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A Renewalist Primer

Lisa P. Stephenson

I Introduction

I would like to begin by highlighting the picture that graces the cover of *Renewing Christian Theology*. This is, perhaps, a curious way to start, but, then again, so is starting a systematic theology with eschatology! The image is a modified design of Sadao Watanabe's print entitled *Oikoumene*. This print focuses on the ecumenical nature of the church (as depicted with the single boat), as well as its global scope (as depicted by six uniquely dressed persons, each representative of the six inhabited continents). The red cruciform mast extends over the heads of the six figures—visibly unifying them—and is flanked on either side by two doves—a symbolism of both peace and of the Spirit.

That Yong chose this work of art to introduce the text is no coincidence. In one snapshot it communicates the driving focus and hope of the next 300+ pages of the book, wherein Yong believes that within a global context renewal Christianity offers a theological framework that can maintain doctrinal unity without demanding a uniformity of thinking. He contends that it is

precisely by starting with the Spirit of Christ that the many ecclesial tongues and languages heard throughout the globalizing world of the twenty-first century can be held together in the common ship of the church; harmonized but not homogenized.

In the following review, I will evaluate *Renewing Christian Theology* specifically as it is intended to be: a textbook for second-year undergraduate or graduate level theology students. This approach is not meant to discount the value that the book has on other levels or for those who do not fit the description of the proposed audience. Everyone should read this work regardless of where they are on their educational journey. Nonetheless, since this is Yong's stated objective, it seems fitting to consider the text's contents in this light.

There is much to praise in *Renewing Christian Theology*, but the comments below will focus on various aspects of the method Yong employs throughout the book more than the particulars of the content. As a textbook for students, Yong's work models how to construct theology as much as it does what that theology should look like.

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II Commendations

First and foremost, someone has finally written a theological textbook that not only takes renewalist theology seriously, but prioritizes it within the larger project of systematic theology! This is no small feat and is a welcome addition amongst other theological textbooks that not only largely ignore renewalist theology, but even fail to present a robust pneumatology (e.g., in Alistair McGrath's *Christian Theology* pneumatology is relegated to one subsection within a chapter on the doctrine of God, despite three entire chapters devoted to Christology).¹

This is no longer excusable, given the growth and influence of the renewalist movement globally in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and Yong's work goes a long way toward rectifying this dearth. Yong allows renewalist concerns to inform both his content and method, but does so in such a way as to invite other voices into the conversation rather than exclude them.

Consequently, renewalist students should find themselves at home amongst the theological content covered, while also being sufficiently challenged to expand the ways in which they have traditionally conceived certain tenets of the faith. Moreover, renewalist students will be forced to consider the ways in which renewalist distinctives can serve as a lens through which to view other theological loci that are not explicitly 'renewalist' in nature. For those students that do not

identify with the renewalist movement, *Renewing Christian Theology* encourages them to move past the stereotypical or parochial ways in which renewalist theology and spirituality is sometimes presented, and expand their horizons beyond their own personal experiences.

A feature of the text that can assist in both groups of students processing the book's material is the discussion questions that are found at the end of each chapter. The questions are sufficiently open-ended so as not to exclude those who do not come from a renewalist background, but directed enough so as to press everyone to engage with the various renewalist aspects of the text.

Even though *Renewing Christian Theology* is renewalist in nature, it still models for students the importance of engaging a broad range of voices on a given issue in order to avoid producing either a 'navel gazing' theology or a 'head in the sand' approach that has been characteristic of evangelical theology at times in the past. Throughout the book, Yong effortlessly incorporates biblical texts, historical theology, contextual theologies, ecumenical perspectives, world religions, and modern science to assist him in his constructive task. One might think that this sounds like a recipe for disaster, but Yong is able to demonstrate the significance of these various interlocutors without overwhelming the conversation with too many dialogue partners.

Students not exposed to some of these diverse perspectives (especially the interreligious ones) may feel uneasy in the waters Yong sometimes treads in throughout the book. But, ultimately, students would do well to learn from this multi-faceted approach,

¹ Alistair McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

even if they quibble with the details. The fact that Yong has set the theological table so broadly and invited these 'strangers' to the meal is a noteworthy gesture for students to observe, especially in this global age.

Another commendable feature of the book is Yong's commitment to engaging consistently with scripture throughout the work. Although Yong moves beyond early renewalist attempts at systematic theology via a biblically inductive methodology, he nonetheless remains faithful to the concerns of his predecessors by tethering his theology to scripture. This is significant for renewalist and nonrenewalist students alike because for many of them a biblically inductive methodology is all they have known with respect to the way one utilizes scripture when constructing theology. Thus, even though Yong is utilizing the biblical texts differently than students may be used to, his prioritization of biblical theology as a source for theological construction will still resonate with students' commitment to scripture in matters of faith. What is gained, then, is a better way to incorporate the biblical texts within theology without dispensing of their significance altogether.

