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**The Spirit of Truth as Guide into All Truth: A Response to R. A. James Merrick,
“The Spirit of Truth as Agent in False Religions? A Critique of Amos Yong’s
Pneumatological Theology of Religions with Reference to Current Trends”¹**

By

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Introduction

Commendably, R. A. James Merrick has tackled boldly the timely but difficult topic of Christian theology of religions. In fact, he tackles not only theology of religions but pneumatology, and examines important intersections of the two. Further, he does this through a critical conversation with Amos Yong, a leading Pentecostal theologian especially noted for his pneumatological theology of religions. Finally, Merrick uses his study of Yong to warn against what he perceives as troubling trends in current Christian theology of religions. Although Merrick’s essay is informative and well written, it may not adequately represent Yong’s complex and carefully nuanced pneumatological theology of religions.² If not, consequently neither would it accurately address current trends at the point of intersection between Pentecostalism or pneumatology and contemporary theology of religions regarding interreligious dialogue. If so, then it may contribute more to confusing rather than clarifying an already difficult topic. In the globalizing contemporary context, Christian theology of religions, and thus pneumatological theology of religions as well, is one of the most critical, though admittedly controversial, fields of endeavor. The situation calls for careful critique characterized by a concern for conversation rather than what can amount to incautious

caricature. In the interest of carrying this conversation forward rather than seeing it stall tragically due to misunderstanding I offer the present discussion.

This response is a respectful attempt to articulate more satisfactorily, in my opinion, Yong's work and current trends in pneumatological theology of religions especially from an Evangelical and Pentecostal perspective. However, I wish to utilize this process more to continue this critical conversation than to “defend” Yong or “promote” his ideas.³ Accurately assessing contemporary Christian theology of religions is the main concern of my critique. As already implied, I proceed on an assumption, based on contemporary globalization and consequent increase in confrontational conduct between religions, and tried and tested in actual ecumenical and interreligious encounter and dialogue, that satisfactorily developing a contemporary Christian theology of religions is among the most important tasks of Christian theology today. Therefore, the topic deserves our most deliberate attention.⁴

The first section of this essay, after the brief introduction, will critically address some methodological issues. The second, and necessarily the longest, section will survey Yong's written work on our topic. Lastly, following Merrick's cue, it will then discuss applications to current trends in the field before finishing with some brief suggestions for moving forward with the conversation on Christian theology of religions. Throughout I will offer suggestions regarding the discussion as deemed appropriate.

Revising Methodology and Message

Partly, my concerns with Merrick's article arise from its employed method as well as its eventual message. Methodologically, I have three concerns. First, Merrick honestly admits that he is not primarily concerned with Yong's work per se but that his “ultimate concern” (109) is with using it to address what he considers problematic and troublesome trends in the field of Christian theology of religions, particularly in the area of pneumatology.⁵ Of course, a conversation with a leader in the field is an excellent approach for understanding its concepts and/or addressing one's concerns about them. However, in such a case extreme caution is necessary for assuring evenhandedness in representing fairly one's chosen conversation partner rather than employing

misrepresentations that merely mine another's thoughts in attempts to prove one's polemical points against the field at large. I argue that perhaps Merrick, possibly because of his determinative intent "to critique the features of Yong's thesis that he has in common with recent proposals" (109), does not always achieve that adroitly balanced line. I hope to offer a less biased approach to Yong's thought that will demonstrate my point.

Second, and regrettably, Merrick erects his entire understanding of Yong's theology on the building block of a brief review of one book. In my mind, in spite of several valuable features, this may be a "fatal flaw" that sends the article in some wrong directions. Employing inadequate resources always undermines authentic understanding of any author. In Yong's case, it is disastrous to the project. He is an incredibly prolific author. Though relatively young, already Yong has more than a half dozen full-length monographs to his credit, not counting edited/co-edited works, as well as hundreds of articles, reviews, and book chapters. To date, three of his books completely devote themselves to exploring and explicating theology of religions, and most of the others have significant chapters or sections dealing with that topic as well. The same is true of a host of his various articles and essays. I argue that arbitrarily selecting one work to represent his entire theology of religions is an incautious act ending in an unfortunate caricature. Again, at the heart of my response is an attempt to let Yong's own writings prove my point through a more complete consideration.

