

## Review Essay

### **Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003)**

#### I. Beyond the Impasse

A fundamental axiom emerging within contemporary theology is an understanding that the Holy Spirit is the agent of *all* revealed truth to humanity. If we accept this statement, (which we do), then all discovery, whether scientific, philosophical, or theological, is only revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. This forces upon us the issue of truth revealed in other religions. If we are courageous enough to consider whether there is truth found within other religions, then we are forced to acknowledge that such truth has been imparted by the Holy Spirit.

As our world becomes more global, and especially as east meets west, differing cultures, philosophies, and religions will inevitably confront each other. For the Christian community, what is the most effective way to engage with other religions? In *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions*, Amos Yong, Associate Professor of Theology at Bethel College, St Paul, Minnesota, USA, addresses this question theologically. But are his conclusions those we would want to share? And what is the impasse beyond which Yong wants us to traverse?

Yong builds on Paul Tillich's definition of religion as 'ultimate concern'<sup>1</sup> to define a theology of religions as 'the attempt to understand the human ultimate concern within a theistic framework' (p.17). Yong believes that the categories of 'exclusivism', 'inclusivism', and 'pluralism' are laden with Christian assumptions that are too bound up with christological and soteriological claims which result in an 'impasse' between Christian theology and a theology of religions.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions* (1963; reprint Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 3. See Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 16. All further references to *Beyond the Impasse* will be in parenthesis in the main text.

As such, Christian theology takes a defensive stance against other religious claims to truth (pp.22-29). Yong therefore promotes a pneumatological approach to a theology of religions, believing this approach can move Christian theology 'beyond the impasse'.

Yong's thesis is founded upon three axioms: first, that God is universally present and active in the Holy Spirit; second, the Holy Spirit is the life breath of the *imago Dei* in every human being; and third, and more controversially that religions of the world, like everything else that exists, are providentially sustained by the Spirit of God for divine purposes (pp.44-46). Key for Yong's foundational theology is a rejection of the *filioque* and reclamation of Irenaeus' description of the economic activity of the Son and the Spirit as the 'two hands of God (the Father)' in the world (pp.86-91). Yong uses this analogy to good effect in attempting to eliminate the subordination of the Spirit to the Son which he sees in much contemporary theology.

In order to situate his own proposal within the contemporary scene Yong surveys and critiques the work of four theologians: Georg Khodr (Eastern Orthodox), Stanley Samartha (Protestant), Jacques Dupuis (Roman Catholic), and Clark Pinnock (Evangelical Protestant), who have proposed a pneumatological path towards a theology of religions. Yong's major criticism of each thinker is that they return to Christology prematurely (P.103). While acknowledging a need at some stage to confront the Christological questions, Yong's suggested methodology is to explore the role of the Holy Spirit for as long as possible because the Holy Spirit is 'the meeting point between Christian and non-Christian, and between both and God' (p100). If Christology is seen as the divisive issue for a theology of religions then pneumatology is considered the unitive bond. It is this thesis which Yong goes on to develop.

In order to suggest a pneumatology suitable for a theology of religions, Yong develops a systematic reassessment of the nature of spiritual discernment (p.129). The key question being how do we distinguish the Holy Spirit from other spirits in the religions of the world, including our own? (p.163). Yong provides three criteria for discernment: divine presence, divine absence, and divine activity. Divine presence shows the reality of God in truth, goodness, beauty, and holiness. Divine absence is characterized by the destructive, false, evil, ugly, profane, and demonic. Divine activity is the realisation that everything is constantly moving either towards or away from its God instituted purpose (p.165). The goal being that we can understand and

engage other religions from a position of truth (p.175) without allowing Christian normativeness to create a theological imperialism (p.125).

This work throws up many questions such as: are religions other than Christianity salvific? Can adherents of pagan religions have a right standing with God? What is the basis or content of Christian evangelisation? Yong has developed the ideas represented in the current work under review in several other publications including *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal–Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions*, Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series 20 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), and ‘The Spirit Bears Witness: Pneumatology, Truth and the Religions,’ *SJT* 57 no. 1 (2004), 14–38. In each of these works the basis thesis remains constant: ‘a pneumatological approach to the diversity of religions provides hitherto untapped resources for the theological understanding of both religious truth and the interreligious encounter.’<sup>2</sup> In this essay published after *Beyond the Impasse* Yong asks the specific question as to the finality of Christ in a pluralist world of religions. For Yong, a difference must be established between so-called objective truth, absolute truth, and religious truth. It is religious truth which is especially Spirit endowed in Yong’s argument at least. As Yong writes, ‘In this case, then, the intuition that religious others are also caught up in some way by the truth of Jesus as light of the world is given a pneumatological grounding.’<sup>3</sup> From this Yong argues that the ‘other sheep’ Jesus speaks of in Jn 10.16 refers to those who have a religious grasp of the truth but indwell other religions than Christianity.

