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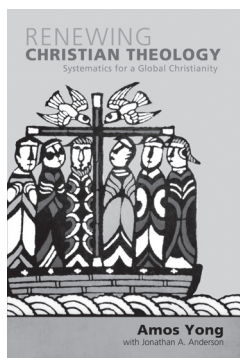
for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
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Theological Commission

Students, Scholars, and Systematics:

A Panel Discussion of Amos Yong:

Renewing Christian Theology: Systematics for a Global Christianity

Christopher A. Stephenson



It is my distinct privilege to introduce the following critical reviews of Amos Yong's *Renewing Christian Theology: Systematics for a Global Christianity*, an introduction to systematic theology in pneumatological perspective for beginning students.¹ Yong is not a stranger to the readers of *Evangelical Review of Theology*. In addition to book reviews, he has published several articles on

topics including philosophy of religion, pentecostal theology, ecclesiology, and disability studies.² Among Evangelicals more broadly, it is probably Yong's theology of religions that has attracted the most attention, and as the most prolific academic theologian in the history of pentecostalism, he has also written on theological method, hermeneutical theory, missiology, political theology, and science and religion.

In light of Yong's prior achievements in these numerous areas of religious studies, a few words are in order about how they provide the context for *Renewing Christian Theology*.³

² See in *ERT*: 26:1 (2002): 45-67; 26:3 (2002): 240-64; 30:1 (2006): 60-85; 32:1 (2008): 22-37; 33:2 (2009): 179-83; 35:2 (2011): 160-76; 39:3 (2015): 204-17.

³ For an extensive evaluation of Yong's theology, see Christopher A. Stephenson, *Types of Pentecostal Theology: Method, System, Spirit* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 82-110.

¹ Waco: BUP, 2014.

Christopher A. Stephenson is Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology at Lee University (Cleveland, TN) and the author of *Types of Pentecostal Theology: Method, System, Spirit* (Oxford: OUP, 2013). His current research is devoted to completing *The Work of Jesus Christ* (Eerdmans; *Guides to Theology*) and a book on constructive theology that combines ritual and pneumatological perspectives on baptism and Lord's supper (OUP). He is the editor of *Peter Lang's Ecumenical Studies monograph series* and a book review editor in *theology for Religious Studies Review*. Cover graphic used with permission.

In Yong's first monograph, *Discerning the Spirit(s)*, he not only begins to develop his theology of religions, but also provides the first glimpse of a methodology that receives its most explicit articulation in *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective*.⁴ In the latter, Yong develops a pneumatological theological method and hermeneutic. Pneumatological theology is not simply a theology of the Holy Spirit, but an account of all of Christian theology in pneumatological perspective, a privileging of pneumatology as the best entry point into a robustly trinitarian theology and hermeneutic.

Pneumatological theology requires us to speak not only to those within ecclesial contexts, but also to any interlocutor in the public square over the validity of our truth claims, whether theological or any other kind. Yong sees coherence, correspondence, and pragmatism as compatible criteria for truth claims. Thus, engagement with any and all interlocutors in multiple different communities of discourse allows us to bear witness to what we believe to be true while remaining open to correction when such engagement suggests that our beliefs may not be internally consistent, may be less satisfactory than others' competing attempts to square their own beliefs with a reality that exists independently of human minds, or may come up short at the level of lived experience—coherence, correspondence, and pragmatism, respectively.

According to Yong, such a process of engagement and discernment is pneu-

matological because the Holy Spirit is operative at the ontological level by playing a role in instantiating created realities as the realities that they are and at the epistemological level by making created realities intelligible to human minds. The realms of being and knowing are related, and the Holy Spirit enables human minds to span the gap between the two. Although human knowledge is fallible, we do not have to withdraw to utter scepticism, because, in Yong's words, 'we do engage reality, our engagement is more or less truthful, and it is normed by reality itself'.⁵

However, human knowledge of reality is hermeneutically construed, for we are situated within various interpretive communities that have established traditions, practices, and ways of viewing the world. Indeed, for Yong, theological interpreters are situated within multiple communities of discourse whose borders are not hermetically sealed and at times are not even clearly delineated. Besides engaging interlocutors outside ecclesial contexts in various communities of discourse in the public square, theologians must also acknowledge that they themselves operate and interpret from within multiple communities of discourse.

Thus, not only should they engage persons in other interpretive communities to test truth claims, they should also realize that their own truth claims are already informed by more than one interpretive community before they ever get around to engaging directly members of other interpretive communities.

This is less than even a sketch of

4 Burlington: Ashgate, 2002.

5 *Spirit-Word-Community*, 184.