Even at that, third, I suggest that apparently Merrick has sometimes misread the one Yong resource he did use, *Beyond the Impasse*. I make this suggestion because he states that based on this book he has concluded that Yong advocates a pneumatology that is "divorced from christological constraints" and spends a "sizable portion of his book putting distance between pneumatology and Christology" (115). I respectfully disagree. Complexity and subtlety characterize Yong's thought. An obviously simplistic reading of a major aspect of his theology is surely insufficient. Later in this response, I will look at some of Yong's other writings on our topic. However, right here and now let us make a few notes regarding his understanding of the relation between Christology and pneumatology in contradistinction from Merrick's critical analysis of that book.

Beyond the Impasse packs many statements such as “the ultimate sequence of pneumatological events in history” is the “life, work, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”⁶ It also argues for overcoming the traditional Christological impasse regarding particularity and universality precisely because of the inseparability of Christ and the Spirit.⁷ Further, it describes Word/Christ and Spirit as “the two poles through which all orthodoxy must pass.”⁸ Rather, that to which Yong objects is a brand of “christocentrism” focusing on Christ to the point of displacing or subordinating the Holy Spirit and thereby distorting the Trinity.⁹ Accordingly, in *Beyond the Impasse* Yong argues, though apparently dismissed by Merrick, for the utterly essential interdependence of Jesus of Nazareth and the Spirit.¹⁰ In the light of these remarks, Merrick’s charge that Yong attempts to “divorce” or “put distance” between Christology and pneumatology is untenable. Better is an assessment that understands Yong’s desire to approach theology of religions from a perspective that gives more initial attention to pneumatology as a way of overcoming Christological stumbling blocks that may derail dialogue before it ever gets started in order that subsequent conversation about Christology may actually have even richer results.

Well worth remembering is that Yong’s suggestion that Christology may at times be profitably put off until a more opportune time follows in some rather famous footsteps. At one time, Jesus Christ himself “warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ” (Matt 16:20 NIV). Mounce, commenting on this statement by Jesus, explains that the Jews were not yet epistemologically prepared to wrestle with the revelation of Christ’s messiahship. Mounce says that apparently Jesus intended us to understand that “Ill-informed action like this [that is, premature announcement of his messiahship] would make his role much more difficult.” Therefore, Mounce says, “Better to keep silent for now.”¹¹ Indeed, a long tradition of interpreters of this text ranging from Chrysostom and Jerome to John Wesley and beyond, agree that proclamation of Christ’s identity and divinity wisely waited the time when all things were carefully prepared.¹² Obviously, the idea of belying premature proclamation of Christ is not new. Really, it appears what Yong has done, rather than be either especially innovative or implicitly heterodox, as Merrick maintains, is to apply boldly a biblical principle to the area of theology of religions and interreligious dialogue.

Admittedly, I have myself previously presented a warning regarding Yong's pneumatological suggestion for advancing beyond the Christological question.¹³ However, in my case, I understood that Yong was not attempting to divide or divorce Christology and pneumatology. Rather, I suggested that his proposal is ultimately implausible and impossible. In a nutshell, it is not practical, in the sense of not being realistically possible to put into practice, and there is a huge potential for misunderstanding and misrepresentation. I think Merrick's work merits a charge of falling into the latter assessment, and therefore proves my point and my suspicion. I suggested then, and still do, that what is needed in Christian theology of religions is not diminished or delayed attention to Christ and Christology, or even what I might now call *sequential attention*, which is what I think Yong was really proposing, so much as *sufficient simultaneous attention* to the Holy Spirit and pneumatology.¹⁴

Perhaps at least in part due to the above, that is, what I perceive as flawed methodology, Merrick's article conveys a wrong message about Yong's work and about its place in current trends. Does it consequently largely misunderstand the actual state of current trends in Evangelical and Pentecostal theology of religions? I think so. In particular, Merrick warns against attempts at "unhindered interreligious dialogue" and endeavors by "theologians of the Spirit" (123) to connect theology of religions with pneumatology. Accordingly, I will first more fully (though admittedly, not fully) revisit Yong's pneumatological theology of religions before then turning to a fresher evaluation of current trends. Thus can we attempt together to carry the conversation forward.

