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The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful

Mark H. Mann

It is a great honour to respond to Amos Yong's *Renewing Christian Theology: Systematics for a Global Christianity* (*RCT)*. I have known Dr Yong since we were graduate students together at Boston University in the late 1990s, and I consider him a valuable friend and conversation partner and, in many ways, a theological mentor. Because we both studied under and were greatly influenced by Robert Cummings Neville and possess overlapping theological and religious heritages and similar theological concerns and impulses, I typically find myself both in admiration for and in fundamental agreement with Yong when I encounter his work.

The same applies to Yong's *RCT*. It is a very fine theological text, energetically and satisfyingly presenting all that Yong promises to deliver. It very well may be his best and most important theological work to date, and anyone familiar with both the immensity and quality of the Yong *corpus* will know that this is no faint praise. As a whole I think that this is an absolutely wonderful book, and I will be sorely tempted to use it in future theology courses. Nevertheless, it is not without its problems (at both the macro and micro level), which I will address after some personal remarks to frame my response.

I Pentecostal Theology: Eschatological, Pneumatological and... Christological?

As a fourth generation Nazarene, I was raised with misgivings about and mistrust of Pentecostalism. In my youth, I was introduced to literature arguing a cessationist view of *charismata* (*glossolalia* especially) and I frequently heard suggestions that Pentecostalism was a misguided pursuit of ecstatic experience driven by shallow emotionalism that was, at best, a distraction from the true aims of the gospel—a heart and life of perfect love for God and neighbour. Although my friendship with some Pentecostal classmates in high school and their sincere love for Christ began to unravel some of my preconceptions, others only reinforced them.

One of the most troubling involved a visit by a Pentecostal woman to a college Bible study group I was leading. As I was providing some introductory

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comments, she suddenly interrupted me and, on the basis of the 'authority of the Holy Spirit', took over the meeting. She then began prophesying, going around the room and telling us all one-by-one what stood between each of us and God. When she was finished, I thanked her and did my faltering best to refocus on the Bible study. I was certainly miffed, but given that she'd told me that my pride was one of my spiritual problems, I felt convicted to give her the benefit of the doubt and view her behaviour as mostly well-intentioned, even if inappropriate and misguided.

However, after the meeting other members of the group were pretty upset, one even expressing his concern that the woman's behaviour indicated that she had been channelling a demonic spirit! In the end I came to see that he might be partially right. She knew none of us, and by completely hijacking the meeting under the self-proclaimed auspices of the 'authority of the Holy Spirit', she had succeeded only in bringing attention to herself, in the meantime freaking out and alienating a group of earnest young Christians and their attempt to explore God's Word together.

I share this story not to discredit the Pentecostal movement as a whole. Far from it! An entire religious tradition (including mine!) should never be fully identified by its critics—whether external or internal—with its more extreme and/or problematic expressions, such as the one I believe I experienced at that Bible study. The temptation of the external critic is to tear down a straw 'man' [sic] while the temptation of the internal critic is to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater through overcorrection.

One of the strengths of *RTC* is the way that Yong deftly speaks to both internal and external audiences, the way in which he succeeds in being honest and self-critical about the pneumatological excesses and missteps of his tradition while also evangelistically championing the pneumatological heart of his tradition as a means of renewing the church catholic both theologically and spiritually. In this sense, I would suggest that Yong is the ideal internal critic: he is able to recognize and articulate the good, the bad, and especially the beautiful in his tradition.

I say 'pneumatological excesses' because, in my role as a kind of external critic, I would identify the particular pneumatological emphases of the Pentecostal movement as the fertile soil from which the kind of extreme cases like the one I experienced grow. The promise and experience of the imminent infilling, gifting, and empowering of the Holy Spirit certainly transformed the lives of the first Christians, giving them the courage and ability to proclaim the gospel to the nations.[1] That same Pentecostal promise and experience transforms people today and has empowered countless believers to lives of sacrificial service to Christ in countless beautiful ways.

It is no wonder that Pentecostals have been at the forefront of wonderfully affirming women in ministry (women, after all, can be and clearly often are filled with Spirit and therefore empowered to be full participants in the life and work of the church!), to engage in evangelism to the poor and marginalized, to embrace the present

1 Acts 2.

possibility of living empowered to be victorious over sin and filled to overflowing with love for God and neighbour, to champion Christian faith and worship as a vibrant and impassioned work rather than an empty formalism or dead intellectualism. But, as has been duly noted by Yong, it can be difficult to 'discern the spirits', to know when the experience is the authentic work of the Holy Spirit as opposed to empty emotionalism, experience for the sake of experience, something contrived and therefore self-seeking.[2] These are, in my opinion, the potential excesses that arise from an 'excessive' pneumatological focus.