Throughout the book, Yong demonstrates for students two ways to move beyond a biblically inductive methodology. The first is through the vignettes that Yong uses to introduce each chapter wherein he presents a life narrative of a biblical character. These reflections are thought-provoking in and of themselves, while also proving useful to informing dogmatic themes later in the same chapter. This aspect of the text should resonate especially well with the narrative aspect of renewalist

students' spirituality, while countering for all students the tendency in theology at large to privilege propositional texts when it comes to constructing doctrine.

The second way Yong connects biblical theology with systematic theology is through the scriptural considerations presented in each chapter that precede the constructive components. Here one finds a diverse representation from the New Testament that goes beyond mere proof-texting. Because Yong opts to explore whole books or letters rather than isolated scriptures in this portion of his text, by the end of the book the student is offered theological commentaries on eleven different New Testament writings.

While renewalists have been known to operate from an approach that favours a canon within a canon (i.e., Luke-Acts), Yong avoids this method (at least in this work!) and thus models an approach that has greater ecumenical value and can resonate with all types of students, regardless of their denominational background. Moreover, this aspect of the text serves to demonstrate for students the importance of interpreting scripture within its broader narrative, literary, and canonical context, as well as utilizing the whole of scripture to inform one's doctrine.

A unique element of the book that also deserves praise is the way in which *Renewing Christian Theology* not only connects with the students' cognitive faculties (i.e., orthodoxy), but recognizes and engages their affective faculties as well (i.e., orthopathy). This occurs by means of the fifty-four colour pictures appearing throughout the text that focus on various forms of art. Each chapter contains multiple images that

appear in strategic places and coordinate with the content of the text. These pictures represent diverse mediums and global perspectives, serving to illustrate and illuminate the material in further ways. Because of this added component students will not only read through the book, but experience it as well.

On the one hand, this aspect of the text will serve to challenge those students who prioritize orthodoxy over orthopathy by validating the theological significance of the latter and demonstrating that theology is not just intellectual but embodied. On the other hand, it will also serve to challenge those students who might prioritize orthopathy over orthodoxy by proving that orthodoxy is not inimical to orthopraxy and can even enrich it. The two can exist in a meaningful and reciprocal relationship.

III Concerns

1. Gender bias

Despite the strengths of *Renewing Christian Theology*, let me offer three concerns. First, as noted above, part of Yong's method is to present biblical vignettes as forays into the various theological loci. However, one cannot help but observe that the number of female vignettes (2) are notably disproportionate to the number of male vignettes (9). While it is recognized that the biblical texts themselves limit one's options in this respect, there is still room for a more equitable distribution.

For example, in the chapter on divine healing, Yong highlights the story of the Gerasene demoniac from the Gospel of Mark (Mk 5:1-20) to intro-

duce the chapter's contents. Yong argues that the Markan characterization of this unnamed man invites consideration of a more multidimensional model of healing. Later on in this same chapter, Yong explores further the ideas of wholeness and salvation in the Gospel of Mark. Yet, would it not be equally fitting to highlight the narrative of the woman with the issue of blood instead—which immediately follows in the Markan text (Mk 5:21-34)—as her story shares similar elements with the Gerasene demoniac? The woman with the issue of blood is also healed and her restoration includes more than just the physical aspects.

The concern here is more than just equality for equality's sake. As part of Yong's method, the biblical vignettes serve not only to model for students how to use narrative to inform theology, but whose narrative to use. Consequently, the implicit message offered is problematic. And, ironically, the disparity within the book on this account is not representative of the narrational aspect of renewal spirituality globally, as it is the voice of women offering testimonies of God's good deeds as much (if not more) as it is that of the men's.

2. Use of confessions

Second, one of the central aspects of Yong's methodology is to employ the World Assemblies of God Fellowship's (WAGF) Statement of Faith (SF) as a test case for using confessional statements to construct a template for systematic theology. The impetus for this move is Yong's concern that theology be connected and engaged with the living church. Thus, the individual Ar-

ticles of the WAGF SF not only order the structure of the book (though in reverse), but also provide a loose agenda for the content of each chapter. Yong maintains that the theological task becomes one of retrieving and reappropriating the tradition in ways that are faithful and creative.

There is no doubt that Yong has certainly been creative with the tradition as articulated in the WAGF SF (e.g., reversing the order and reinterpreting the content), but has he been faithful enough? That is, by the end of the book has Yong reappropriated the content of the SF to such an extent that those renewal churches a part of the WAGF would no longer recognize it?

On the one hand, I imagine Yong would say that part of the point of the book is to facilitate broadening the perspectives of these renewal churches so that they are better equipped to speak responsibly in a global context. On the other hand, if Yong's intent is to use the SF as a bridge between the living church and academic theology, then is this a bridge to nowhere?

Another way to put this is to consider that a statement of faith is usually employed as a standard for a group's membership. Consequently, to reinterpret that standard in broader categories may not be a welcome gesture by all. While using a confessional statement as a theological template is a creative move, I am not sure it is the best way forward in terms of method (at least if one is still concerned with keeping the lines of communication open with the original constituents).