Revisiting Yong's Work

A fuller survey of Yong's work on pneumatological religions necessarily begins with his groundbreaking, and in some ways, paradigmatic, book based his doctoral dissertation, *Discerning the Spirit(s)*.¹⁵ Therein Yong wrestles with issues raised by implications for Pentecostal theology by the "primal spirituality" thesis of Harvard theologian Harvey Cox.¹⁶ Yong approaches theology of religions pneumatologically without trying to "untangle the christological debates".¹⁷ He suggests that the generally negative rhetoric of Pentecostals against other religions belies an underlying attitude of openness. Yong's own adventurous attitude shows in his "pneumatology of quest".¹⁸ He sketches the

history of Christian theological reflection on non-Christian religions in light of the reality of contemporary religious pluralism, calling attention to tensions between competing truth claims in the context of universality and particularity issues raised regarding Jesus Christ. He suggests pneumatological approaches to theology of religions have an advantage in perceiving the Holy Spirit as cosmic divine presence, but argues that the problem of discernment becomes paramount.

Yong then advances his idea of “pneumatological imagination,” or a Pentecostal-Charismatic experience of and orientation toward the Holy Spirit. Yong describes the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement and its historical responses to religions, and argues why Pentecostals need and should desire a theology of religions. He revises Cox’s primal spirituality categories to lift up religious experience, utility, and cosmology. A dialogical case study between Pentecostalism and Brazilian Umbanda religion is a bold application of Yong’s pneumatological approach. Finally, he expounds some important supportive theses for Pentecostal-Charismatic theology of religions, sets forth some provisional theological implications arising from this study, and offers recommendations for further research.

Notably, as Merrick has rightly pointed out from *Beyond the Impasse*, Yong observes that progress in theology of religions often halts because of apparently irresolvable issues regarding the person of Jesus Christ. He wishes to by-pass this Christological impasse by re-directing attention to pneumatology. He does not deny that this is only a temporary tactic. He himself insists on the necessity and desirability of a robust trinitarian theology of religions developing an ancient idea of Irenaeus on the Son and the Spirit as the two hands of the Father.¹⁹ Merrick notes but doubts Yong’s authentic commitment to “a robust trinitarian theology of religions” (118, 120). Perhaps Merrick dismisses the strategy here because he misses the theology behind it. Significantly, Yong never suggests the *Christian* surrender his/her Christology for the sake of interreligious dialogue. He merely suggests Christians may engage *non-Christians* from another angle first before addressing the most difficult topic between them, and provides a pneumatological basis for doing so consistently and legitimately. Arguably, as will be stated more succinctly below, Yong’s theology of religions is

precisely an attempt to demonstrate how pneumatology can help Christians authentically engage religious others without endangering their own Christological commitments.

Admittedly, setting aside Christology, even temporarily, is understandably a sticking point for many Evangelicals and Pentecostals. Viewing Christ as divine particularity (historic) and the Spirit as divine universality (cosmic) may have much to offer theology of religions, but an artificial isolation of Christology and pneumatology is neither plausible nor possible. For one thing, Christology is not without universality (cf. John 1:1) and pneumatology is not without particularity (cf. Rom 8: 11). More importantly, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ (Gal 4:6). Yet Yong, on the one hand, is helping correct an imbalance and, on the other hand, highlighting a helpful resource for interfaith conversation. However, the subtle nuances are numerous, and require careful notice.

Yong's complaint about the lacuna in theology of religions regarding pneumatology is certainly legitimate, in spite of Merrick's caustic counter complaint that "now it seems, due to the explosion of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, theologians cannot address pneumatology enough" (108). Further, Yong's concept of "pneumatological imagination" is an exceedingly helpful corrective, and central to his thought, but not attended to at all by Merrick. However, the category of pneumatological imagination definitively shapes Yong's pneumatological theology of religions. Here Yong is simply calling for a Christian theology informed by an experience of and orientation toward the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, this move does not necessarily deny or diminish Christology in favor of pneumatology so much as it potentially enhances and enriches it through a more truly trinitarian turn. Arguably, "more truly trinitarian" here appropriately means more pneumatological. If this is the case, as it certainly seems to me to be, it is precisely at this point that Evangelical theology needs carefully to articulate the need for bringing pneumatological balance into trinitarian theology of religions.