The way that much of the historic church has sought to avoid such excess, and this goes back well before the time of the Montanist controversy to the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch, has been to embrace a kind of Christocentric ecclesiology that functions to rein in 'extreme' claims of those claiming the Holy Spirit's authority by essentially linking such authority and power of the Holy Spirit to the church—that is, the formal structures and practices of the church. So, it is the various officers of the church who can claim apostolic succession who are the 'vicars' of Christ and thus in possession of the gifts and authority of the Spirit.[3] In the western church such an ecclesiology has been bolstered by the addition of the *filioque* to the Nicene Creed and an Augustinianism that serves to limit the work of the Holy Spirit to the constraints of the formal 'Body of Christ'.

One of the most important of Yong's contributions to contemporary theology has been to recover a more eastern model of the Trinity, drawing upon the theology of Irenaeus of Lyons who spoke of the Son and Spirit as the 'two hands' of the Father.[4] The earliest of fully 'orthodox' articulations of the Trinity, and therefore of tremendous value for ecumenical purposes,[5] the Irenaean model provides an effective *via media* between the potentially untethered pneumatological excesses of Pentecostalism and the Spirit-stifling excesses of a western Christo-centric ecclesiology, as the Son and Spirit always work in concert while never being subordinated to each other.

Although Yong never mentions Irenaeus in *RCT*, it is clear that he remains wary of a pneumatology loosened from christological moorings and one that subjects the Spirit to a subservient role in the economy of God's work and presence in the world. This serves as a key theme throughout *RCT* through Yong's preference for eastern perichoretic notions of the Trinity[6] and persistent refrain that renewalist the-

2 Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000). Here, Yong is more concerned with the non-western Pentecostal appropriation of indigenous culture, beliefs, and spiritual practices.

3 Gerald Bray, *God is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Press, 2012), ch. 11. Yong briefly addresses this issue in *RCT*, 302ff.

4 Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s)*.

5 Mark H. Mann, 'Traditionalist or Reformist: Amos Yong, Pentecostalism, and the Future of Evangelical Theology', *Passion for the Spirit: The Theology of Amos Yong and the New Face of Pentecostal Scholarship*, ed. Wolfgang Vondey and Martin William Mittelstadt (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013), 199-220.

6 *RCT*, 304-306.

ology is (or, at least, ideally *should* be) pneumatological, christological and eschatological.

II Organisation of the Argument

This brings me to my first (the macro) criticism of this book: it seems to me that the organization of the book undermines the kind of balanced approach that Yong aims to produce. First of all, it seems problematic to start 'at the end' with a discussion of eschatology. I do not mean to suggest that eschatology is an unimportant or superfluous topic for Christian theology given that 'the end of time', as Article 11 of the WAGF's SF puts it, deals with the culminating end of God's purposes in creation and the ultimate hope of Christian faith. Its importance is without question. But, again, is Yong not undermining his attempt to be both pneumatological and christological by starting with, and therefore giving precedent to, eschatology?

That is, are there not pivotal theological issues that are presumed, have implications for, and therefore should be addressed first before a proper discussion of the eschaton can take place? Specifically, how can 'the end' have any definition or meaning without first clarifying the beginning—that is, what kind of God is the one whose work and purposes will be culminated at the eschaton. Put another way, if we truly want to make any sense of the eschaton, we first need to address the doctrine of God, which Yong puts off until the penultimate chapter. Therefore, I would suggest, Yong lays out a renewalist theology that is pneumatological, christological and eschatological, but in the wrong order.

Similarly, it seems problematic to me that Yong will follow his discussion of the end times with chapters on the 'gifts of' (Ch. 3) and 'baptism with' (Ch. 4) the Holy Spirit, and, as the chapter titles suggest, focuses on various ways of thinking about the Christian 'experience' of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, when Yong finally does address christological themes, it is not until chapter 8, and it is generally within the context of a discussion of soteriology. Likewise, when we are finally introduced to an extended treatment of the Trinity (Ch. 8) it is buried within a discussion of the redemption and renewal of the cosmos. In truth, it is not until the penultimate chapter (Ch. 11) that we get a focused discussion of the Trinity, but even here it's glossed over quickly (five pages!) as he presses forward to discuss feminist criticisms of patriarchal language and religious pluralism.

Almost hidden toward the close of this brief section is a curious claim that gets to the heart of my concern: 'A robust doctrine of the Trinity needs nothing less than an equally robust doctrine of the Holy Spirit; simultaneously, the development of pneumatology also pushes forward the discussion of Trinitarian theology' (305). Indeed, where is this discussion of the Trinity, and why is it not front and centre in a systematic theology that purports to be christological, pneumatological and eschatological?