If retrieving and reappropriating the tradition opens the door so wide that others who previously would not have identified with the renewalist state-

ments now do, while at the same time persons who previously would have identified with the renewalist statements now do not, then what is gained by tying one's theological template to a particular confessional statement? Yong's concern for the living church is admirable and a practice students should seek to emulate. Exhibiting this concern by means of adopting a particular confessional statement and then reversing and reinterpreting it in ways no longer recognizable to the original constituents is probably not.

3. Pedagogical sequence

Third, another central aspect of Yong's methodology is his reversal of the WAGF SF order so that his book begins with eschatology. Yong anticipates that some will find the theological order disconcerting and acknowledges that it 'might be jarring for those who have read and approached systematic theological texts in their more traditional formats' (Yong, 23).² However, my concerns go beyond the mere unconventional nature of the order of the chapters and are related to issues of pedagogy and theology.

With respect to pedagogy, while Yong is right in that beginning with eschatology and then moving through the charismatic, pneumatological, ecclesiological, soteriological, and christological loci before the doctrines of creation, God, and scripture is more consistent with Christian life and experience, a benefit of the traditional order is that it logically builds upon itself.

² Yong notes that it is possible to read the chapters in a different sequence from the one established.

Consequently, pedagogical moments that can arise from the traditional order get short-circuited when that order is reversed.

For example, in the second chapter on eschatology Yong discusses the doctrine of bodily resurrection. In order to do so, he differentiates between a theological anthropology informed by dualistic ideas of neoplatonism during the Patristic and medieval times and a contemporary theological anthropology that opts for more holistic accounts of the human person. This distinction is significant because it clearly affects how one understands and interprets the resurrection of the body, which is an appropriate topic to study in a chapter on eschatology. Yet, because of the reverse order, the subject of theological anthropology has not been raised at length in the text yet and thus the potential student-initiated connections between theological loci is weakened.

Certainly one could inform a class of the broader conversation in theological anthropology and anticipate a more extensive discussion at a later point. But, in doing this, a pedagogical moment is lost that would traditionally allow the students to gain a knowledge of these anthropological issues first and then think through the implications with respect to eschatology. This type of theological, and thus pedagogical, inversion occurs multiple times throughout the text.

While I do not discount that starting with eschatology brings benefits, especially from a renewalist perspective, I am not convinced those gains outweigh what is lost by doing so. The traditional order is not just about epistemic claims concerning scripture, but the internal logic of the scriptural narrative. And

this logic is helpful to follow when in the classroom, even if not identical to the order of one's faith experience.

4. Theological sequence

My other concern related to the reverse order that is employed in the book is more theological in nature. Because of Yong's commitment to starting with the Spirit, he argues that this also necessitates starting with eschatology. This decision is affirmed for him because the pneumatological spirituality of the classical pentecostal movement in North America was thoroughly eschatological and because there is an intricate connection in the New Testament between the Holy Spirit and the coming reign of God. While both of these points are true and can thus lend legitimacy to starting with eschatology, they do not *necessitate* this entry point. And, in light of the pedagogical concern above, I am not convinced that they should.

If part of the renewalist contribution to theology at large is, as Yong says, to recognize theologies of the Holy Spirit *and* pneumatological theologies that are systematically considered from a third article perspective, is it not possible then for a systematic theology to start with creation while also being pneumatological/eschatological? That is, is the Spirit of creation in Genesis not also the Spirit of new creation in Revelation? What is protological can also be eschatological, and thus the doctrine of creation can provide a theological starting point without compromising renewalist distinctives. Adopting this approach might actually better exemplify to students Yong's concern to situate the renewalist perspectives

within the broader context of the Christian tradition so that it is both continuous with it in some respects (i.e., the order of theological loci) and novel in others (i.e., an all-encompassing third article approach).

IV Epilogue—a Gift

All things considered, *Renewing Christian Theology* is a gift to both renewalists and non-renewalists alike. In the Epilogue, Yong summarizes his work

by saying that it is, ‘no more than a modest and even preliminary contribution, one designed to introduce theology students to the richness of the biblical and Christian traditions and also to showcase the capacity of a Spirit-inspired Christian faith to empower life amid the complexities of our twenty-first-century global village’ (Yong, 358). As such, it has accomplished precisely these objectives and done so admirably.

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The Big Picture, with Questions!

Chris E.W. Green

I Introduction

Reading this systematics, which is as Yong says a ‘culmination’ of his thought to this point in time (xix), graced me with the same gifts I always receive from his works: first, a clear ‘big picture’ vision of what is at stake in particular theological conversations; and second, a storm of questions—some delightful, some terrifying—to struggle with and be troubled by. In this case, some of the questions are new to

me, directing my thought down lines of reflection I would never have known to take otherwise. Other questions, which I had believed were already answered, have been given new life with which to afflict me. Thanks to these gifts, my already significant debt to Amos Yong has only deepened and widened.

On its own terms, this work is preliminary and introductory (358), a summary of central Christian doctrines that have particular relevance for the

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