Yong's goal is to realize that in some sense the Spirit "is at work in the religions, shaping and re-shaping them, or else mollifying their resisting spirits", and to challenge us to follow the Spirit's "lead and work with him to do the same".²⁰ I heartily agree. More awareness of the Spirit's work in the world and in the world's religions has

extremely important implications for Christian theology of religions. Yong is not unaware of or ambiguous about possible dangers in this project. As a spiritual safeguard, he develops a practical doctrine of discernment of God's presence or absence and of the presence of the demonic in religions.²¹ Merrick approvingly notes this emphasis in Yong but does not give it enough weight. In my opinion, it makes a major difference in distinguishing between the divine and the demonic in religions. Yong does not open up everyone to everything. He is not naïve. He is fully aware of and faithfully articulates the reality of evil and falsehood in the religions. He does not stop with telling us the Spirit is working throughout the world, which is, after all, God's creation, or even in the midst of non-Christian religions, with their mixture of the divine, human, and demonic. He goes on to help identify when and where the Spirit is present and active, or not, and when and where demonic presence and activity occurs. His is not a naïve or nostalgic theology of religions but a practical, workable, and fully Pentecostal approach entirely commensurate, as will be shown below, with the best Evangelical tradition.

Another available resource not accessed by Merrick is Yong's *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*.²² This is a broad book interested in diverse Pentecostal origins and activities around the world, Pentecostalism's inherent ethos as a movement, and an in depth application of its underlying pneumatological theology and spirituality addressing many of the most pressing themes of the day. It is not devoted only to theology of religions. It does have a large chapter and other significant sections devoted to the topic. Before turning attention here however, I briefly note that attention to this book helps allay two of Merrick's most prominent (and, if correct, legitimate) concerns regarding Yong's theology. Herein Yong ably articulates and advocates a strong soteriology with multiple dimensions of holistic salvation, and a Spirit Christology avoiding subordination or displacement of either Son or Spirit.²³ As Yong builds on sound biblical exegesis and classic Christian resources, Pentecostal and Evangelical as well as ecumenical, definitely dismissed are any doubts about his high Christology or Christian view of salvation. As a matter of record, throughout this work Yong strives to be "Christ centered and Spirit driven".²⁴ Again, this amply indicates that for him Christology and pneumatology are not competitive but complementary categories. An accurate assessment of his work is impossible apart from this underlying understanding.

At this point, I would suggest that (non-Pentecostal) Evangelicals and (Evangelical) Pentecostals avoid falling into the trap of pitting Christology and pneumatology against each other. We should not allow this to degenerate into theological sectarianism. I think that would be detrimental for all concerned. This is not an either/or proposition. Of chief significance are how to relate Christology and pneumatology to each other in the context of theology of religions, and how to apply this relation in a practical way to dialogical praxis.

Yong is particularly adept at taking apparently disparate views and demonstrating, without denying their real differences, ways they might appreciate, inform, and enhance one another. Results are never merely condescending or compromising, but always truly creative. Along this line, his discussion of Trinitarian and Oneness Pentecostal theology in relation to interreligious dialogue is especially intriguing. He creatively explores potentially cross-fertilizing concepts of unity and plurality. One suggestion I question, however, is Yong's admittedly "ambivalent" discussion of possibilities in Oneness theology as points of contact with non-Christian radical monotheists.²⁵ The idea is that since Jews, Muslims, and Oneness Pentecostals share some form of Unitarian monotheism then dialogue on that basis might stimulate better relations. I am cautious here based on two considerations, one practical and the other theological.

My practical concern evolves out of an intuition that focusing on views imported from outer fringes of Christian faith does not well serve genuinely effective dialogue between Christians and non-Christians. Oneness devotees are not representative of the majority of Christianity or even of most Pentecostals. This actually *adds* (not *subtracts*, as implied by Yong) another hurdle to be overcome in efforts at interreligious dialogue. Even if Jewish, Islamic, and Oneness theologies do gel at some level, most other Christians will still not be on board. My theological concern arises out of an understanding that although Jews, Muslims, and Oneness Pentecostals share commitments to Unitarian monotheism, their systems are radically different at precisely the point they most necessarily would have to converge in order to establish an effective point of contact: Jesus Christ. The main difficulty to hurdle in dialogue with Jews and Muslims is their (to us) misplaced pious horror over Christian commitment to the divinity

of Christ. Oneness Pentecostals cannot help us here. They are not the usual Unitarians in that they do indeed avidly affirm the deity of Jesus Christ.