This is not to say that I find Yong's chapters on eschatology, Spirit baptism, spiritual gifts, salvation or creation in themselves problematic. On the contrary, I consider the particular treatments of these topics to be tremendously helpful. In each case we

find Yong's reflections to be biblically grounded, historically aware, and winsomely irenic in his willingness to provide a thoughtfully critical account of the wide variety of contemporary Christian beliefs on all of these topics.

Take, for instance, Yong's deftly handled discussion of the 'disputed possibilities' of the 'final state' (Ch. 2). Here we find Yong willing to take the risk of critically assessing a doctrine that most members of his own tradition would simply assume—the eternality of suffering in hell. Indeed, even to address the possibility of universalistic tendencies in the Pauline letters would probably offend countless Pentecostal and evangelical readers. Likewise, we find Yong taking on the implications of contemporary science for how we understand miracles (Ch. 8); the implications of evolutionary theory for how we understand providence and evil (Ch. 10); the implications of the Christian encounter with various faith traditions for how we understand both salvation (Ch. 9) and the work and witness of the Triune God in the world (Ch. 11).

The beauty of Yong's work in each of these instances is that, in his willingness to step outside of what may be perceived to be the narrow constraints given to him by his tradition, Yong faithfully demonstrates the great resources renewal theology brings to addressing these 'challenges' in a way that calls Pentecostals to be more attentive to the implications of their own theology while also demonstrating to the larger church that the Pentecostal theology should be taken seriously.

III Renewal Theology and Wesleyan Holiness Theology

Finally, moving from the macro to the micro, I wish to address Yong's discussion of sanctification in Chapter 5. Since I am a Nazarene, it almost goes without saying that I have a keen interest in this doctrine.[7] This is the case with all ecclesial communities that would identify themselves as part of the Wesleyan-holiness tradition—Nazarene, Wesleyan, Free Methodist, etc. Some within this tradition might find it strange that a Pentecostal theologian would dive into this conversation, but we should not.

While historically many within the so-called Wesleyan holiness tradition have taken great pains to distance themselves from Pentecostalism, the fact is that both grew out of the late-nineteenth century holiness movement.[8] While Nazarenes and their ilk have been quick to reject the charismata of Pentecostalism, most Pentecostals have remained fully committed to Christian holiness, some (including Yong's Assemblies of God) even identifying themselves formally with the Wesleyan-holiness movement.[9] Personally, I consider the return of our Pentecostal brothers and sisters to discussions about Christian holiness

7 Mark H. Mann, *Perfecting Grace: Holiness and the Human Sciences* (NY: T&T Clark, 2006).

8 See Vinson Synon, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

9 The recently formed Wesleyan Holiness Consortium includes not just the old standard bearers of the Wesleyan-holiness movement, but also notably 'Pentecostal' denominations, including the Assemblies of God, The Four Square Church and the Church of God (Cleveland TN), to name just the more prominent.

greatly welcome!

And, as Yong correctly points out, there has been a significant reappraisal of the doctrine of Christian holiness within Wesleyan-holiness circles in the past half-century.[10] Yong has clear sympathies with this move, as his treatment of the topic in chapter five indicates. According to Yong, this reappraisal has centred on discussions of whether sanctification, and especially entire sanctification, should be understood as a process of life-long growth in grace or the result of a particular crisis experience that culminates in the heart-cleansing baptism with the Holy Spirit.

Since all would recognize that there are both big steps (i.e., crises) and little steps (i.e., gradual growth) in the life of faith, I consider the so-called dichotomy between instantaneous versus gradual growth a distraction from the true heart of the debate: the definition of Christian perfection. That is, what kind or measure of sanctity can be found as a result of sanctification?

Those emphasizing the 'entirety' of sanctification have claimed that the perfection received includes complete purification of the heart from inbred sin and filled with perfect love for God and neighbour and therefore the possibility of a life without any sins 'properly so-called'—that is, wilful and conscious transgressions of known laws of God.[11] Those emphasizing the 'gradualness' of sanctification, however, have preferred to think of perfect love as an ideal quality of life toward which, by grace, the believer is ever drawn by God through participation in the various means of grace.

Yong identifies the shift from the former to the latter as an outgrowth of larger cultural and philosophical shifts. I would suggest that this is only partly correct. Yong claims, for instance, that this shift has been propelled by a coinciding shift in philosophy, as nineteenth-century dualistic and substance-based notions of sin and sanctity (grounded in neoplatonic and Aristotelian metaphysics) have given way to more dynamic and relational notions of sin and sanctity. But, this is not quite right. Instead, I would suggest, that which is being rejected by contemporary Wesleyan-holiness theologians is instead a notion of 'sanctity as purity' (for which purity is an absolute concept—even one blemish marks one as entirely impure!) that instead is grounded in common-sense realism and the Cartesian distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*.[12]

Far more significant than philosophical shifts, however, has been the mid to late twentieth century recovery of John Wesley, whose work had been misunderstood and misappropriated by many who called themselves 'Wesleyan' within the holiness tradition.