## II. The Problem of Metaphysics

Yong’s work is stimulating, enlightening but at the same time challenging and disturbing. His appeal to the category of pneumatology as a way beyond the impasse created by absolute Christian truth claims is engaging but problematic as well. Several criticism immediately come to the fore, a few of which we shall consider in this critical review.

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2 A. Yong, ‘The Spirit Bears Witness: Pneumatology, Truth and the Religions,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57 no. 1 (2004), 15.

3 Ibid., 34–35.

Yong spends some time interacting with metaphysical concepts in order to make a robust foundation for the application of his theology later in the work. He argues that metaphysically, 'all determinant things' have both the *logos*, what is concrete and objective; and *pneuma*, what is dynamic and subjective (pp.129-130). This requires some critique of Yong's metaphysical argument and from there an examination of whether or not his spiritual discernment criteria are too ambiguous to be effective in what he proposes.

In a generally positive review of his work, Dale Irvin levels two critical questions regarding Yong's work. His first question regards his seemingly preconceived commitment to Western Metaphysics.<sup>4</sup> Irvin points to how Yong takes C. S. Peirce's phenomenological features of firstness, secondness, and thirdness (p.132-134) and by using the 'two hands of God' analogy, he concludes that the *logos* and *pneuma* are present in any historical form through its concreteness and dynamism.<sup>5</sup> It is from this train of metaphysical thought that Yong provides his three criteria for spiritual discernment. Irvin's charge is that Yong 'perceives the substance of God as something to be abstracted or abstractable from the persons of the Trinity.'<sup>6</sup> Irvin promotes the Eastern Orthodox position as one better suited to the project that Yong has undertaken. That position being 'where the divine substance is understood to be a function of the personhood of the Father communicated to the Son and Spirit and thus not capable of being talked about apart from the personhood of God.'<sup>7</sup>

Yong responds to Irvin's critique by asking 'what kind of metaphysical framework best accounts for the actuality of genuine faith interaction, of inter-confessional understanding, of inter-testimonial appreciation?'<sup>8</sup> Yong admits that metaphysical assumptions are unavoidable and acknowledges his own. In a post-modern context where narratives, confessions, and testimonies are subjective, we are still able to communicate with each other despite culture language or religion which produces obvious barriers. Yong

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4 D.T. Irvin, 'A Review of Amos Yong's *Beyond the Impasse*,' *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 12 no. 2 (2004), 279.

5 Dale T. Irvin, 'A Review of Amos Yong's *Beyond the Impasse*,' *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 279.

6 Ibid 279.

7 Ibid 279.

8 A. Yong, 'Beyond *Beyond the Impasse*? Responding to Dale Irvin,' *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 12 no. 2 (2004), 282.

suggests that we can't avoid metaphysics and must therefore answer what 'scheme best explains the facts as we experience them.'<sup>9</sup> As we encounter inter-religious dialogue in a pluralist world our experiences need to be translated self-critically in a way that can support public discourse.<sup>10</sup>

### III. The Issue of the Trinity

In relation to the Godhead, Yong rightly sees adopting the Eastern starting point of three triune persons over the Western view of one divine substance as exchanging 'one set of problems for another'.<sup>11</sup> Trying to avoid one stance on the Trinity over another (east vs west) is the very reason Yong has considered metaphysics in order to redefine the distinct and yet inseparable economies within the Godhead.<sup>12</sup>

While defining the Trinity is an incredibly complex matter, the trinitarian structure of reality and theology must be taken seriously when a pneumatological answer to anything, let alone a theology of religions, is proposed. While Yong is correct that the western Christian tradition has tended to subordinate the Spirit to the Son his adoption of Irenaeus' two hands of God theology does not convincingly support his case as it too tends to subordinate both Spirit and Son to the *monarchy* of the Father.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Yong's focus on pneumatology to the relative neglect of Christology tends to create a religion of the Spirit. Although Yong claims that his pneumatology is theistic, even trinitarian, he is in danger of an implicit tri-theism. Timothy Tennent notes this predominance of pneumatology over Christology in Yong's work and notes that that from the council of Nicaea 'Christology provides the only truly objective basis for evaluating truth claims.'<sup>14</sup> While a more trinitarian basis for truth claims may be more appropriate Tennent's criticism of Yong's approach is welcome.

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9 Ibid., 282.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 283.

13 Irvin, 'A Review of *Beyond the Impasse*,' 281.

14 Book Review by T.C. Tennent, '*Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions*' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 27 no. 4 (2003), 181.

