achieve certain outcomes, when clarity enables recognition of healthy limits to one's responsibilities. Frank Rogers demonstrates how clarity is expressed in a person's setting firm boundaries in their pursuit of flourishing and justice.⁵³ Of course, Self-Clarity impacts the Self's broader environment, evidenced through responding to moments of kindness with joy and a sense of affirmation and which also opens up to work dismantling multiple systems of oppression. Other examples of clarity can include intersectional and intercultural partnerships where each group is embraced according both to their uniqueness but also a shared sense of cooperation and resistance against injustice. On the Day of Pentecost, clarity is manifest amidst the cacophony and dissonance in the realisation that "in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power" (Acts 2:11b); parts speaking through their multiplicity and yet heralding the divine presence and activity. Clarity allows the distinctiveness of each voice (part/member) to be registered.

Second to last (in our account) is Curiosity, which is not simply an exercise for those who are ignorant or youthful but which assumes that each person is a learner and can be improved through continuous development. Curiosity understands that each part and each person does not know everything, and there is something we can learn from our parts and from others if we are open to it. Curiosity requires we suspend initial judgement (on our parts and of others) and become receptive to a deeper truth that may be difficult to access initially. Curiosity also affirms that we can be open to transformation if the situation (and the desire to grow into a deeper embodiment of love) demands such. Being in the position to honestly inquire, "'What does this mean?'" (Acts 2:12b), reflects the disciples' sparked, Spirit-baptised curiosity. Genuine questions will open up to the rest of the unpredictable community story (journey of parts-and-Selves).

Finally, we come to Confidence, which is unwavering trust and persistence in the process of healing that enables us to claim the agency available in each situation. Confidence is vital, for the renewed parts and also for Self-leadership, because it helps prevent things like compassion-fatigue (including giving up in the face of adversity) and invites persons to actions of self-care (read: parts-care!) and reflection so they do not compromise their spiritual well-being while engaging in the challenges of life, not least the pursuit of justice. It is through an awareness of agency, which is also a divine gift granted as our freedom to be all we are, that can then discern what action is right for each person in diverse situations and/or moments that lead towards life's renewal. Spirit-empowered agency allows Peter to stand up and begin to address the crowd at Jerusalem, now living confidently into his call to bear witness to the living Christ (Acts 1:8;

⁵³ See Frank Rogers Jr., "Warriors of Compassion: Coordinates on the Compass of Compassion-Based Activism," in *Taking It to the Streets: Public Theologies of Activism and Resistance*, ed. Jennifer Baldwin (Lexington, 2019), 25-42.

2:14). As the wounded parts of the disciples are touched divinely, so their Selves can bear witness to the good news (as we see in the rest of the Acts narrative), and so also is the apostolic community commissioned by the Spirit for their journey to the ends of the earth.

We hope it is clear how the various characteristics described above both renew the way we understand the gifts present in the Day of Pentecost but also open us to the reality that the Spirit is granted both to the complexity of who we are as multiple-selved creatures and also offered to others around us, even those we have otherised for this or that reason. Schwartz's reminder, though, is important: "even accessing one of these C qualities often leads to the appearance and activity of others," so that the "critical mass of Self"⁵⁴ means the unburdening and empowering of the many parts to contribute to the fuller life of witness.

Conclusion

How then might the Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit take on new meaning through the lens of IFS? In IFS, practitioners recognise at least three dimensions that are vital to healing and ongoing transformation: the gift we receive, the surprise of "others," and the flow of Self- leadership inherent to all life. What are possible theological correlates of such after Pentecost?

First, the Spirit comes "suddenly from heaven" (Acts 2:2a). While we receive this divine wind as if from without, it achieves a nurturing of energies from within, so that we speak in other tongues by the same Spirit. The gift of the Spirit is thereby also a renewal of our (multiple) selves, a gift reorienting these parts in relationship to the core Self, which is also a reality within all of life. Healing is not something we perform but allow to flow from within us through the power of the Spirit. Precisely for this reason, we see that Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit is about our reconciliation, first of our parts and then of us in relationship to others, personally and systemically. Therein is also the gift of empowerment and enrichment, especially to love that which was previously demonised, both within and without, which is part of the ongoing transformation of our lives, deepening love and regard.⁵⁵ We are now more able to relate to ourselves and the world with affirmation, truth, and openness that is restorative and redemptive.