In fact, Oneness Pentecostalism is a particularly Jesus-centered piety.²⁶ The debate between Trinitarian and Oneness Pentecostals is not about the divinity of Christ, which both affirm, but about how he relates to the Godhead. Oneness advocates argue that Jesus Christ is the incarnate fullness of the entire Godhead (cf. Col 2:9), Trinitarians that he is the Son of God, the Word made flesh (cf. Jn. 1:14). Though they are Unitarians, Jesus Christ is as much or, if possible, more of an obstacle for interfaith dialogue from the Oneness perspective as from that of Trinitarians. Yong, of course, knows and notes these or related concerns but wonders if they may be overcome.²⁷ I am inclined to conclude that the most effective interreligious dialogue includes candid conversation about who we really are in our most authentic identity—and for most Christians, including most Pentecostals, that identity is trinitarian.

My overall sympathy is nonetheless for Amos Yong's ecumenical and interreligious objectives. I simply regard this as an unappealing and ineffective approach. I mention it here more for purposes of demonstrating Yong's complexity and subtlety. Note that he nowhere even hints that *Christians* can or should give up their commitment to the Trinity. He only wonders if in dialogue with *non-Christians* a Unitarian expression of Christian faith might inform the conversation. (Similarities with his Christology and pneumatology ought to be obvious.) A hermeneutics of suspicion would perhaps immediately assume the worst, and question his orthodoxy. Without doubt, I think it would be immeasurably mistaken. A hermeneutics of charity, whether agreeing or disagreeing with his proposal (about which even he expressed ambivalence and has not subsequently pursued), would understand that he is only reaching and stretching for dialogue points. Whether one agrees with this adventurous approach or not, they would do well at least to understand it accurately. Merrick, or others, who speak of his "questionable motivation" (116) regarding interreligious dialogue would also do well to think of how much this son of first generation converts from Buddhism to Christianity has sacrificed in sustaining his own unquestionable commitment to authentic Christian faith.

Here I would insert a suggestion for this ongoing conversation; something of an informal excursus I might call it. I will attempt to do so without coming across as “preachy” or pedantic. Unless there is clear and concrete evidence to the contrary, we should be reluctant to question the motivation of scholars working in this volatile field. In all Christian charity, we should assume that Yong, Merrick, me, and others, are working from the best and purest of motives, that is, that we are all working for the sake of the gospel in fulfilling our sense of calling by Christ into academic or theological ministry. Let us deal with the arguments at hand. Let us not militate against each other’s motives or question each other’s Christian character or commitment. Let us always aim at “speaking the truth in love” (Eph 4:15 NIV). Besides, otherwise we may inadvertently silence constructive creativity. Imagine the hesitancy of Christian voices outside the Midwest USA, or as in my case, the South, or even say in Asia or Africa or somewhere comparable, people who perhaps have a background in or near non-Christian religions, when they are charged with being un-Christian every time they utter something we did not hear growing up in Sunday School.

Now, let’s get back to the task at hand. In a full chapter on theology of religions, Yong goes ever deeper into the intricacies of his subject. Specifically, after noting that the times have intensified the need for a more developed Christian theology of religions, he lists three interrelated questions demanding special attention. First, “what is the role of religions in the providence of God?” Second, “does God save through the religions, and, if so, how?” Third, “what should be the Christian response to other faiths?” Not surprisingly, he suggests the “hypothesis” that “a pneumatologically driven theology is more conducive to engaging these matters in our time than previous approaches.”²⁸ His short answer is worth quoting at length.

[T]he religions are neither accidents of history nor encroachments on divine providence but are, in various ways, instruments of the Holy Spirit working out the divine purposes in the world ... the unevangelized, if saved at all, are saved through the work of the Christ by the Spirit (even if mediated through the religious beliefs and values available to them). Until both the questions and answers are broadened so as to take into account the religions themselves, however, those tentative proposals will be necessarily incomplete at best and immaterial at worst, since apart from these developments, Christians pronounce judgment on the religions without knowing what it is they are actually making

pronouncement about. In other words, as any theology needs to follow after the experiences and empirical actualities that it strives to understand, then theology of religion is not exempt.²⁹

Then there comes the “punch line” so to speak.