#### IV. The Problem of Ambiguity

Irvin's second question regarding Yong's work is that if Christology faced the danger of religious imperialism in inter-religious dialogue, then 'the danger that confronts foundational pneumatology is inherent religious vagueness.'<sup>15</sup> Irvin alludes to Yong's criteria for spiritual discernment as inherently ambiguous categories.<sup>16</sup> Yong realises this but claims that 'discerning the spirits will always be ambiguous' (p.160). Tennent agrees with Irvin that Yong's threefold criteria are 'in the end too ambiguous to provide the assurance that such an ambitious project demands.'<sup>17</sup>

Yong's response is that because metaphysics trades on generalities, then it 'cannot but be abstract'.<sup>18</sup> He prefers to describe his spiritual discernment criteria as vague. Because inevitable comparisons will be made in inter-faith dialogue Yong believes that by using vague or the broadest categories for discernment, we can 'remain sensitive to the difficulties of comparing across linguistic, cultural and religious traditions...while attempting to honor the particularities, values and insights of what is being compared.'<sup>19</sup> Yong gives an example of how two different religions may experience similar realities by comparing Buddhist enlightenment to the Pentecostal baptism in the Holy Spirit.<sup>20</sup> Only by comparison will we be able to see if there are any similarities, if so what are they and how identical are the two experiences? According to Yong, this type of inter-faith dialogue and comparison will become essential if we desire to communicate the gospel while being respected of other people heritage.<sup>21</sup>

#### V. Word and Spirit

Yong's argument that the broader that we can keep the criteria for spiritual discernment in engagement with other religions the more likely we are to go beyond the impasse created by traditional Christian theology is a convincing argument and one that is being made often

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15 Yong, 'Beyond *Beyond the Impasse?* Responding to Dale Irvin,' 280.

16 Irvin, 'A Review of *Beyond the Impasse?*' 280.

17 Tennent, '*Beyond the Impasse?*' 180.

18 Yong, 'Beyond *Beyond the Impasse?* Responding to Dale Irvin,' 282.

19 Ibid., 283.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

today.<sup>22</sup> It is, however, a thesis fraught with dangers. How long can one keep Word and Spirit apart in such interfaith dialogue without distorting the truth of the Christian gospel? How can a pneumatological approach to the religions not also be, if it is indeed Christian, a trinitarian approach which must, by necessity, involve the constitutive role of Christ? And finally, how does the approach advocated by Yong seek to redress the problems encountered by such ill-fated attempts by the World Council of Churches to achieve the same ends? In the final analysis Yong's thesis risks separating the work of the Son and the Spirit in the economy rather than distinguishing their work as he intends.

The ambiguity touted by Yong as the panacea for interfaith dialogue by Christians in a postmodern context must be held in tension to allow for the realisation that if Jesus Christ is God's ultimate revelation, the christological question will need to be addressed sooner rather than later. While Yong is exploring an exciting pathway for a theology of religions, the Son provides us with certain boundaries that the quest for truth will be found within. We do need to search for areas in the world where the Spirit is at work while realizing that the Spirit points people towards Jesus Christ. However, there is a danger in focusing on the economic mission of the Spirit over that of the Son (or i.e.-versa for that matter). Rather in all areas of theology we must seek understanding from a trinitarian perspective.

Yong has provided a book to further a pneumatological theology of religions and is to be congratulated. While this concept is still in its infancy, Yong raises some thought-provoking concepts worthy of further thought and understanding. Yong goes out of his way to present a position on a theology of religions which is orthodox, and yet he is walking a short distance from disengaging the persons of the Godhead from each other thus threatening the unity of God.

While the argument of Yong is couched in academic theological terms and vocabulary it is one with which many today in

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22 See for example the survey provided by V-M, Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), especially his review of Yong on 277-281). For Kärkkäinen's own constructive proposal see *Toward a Pneumatological Theology: Pentecostal and Ecumenical Perspectives on Ecclesiology, Soteriology, and theology of Mission*, ed. A. Yong (New York: University Press of America, 2002), 193-239. See also C. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 185-214.

the church and the academy need to wrestle with as it has many practical consequences for ministry and mission. With Keith Warrington we agree that it would be a shame if these concepts are only read by scholars and therefore the work needs to be made more accessible to a broader readership through critical reviews such as this and by pastor-scholars interacting with such proposals and translating them for their congregations.<sup>23</sup> A positive challenge given to us from Yong is that as we meet and engage people of other cultures and religions in our own neighbourhoods, are we ready to engage with them from a position of similarity - as human persons created in the *imago Dei* - rather than from a position of imperial arrogance and conflict? As Kärkkäinen states: 'It is too early to give a definite assessment of Yong's very recent approach. Nevertheless, his attempt to construct a viable pneumatological theology of religions should be understood as an opener, a way to ask the right questions.'<sup>24</sup> While Yong may not provide the final answer on this issue he certainly raises many useful ideas which deserve further consideration.

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23 Book Review by K. Warrington, 'Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions,' *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 30 no. 3 (2006), 283.

24 Kärkkäinen, *Toward a Pneumatological Theology*, 237.