Practitioners within IFS also often discuss how the process is not a linear, step-by-step journey; nor can it be premeditated because not only does each session and healing encounter differ, but because our multiple parts are forged in differentiated social, communal, and relational webs. The harmonisation of any part requires a stance open to spontaneity and a willingness to spend as much time as necessary with what is arising. We see a connection to the verse saying the disciples were "all together in one place" (Acts 2:1) and waiting upon the divine. Because IFS is a trauma-informed model, it always relies on the guidance of consent – of the various parts, first and foremost – as related to the pacing and the "how-to" of approach. It is this sense of coming to be in "one place" with

⁵⁴ Schwartz, *No Bad Parts*, 99.

⁵⁵ For more on the gift of the Spirit and the Spirit's gift/s, see Amos Yong, *Spirit of Love: A Trinitarian Theology of Grace* (Baylor University Press, 2012).

others where the healing can emerge spontaneously and naturally. Practitioners are encouraged only to go at the speed of trust and to always nurture the client's sense of being safe, give them options, and invite agency in moving to vulnerable places. The healing of the many parts within opens us up to being curious about, having compassion for, being connected to, etc., the many others without. Freshly harmonised and revitalised parts transform us and allow reconciliation with, and witness to, others.⁵⁶ If the outpouring of the Spirit transforms individuals in the Pentecost account for the sake of the world, this happens in unpredictable ways so that the witness of God's Self-/Spirit-led people can extend to the ends of the earth.

Last, openness to the unknown is not just a cognitive stance but a practical posture. As in the Early Church, where the overflow of the Spirit's outpouring was an impulse towards witness and sharing the gifts received with others, this also takes place within many IFS circles (as is witnessed through its increasing popularity) with those who have experienced transformation. The unknown is in many ways the very foundation of creativity. The goal of IFS is not ultimately about persuading others to become part of the IFS community but cultivating the more subtle and embodied Self-presence, sensibilities that are full of vitality, engagement, and presence and are compassionate to and naturally curious towards others. And this is not primarily about effort (although it takes active participation) but actually flows from within the person now that the parts which were previously suffering have let go of their "burdens." If the Spirit's descent opens up a new way of relating to the unknowns of life (including aspects of oneself and the diversity of others) with care and wisdom, then now we have something of value not only to those who identify as Christians but to all of life.⁵⁷ And that truly is a Spirit poured out on all flesh, available to any open to a fresh revelation of the divine.⁵⁸

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⁵⁶ Intriguingly, Schwartz has himself understood his model of the self as a witness, first and foremost a compassionate witness, with and to the many parts within; see Schwartz, "Releasing the Soul: Psychotherapy as a Spiritual Practice," in *Spiritual Resources in Family Therapy*, ed. Froma Walsh (Guilford, 1999), 223-39, esp. 229-30 and 232-33.

⁵⁷ Including other animals and biological life; see Amos Yong, "Many Tongues, Many Translations: Ecosemiotics and the Gift of Interpretation of Tongues in the Age of the Anthropocene," in *Voice of Creation: Pentecostals Engaging Scripture for Ecological Renewal*, ed. John Griffiths, Jacqui Grey, and Dani Rizzo, CHARIS: Christianity and Renewal—Interdisciplinary Studies (Palgrave/Springer, forthcoming); see also Yong, *The Heteroglossic Spirit: Unruly Tongues and Translations after Pentecost*, ed. Ekaputra Tupamahu (Cascade, 2026), ch. 12.

⁵⁸ Thanks to Siang Yang Tan, Haley French, and Jie Yun Wong for feedback on the penultimate draft of this paper; they are not to be held responsible for any errors of fact or interpretation that remain our own.

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Learning from and Engaging with Yong and Yong on the Post-Pentecost Exploration of Internal Family Systems (IFS)

Wonsuk Ma

This is another “boundary-pushing” exploration of Amos Yong, now ably co-authored with his son, Aizaiah Yong, a trained IFS psychospiritual practitioner. The Internal Family Systems, although broadly practised in the psychotherapy world, is a new area for me to learn. My brief conversation with my son, who is studying professional counselling, was also useful. Therefore, reading the Yong–Yong presentation was, first, a learning experience. To an Asian Pentecostal who has researched the Old Testament, particularly the Spirit of God, this study afforded several parallel contact points. This conversation may enhance the exploratory journey between Pentecostal theology and psychology, both on the theoretical and practical levels.