Only a pneumatological approach to the religions enables us to hold in tension the distinctive confessional claims of the Christian faith alongside of the actual claims of the religions themselves, because the Spirit’s being poured out upon all flesh does not cancel out but instead preserves the diversity of human voices.³⁰

Yong proceeds to discuss the dynamic relation of the religions to culture, which for him calls for interreligious engagement today.³¹ Next he provides exegetical support from the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) for his theology of religions.³² After that, he employs an assist from the Wesleyan tradition through John Fletcher’s “doctrine of dispensations”. He describes Fletcher’s thought as a “proto-pneumatological theology of religions.”³³ Finally, Yong attempts to demonstrate the potential of his theology of religions through a Christian-Muslim case study of a theological dialogue. He concludes that the results included are numerous. First, there is “a deepened contextualization of the gospel” and “a more coherent articulation of the message of Jesus in Islamic and even Qur’anic terms”. Second, the Church moves toward being “a servant to the religions, seeking after and contributing to their welfare”. Third, “the Christian faith will also be transformed in anticipation of the impending kingdom of God.”³⁴

At this point, I wish to take two steps. First, I will lift up a few of the salient aspects of Yong’s short summary above quoted at length. Second, I will summarize the main thrust of the unpacking that occurs in the rest of the chapter. In the process, I think this ought to quiet the main thrust of Merrick’s qualms. On the first, Yong is quite simply relating and extending the classic Christian doctrines of divine providence and salvation consistently to theology of religions. There is really nothing much too controversial here. Hypothetically, many of us just have not been accustomed to anyone applying these classic Christian doctrines beyond our own ecclesial communities.³⁵

However, Yong pushes readers to the next step, and that is perhaps where for many it gets uncomfortable or unpalatable. He requires us to wrestle with the reality of

the religions in an informed and informative way. One might put it thus: since God's providence genuinely overarches and embraces everyone, and since salvation is only attainable through Christ but is somehow available to everyone and since there are these rival religions in existence that God must know about and allow to exist, then what does that mean for Christians and what should we do about it? To me, it sounds like Yong's answer is that an expansive and inclusive understanding of God's Spirit at work in the whole world is the best way to hold all of this together without compromise or contradiction. Please note that, for Yong, neither compromise of Christian identity and integrity nor contradiction of the identity and integrity of rival religions are acceptable alternatives. If I read Merrick right, he misunderstood that dialectic, or thought that Yong fails in that endeavor, at least regarding Christian identity and integrity. Whichever it might have been, he himself, in my evaluation, may have failed to prove either point because he did not delve deeply enough into Yong's ideology.

On the second, Yong felt like at the end of this chapter that he had at least provided some concrete suggestions that might be helpful for Christians coming to grips with life in a religiously plural world. These suggestions require honestly wrestling with the Bible and Christian theology in light of the reality of the world of religions. He humbly admits that this work is subject to the test of time. However, he is comfortable with the dynamism inherent in pneumatological theology of religions and with an open-ended eschatological orientation toward the future. For him, "Following after the Spirit, who leads into all truth, is an acknowledgement that the truth is some ways yet ahead of us."³⁶ Readers should understand and assess this for what it really is: an honest, reverent attempt *as a Christian* to come to grips with undeniable *non-Christian* religious reality.

Here I would note that Merrick's main title, "The Spirit of Truth as Agent in False Religions?" implies, at least to me, a fallacy that is itself false. Partly for this reason, I chose as title for my response, "The Spirit of Truth as Guide into All Truth." Merrick seems to assume that since the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth that the Spirit's presence or influence anywhere that absolute truth does not already fully reside is a logical impossibility. If so, that would mean there is no continuum or scale of truth. However, a biblical understanding of the identity and ministry of the Spirit of Truth includes a