10 This was sparked by the work of Albert C. Outler who coined the phrase, 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral', and served as the first editor of *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984ff).

11 John Wesley notably articulated this distinction in his sermon, 'Christian Perfection', among other places.

12 Jennifer L. Woodruff Tait, *The Poisoned Chalice: Eucharistic Grape Juice and Common-Sense Realism in Victorian Methodism* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2011). See also John Wesley's sermon, 'What is Man?', in which he explicates a Cartesian dualism.

Oddly, Yong seems to have appropriated some of these misunderstandings as, for instance, he notes that Wesley believed that entire sanctification results in the 'eradication' of the sinful nature (87).

This is exactly what the American holiness Wesleyans would affirm, though Wesley never used the language of eradication when talking about entire sanctification. He would on occasion use the language of the 'cleansing' from sin and, at least once that I am aware of, the 'mortification' of the flesh/inbred sin. Both categories *might* be construed in eradicationist ways, as they certainly would in later Wesleyan-holiness theologies, except that this is simply not the way that Wesley thinks about Christian perfection. Instead, the kind of language he typically employs indicates a more dynamic and relational notion of holiness: Christian perfection is 'renewal' in the image of Christ, the transformation of the 'tempers', a heart 'overflowing' with 'joy,' 'peace', and, especially, 'love' for God and neighbour.[13]

It is for this reason that Wesley's reflections on the life of holiness tend to be more nuanced than those of his holiness movement descendants. This is evident in his refusal to call the life of perfect love 'sinless perfection', his recognition that many of the effects of sin (what he calls 'infirmities') do carry over into and need to be further dealt with following the reception of entire sanctification,[14] and his recognition that true heart holiness is most often received immediately before death and as a result of decades of committed attendance to the 'means of grace'.

I think it important to note also that, although Wesley never gave up believing that Christian perfection was available to all believers this side of glory, he never testified to it himself, and was only ever able to report that, out of the tens of thousands of Methodists under his charge, only a few hundred could truthfully testify to having received the grace.[15]

Wesley's understanding of Christian perfection is more nuanced because it rests fully upon the distinction that Wesley makes between sins 'improperly so-called' (i.e., mistakes in judgment or based in ignorance, infirmities, etc.) and sins 'properly so-called' (conscious and wilful transgressions of known laws of God). In light of our deeper understanding of the complexity of human decision-making and actions (drawn from advances in psychology, sociology, the neurosciences, etc.), many Wesleyan theologians have found that it is clearly not so cut-and-dry a matter for this distinction to make much sense except as some kind of ideal state.

Strangely, Yong will report favourably on recent studies of Wesleyan theologians who have made exactly this case (114),[16] but then just a few pages later seems to ignore completely the implications of affirming that 'the renewing work of the Spirit accomplish-

13 Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press, 1972).

14 John Wesley, 'Christian Perfection'.

15 John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*.

16 This includes my own *Perfecting Grace* as well as Paul N. Markham, *Rewired: Exploring Religious Conversion* (Eugene, Or.: Picwick, 2007).

es the *eradication* of [sinful] tendencies and proclivities *in* human hearts' [emphasis mine] (125). I find this vexing and can only imagine that Yong's renewalist commitment to the doctrine and experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and its connection to the grace of entire sanctification—which Yong correctly notes Wesley never affirmed and most Wesleyans have cast aside—in some sense requires him to return eradicationism in through the back door.

Admittedly, while I would consider this inconsistency especially problematic because it connects to the core of my own work and interests, in the grand scheme of things this is a rather small problem in an otherwise wonderful book by a theologian who, once again, has demonstrated why he stands out as one of the most important theologians in Pentecostalism and a major voice to the theology discussions of the church catholic. I am grateful for this book, and look forward to many like it to flow from the mind and heart of Amos Yong.

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Trailblazer!

Thomas Jay Oord

Amos Yong's book, *Renewing Christian Theology: Systematic for a Global Christianity*, is simply an excellent book. I have high praise for it! Yong is among the leading Pentecostal theologians at work today, if not *the* leading Pentecostal theologian. The breadth and depth of his theological work is, as far as I know, unparalleled. In this book, Yong uses a broader identity, however, to capture the diverse spiritual fervour and theological reflection often associated with Pentecostalism: 'renewal theology'.

Yong begins this large tome by placing his work in a global context. He reminds/informs readers of the diversity of faith and thought expressions across the planet. What unites this diversity is the quest for Christian renewal, says Yong, but renewal that itself should be open to further renewal.

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