The Yong duo sets human wellness and harmony as the ultimate goal of Pentecostal theology and the IFS practice. This shared destiny makes the conversation between the two spheres plausible or even promising. The “many tongues” in Acts 2 provide a useful imagery for the multiplicity of a person assumed by IFS. The presentation finds that the traditional Christian understanding of a person, either tri- or dichotomist, resonates with the IFS understanding. The Scripture indicates the multiplicity of a person and the disharmony or dissonance between the good “Self” and a “part.” For example, the psalmist in distress admonishes his soul, “Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon – from Mount Mizar” (Ps 42:5-6).¹

Similarly, Paul cries out his inner struggle between two tendencies, which can be easily viewed as a dissonance between the Self and a part: “For in my inner being I [Self] delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me [a part], waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?” (Rom 7:22-24).

¹ All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version.

In addition to the multiplicity of a person, the authors extend the concept to the “body” of Christ (the church). Then Christ, the head, is in parallel with the Self of IFS and “members” of the body with the “parts.” This is perhaps father-Yong’s theological creativity.

My personal learning was focused on the first two parts, “Dominant Theological and Psychological Models of Self-Multiplicity” and “Internal Family Systems.” The key feature of the IFS is the multiplicity of a person, comprising the Self and numerous sub-personal “parts.” The assumption of the Self’s inherent goodness aligns with the Confucian view of Mencius (c. 372 BC, 孟子), asserting the fundamental and innate goodness of a person (性善說). With an equally convincing counterpart (性惡說), first advocated by Xunzi (c. 313 BC, 荀子), these two opposing theories well recognise the propensity of humans towards the other direction. Understandably, each proposes remedies to bring a person towards goodness, either by keeping the “nature” (of goodness for the Mencius school) or by “nurture” (towards goodness for the Xunzi school).

The Confucian thought, including both theories of human nature, strives to achieve harmony. It is well expressed in the “Great Learning” (大學):² “Cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world” (修身齊家治國平天下). Universal harmony begins with the cultivation of virtues on a personal level, expanding to the family and the nation. I cannot help but observe IFS’s resonance with Oriental philosophy.

Theologically speaking, the assumption of the Self’s goodness will need to resolve the consequences of the Fall, strongly present in both Testaments. The swing among psychologists between the negative (e.g., dissociative identity disorders – DID) and constructive views of personal multiplicity indicates the complexity of a person. The Confucian schools long ago recognised the limitation of a binary understanding of human nature.

This reflection from the Asian cultural milieu exemplifies a fruitful application of the IFS concept in diverse cultural contexts. Building on the IFS’s engagement with the Asian thought world, the leadership of the Self resonates well within the Asian cultural framework, where the father’s leadership role within a family is paramount. Another Confucian teaching is on the moral rules of the five relationships (五倫), claimed to have originated from Mencius. Three of the five relationships are familial: an affectionate parent–child relationship, the distinct roles of husband and wife, and a hierarchical elder–younger relationship.³ The harmony of a family is achieved through the healthy three relationships, and at the apex is the father–son relationship. Therefore, the

² A collection of Confucius’ teachings. Confucius, “The Great Learning,” The Internet Classics Archive, 500 BCE, <https://classics.mit.edu/Confucius/learning.html>.

³ The teaching of the “Three Bonds and Five Cardinal Virtues” (三綱五倫) runs through the Four Books and Three Classics (四書五經), collected and edited from the eleventh to the third century BC. The Four Books are *Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, *Analects*, and *Mencius*. The Five Classics are *Classic of Poetry*, *Book of Documents*, *Book of Rites*, *I Ching* (Book of Changes), and *Spring and Autumn Annals*. James Legge, trans., *The Four Books and Three Classics* (Hong Kong University Press, 1960).

wellness of the family is predicated on the firm yet benevolent leadership of the father, shaped through a disciplined cultivation of virtues. This able leadership holds the family together in harmony with each member (often of the extended family) caring for one another. Maintaining and enhancing honour to the family is an external aspiration. The honour-suicide tradition in Japan, heavily influenced by Confucian values, is an extreme example of the crucial role of the family.