Yong's elaborate theological method, but it is enough to illuminate what motivates his forays into so many different areas of religious studies. Put simply, Yong is on a quest for truth of all kinds wherever it may be understood and elucidated most clearly. In some respects, it may be among pentecostal systematic theologians.⁶ In others, it may be among adherents to more popular Evangelical or pentecostal practices.⁷

In others, it may be among persons with disabilities.⁸ In yet other respects, it may be among practitioners of religions other than Christianity.⁹ In still others, it may be among natural scientists.¹⁰ Some find themselves participating directly in more than one of these or similar interpretive communities;¹¹ most if not all are influenced by more than one of these or similar interpretive communities.

In sum, it is Yong's determination to attend to both particular communal interpretations and the possibility of universal discourse that most fundamentally characterizes his theology

and describes at the most basic level what it means for theology to be pneumatological.

Where does *Renewing Christian Theology* fit within this broader context of Yong's work? First, Yong offers the fruits of his most direct engagement to date with pentecostal denominationalism as an interpretive community. Of course, this is not to say that this is his first engagement with pentecostal theology per se—far from it.¹² Rather, it is the first engagement of this length with Christian beliefs as articulated by a single pentecostal denomination.

The Statement of Faith propagated by World Assemblies of God Fellowship provides the book's structure, although certainly not all of its content, and each chapter begins with the article from the Statement of Faith that corresponds to that chapter's primary topic. This is truly noteworthy, for while there is no shortage of academic introductions to systematic theology or of popular explanations of pentecostal beliefs, *Renewing Christian Theology* combines extensive research and academic rigour with the treatment of a pentecostal denominational faith statement in a format that non-specialists will find readable.

It is all the more noteworthy that Yong does this precisely at a time in which academic pentecostal theology is maturing and entertaining questions about its relationships with the ethos that gave rise to this Statement of Faith and others like it and in which global pentecostalism is simultaneously entertaining questions about its

6 *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

7 *In the Days of Caesar* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

8 *Theology and Down Syndrome* (Waco: BUP, 2007); *Bible, Disability, and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

9 *Discerning the Spirit(s)* (Sheffield: SAP, 2000); *Beyond the Impasse* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003); *Hospitality and the Other* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008); *Pneumatology and the Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

10 *The Spirit of Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

11 *The Cosmic Breath* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); *The Future of Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2014).

12 Especially *Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh; Who is the Holy Spirit?* (Brewster: Paraclete, 2011); *Spirit of Love* (Waco: BUP, 2012).

relationships to denominationalism generally. Instead of jettisoning this imperfect denominational statement, much of which broadly and unofficially represents the beliefs of many pentecostals beyond the boundaries of the World Assemblies of God Fellowship, Yong gives it a place at the theological table in his search for truth.

And yet, Yong does not offer merely an exposition of the Statement of Faith's articles themselves. Instead, he, second, brings to bear his earlier scholarly investigations on his introductory explanations of traditional systematic *loci*. For example, emergence theory informs theological anthropology; questions about the unintentional marginalization of persons with disabilities informs divine healing; and theology of religions informs the doctrine of the Trinity. In these and other discussions, one finds the arguments of Yong's scholarly monographs and countless peer-reviewed articles distilled for consumption by beginning students and woven into the fabric of more traditional major themes and figures commonly associated with introductions to systematic theology.

Yong critically appropriates a facet of pentecostal denominationalism so that a single denomination's faith statement is stretched to address all of the areas of religious studies in which he has already laboured and so that those prior areas of labour find their way into a text whose structure is a faith statement. One of the most important results of this endeavour is that his ideas now have an avenue into academic institutions that might not have previously exposed their beginning students to Yong's theological

programme. *Renewing Christian Theology* is at once sophisticated and accessible, at once particular and global.

The following reviews—presented according to the alignment of their emphases with the book's order of topics—evaluate matters of both substance and style. While all of them are generally positive appraisals, they do not stop short of challenging Yong on several fronts. Lisa Stephenson focuses on reading *Renewing Christian Theology* precisely as a textbook and raises questions related to the structure of the individual chapters and of the book as a whole. Before taking up both sacraments and divinization, Chris Green asks if Yong too quickly speaks of global pentecostalism as if it were singular instead of an 'extended family'.

Mark Mann also raises concerns about the book's structure and disputes Yong's account of sanctification and his interpretation of Wesley. Thomas Oord wonders about the extent to which Yong's views represent the theology of global pentecostals and then turns his criticisms to creation, evil, and providence.

These reviews and Yong's response originated as a panel discussion sponsored by the Theology Club at Lee University in Cleveland, TN (19 November 2015). I extend my hearty appreciation to everyone who made that event and this published forum possible. Special thanks goes to Amos Yong, who suggested the topic and participants of the panel discussion in response to my invitation for him alone to give a public lecture at Lee University. This initiative to bring others also 'into the spotlight' is indicative of his entire professional disposition.