progressive journey of showing the way toward the truth (John 16:13). The word for “guide,” ὁδηγεῖο (*hodegeo*) bears out this dynamic process of the Spirit’s didactic activity regarding truth. Paul’s teaching on the partial and provisional nature of truth even among Christians substantiates the same point (1 Co 13:9). According to the implicit logic of Merrick’s title the Spirit of Truth would not (could not?) be present or active even among Christians unless the entire religion absolutely possessed absolute truth. Is anyone willing to argue for that proposition? The crux of that is this: a pneumatological theology of religions accenting the reality of absolute truth possessed absolutely only by God but progressively and provisionally shared with humanity is more in tune with biblical pneumatology than one assuming that one religion, even Christianity, absolutely possesses truth and all others are absolutely false. All truth is God’s truth, and wherever truth is found, God is somewhere around. That means the Spirit of Truth. Of course as Christians, we believe that the revelation of God in Christ according to the Scriptures is full and final. We may say this without contradiction even though we accept and expect an eschatological unveiling surpassing our present understanding.³⁷

Merrick cannot properly be blamed for not consulting another of Yong’s full-length treatments of Christian theology of religions and interreligious dialogue, *Hospitality & the Other*.³⁸ It is a very recent release, and though earlier than the Merrick article’s summer 2008 publication was probably not available at the time of its actual writing. However, for the sake of thoroughness, I mention it. I also highly recommend it for an in depth treatment of Yong’s most mature thought on this discussion. In sum, *Hospitality & the Other* is a biblical and theological study of what happens when the hospitable beliefs and practices of Jesus and the post-Pentecost Church are applied to Christian relations with persons of non-Christian faiths today. It essentially argues that contemporary practice needs to catch up with the biblical teaching of extending hospitality beyond every boundary of faith, nation, and ethnicity. For our purposes here, I might add that its careful research, close argumentation, and creative application demonstrate decisively that Amos Yong’s insightful integration of Christian orthodoxy and Christian orthopraxy has much to offer the field theology of religions and interreligious encounter and dialogue that Christians all across the spectrum can appreciate.

I will now state unequivocally that in my opinion if Merrick is right that Yong divorces or distances Christology and pneumatology, that is, that he rends asunder the person and work of Christ and the person and work of the Holy Spirit, then concern and caution over Yong's thought is not inappropriate. In other words, if Merrick is right about Yong then he is right about his reservations. However, I think Merrick is wrong about Yong, and thus also wrong about his reservations. A fair reading of Yong's overall work certainly suggests his thought, though surely sophisticated and subtle, is much more about relating rather than separating Christ and the Spirit in Christian theology of religions and in the interreligious encounter. Admittedly, these thoughts are in the Christian's heart and mind concerning his/her faith frame of reference contributing to and guiding interfaith conversation, but not the topic of discussion for non-Christians at the dialogue table—at least not at first, except perhaps at the most formal or pedagogical levels. If we miss this major point, we not only do a grave disservice to Amos Yong, but also to the developing field of Evangelical theology of religions and interreligious dialogue and to ourselves.

For this conversation to go forward, we need at the least to accurately understand the options on the table. For me, a nuanced pneumatological theology of religions does not suggest taking a quasi-Christian approach to interreligious understanding and interaction; rather, it suggests a consistently Christian approach may well be pneumatological in nature. That is an altogether different definition. Minimally, it is worthy of intelligent attention.

Reevaluating Current Trends

Helpfully, Merrick is up front about his use of Yong's theology to confront what he sees as lamentable and regrettable trends in the current intersection of theology of religions and pneumatology. He explains that his primary problem with Yong is what he sees, wrongly I think, as his "decision to advance a pneumatology in relative abstraction from Christology" (122). He further complains about and criticizes two movements he thinks a consequent of or dependent on a pneumatological theology of religions: "the notion of unhindered dialogue" and "theologians of the Spirit" who are part of "the pervasive trend of connecting the Spirit to creation" (123). For the first, he suggests S. Mark Heim and

John Hick exemplify those who would diminish or even deny Christian commitments for the sake of dialogue. For the second, he suggests Jürgen Moltmann and Michael Welker exemplify those who overemphasize the work of the Spirit outside the Church. Of course, he thinks, Yong, and a “significant ally” (123) in Clark Pinnock, exhibit both troubling trends. Without indulging in lengthy debate regarding his assessment of each of these thinkers (though I confess some significant points of agreement with Merrick, for example, regarding Hick’s over-the-top, radical pluralism), except for Yong of course, I wish to suggest that Merrick’s misunderstanding of Yong and disenchantment with current pneumatological theology of religions have perhaps led him to prematurely dismiss the field. I politely propose some reassessment.