Now, how do Pentecostals understand and contribute to the IFS as a psychological theory and practice? Or how do Pentecostals factor the Holy Spirit in this conversation with IFS? First, the eight characteristics/values/virtues (8 Cs), presumably proposed by Richard Schwartz and Martha Sweezy,⁴ evoke the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). For example, “compassion” in the 8 Cs parallels with love, kindness, and goodness of the Spirit’s fruit; calmness with self-control; confidence with patience. Spirit-filled therapists can benefit from comparing these two value sets.

Second, is there a place for spiritual gifts in the development of IFS theories and practices? Since the goal of IFS practitioners is human wholeness and wellness through emotional healing, the prayerful exercise of spiritual gifts, such as healing, words of wisdom and knowledge, and discernment, would directly strengthen Spirit-filled (IFS) therapists’ practices.

Third, IFS’s goal for life’s flourishing calls for the life-giving work of the Spirit, which has been traditionally sidestepped by Pentecostal scholarship. The coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2) is in fact the “recovery” of the “breath/image/Spirit” originally endowed to humans (Gen 1:26; 2:5). As elaborated elsewhere, the Creator graciously endowed into humans, the apex of God’s creation, the “unidentified extension of his personality” (or the “God-matter”). Its presence afforded humans a privileged status among creatures, allowing rare “relatability” with God, each other, and God’s creation, and a royal-priestly mission to “rule” the creation with God-given authority (1:26-28). I contend that sin dramatically “corrupted” this God-matter in us, and God’s plan for the restoration of his creation set a priority in restoring this “extension” of his in humans.⁵ Thus, the ultimate interest of God in creation and re-creation is the fullness and wellness of life, in harmony, peace (shalom), quietness and security (Isa 32:15-18). It is encouraging to see a growing number of studies in psychology taking the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit in counselling.

Fourth, how is the “empowering” work of the Holy Spirit applied to IFS thinking and practice? Yes, the therapist can pray for the Spirit’s empowerment over him or herself. Would then a Spirit-filled IFS counsellor invite the Holy Spirit to empower the “Self” to bring harmony by exercising its benevolent authority over the constituent “members”? Would it be possible to “heal” a “burdened,” “managing,” “firefighting,” or “exiled” member by the power of the Holy Spirit?

⁴ Richard C. Schwartz and Martha Sweezy, *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, 2nd ed. (Guilford, 2020).

⁵ For example, Wonsuk Ma, “The Spirit and Leadership: Where It All Began...,” *Malaysian Pentecostal Journal* 2 (2024): 26-32.

Last, the preceding question leads to the need for boundary-setting. Any sound interdisciplinary dialogue and engagement take place with an awareness of each discipline's boundaries. For the theological side, the Scripture becomes its foundation for identifying limits. The recent Pentecostal interface with psychology occurred in the rise of the Third Wave movement. In its inner healing teaching and practice, Third Wave advocates proposed the concept of "inner child" (as a concept borrowed from psychology – I was told). When I participated in a "lab" session after a "Power Encounter" class, the professor led an inner healing session. In the process, two inner children of the person being healed were called, one eleven years old and the other five years old. For the healing of the five-year-old inner child, the healer (professor) asked the eleven-year-old inner child to lead the five-year-old one to Jesus. If the concept serves as an imagery to enhance the therapy process and the patient's understanding, it is fine. However, when the inner child assumes personality, my theological mind flagged immediately.⁶ I must confess that I am not fully versed in how the psychology world understands this concept. This illustrates (Pentecostal) theology's boundary/limit in interdisciplinary conversations.

Reading and engaging with this boundary-pushing study was my delight. It initially challenged my limited psychology knowledge, and this may be a purpose of the study. It encourages both disciplines – (Pentecostal) theology and psychology – to take a vulnerable step towards the less familiar territory. It requires an open and charitable heart. Christian charity involves both offering our gifts and gratefully receiving the other's gifts. For this reason, reading this study was a spiritual experience as well.

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⁶ Wonsuk Ma, "A 'First Waver' Looks at the 'Third Wave': A Pentecostal Reflection on Charles Kraft's Power Encounter Terminology," *Pneuma* 19, no. 2 (1997): 191-92.