What I will attempt is to demonstrate that an Evangelical theology of religions with a strong pneumatological slant and commitment to authentic dialogue is neither so recent nor regrettable as Merrick seems to suppose. Realistically, it is not a rare phenomenon on the fringes of Evangelical faith either. The eighteenth century evangelist and reformer John Wesley was no religious pluralist. His evangelical “credentials” are impeccable. Although Cobb gives a fair evaluation of Wesley’s inclusive theology of religions, he honestly admits that he breaks sharply with Wesley when he pushes into pluralism.³⁹ Runyon is much closer to Wesley when he affirms tolerance toward other religions based on the limits of religious language, though with communicative sufficiency, and, significantly, the activity of the Holy Spirit through prevenient grace. Above all, he affirms that Wesley bases his combination of openness to others and staunch Christian conviction on divine love.⁴⁰

Well within the Wesleyan tradition, Collins notes that Christians defining “spirituality” today need enough breadth and inclusiveness to recognize “the spiritualities of Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, agnostics and others” and enough specificity to “show the distinct place that Christian insight, experience, and teaching play in this larger arena.”⁴¹ Yet later he adds that Christian spirituality “in contradistinction to other kinds, is not simply the attempt to encounter an amorphous personal God, but represents, more specifically, the revelation of God *in Jesus Christ* through the Holy Spirit.”⁴² Here Wesley’s spirit shines forth in the admittedly difficult, delicate, but dynamic both/and

affirmation of Christ's uniqueness and necessity and Christian openness to others. The best in Wesleyan tradition follows suit.⁴³ Evangelicals and Pentecostals today will do well to endeavor to rise to that serious challenge.⁴⁴

In the Reformed tradition, Jonathan Edwards stands out. Gerald McDermott has studied his amazingly and, surprisingly to some, positive attitude toward non-Christian religions.⁴⁵ This great American theologian (1703-58) brilliantly battled deist arguments about revelation and God's fairness to non-Christians. McDermott persuasively argues that Edwards was preparing before his death a sophisticated theological response to Enlightenment religion that was unparalleled in the eighteenth century and surprisingly generous toward non-Christian traditions. Arguably, current inclusivist trends in Christian theology of religions have some deep roots in evangelical soil. However, I am not proposing that Edwards was primarily espousing a pneumatological theology of religions. I only suggest that his approach to non-Christian faiths is consistent with and complementary to a more open attitude as represented by Yong and others.

One widely recognized Evangelical theologian who leads the way in contemporary theology of religions is Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen. If theology of religions "attempts to account theologically for the meaning and value of other religions," then a distinctively Christian theology of religions, Kärkkäinen suggests, must be trinitarian.⁴⁶ Kärkkäinen suggests that trinitarian theology serves as a critique of a so-called "normative" pluralism (which usually collapses the differences between religions). Moreover, he maintains that the Triune God of the Bible is unique, and that a high Christology plays a critical role in the doctrine of the Trinity. For him, the Church in the power of the Holy Spirit anticipates the Kingdom of God, always pointing beyond itself to the eschaton, or the coming of the Kingdom and unity of all people under one God. Finally, he argues that the doctrine of the Trinity indicates the communal nature of God capable of relating in unity and difference; and that trinitarian communion can include critical relationship with religious others in tolerance. Essentially, Kärkkäinen suggests that a full-orbed trinitarian theology emphasizes the role of the Spirit not only in the trinitarian life of God but also in the presence of relationship between God and the Church and in the relationship between the Church and the world.

Obviously pneumatologically robust, Kärkkäinen is nonetheless faithfully Christological and ecclesiological.⁴⁷ The Spirit who reaches out beyond the Church into the Kingdom and into the world is always the Spirit of Christ who abides in unique relation with his Church. Kärkkäinen does not drive a wedge between the Spirit and Christ, or between the Spirit and the Church. Thus other religions are not salvific but discerning appreciation for the presence of the Triune God in their midst is possible. This approach opens the way wide for relational engagement, and includes a responsibility for genuinely appreciative and cautiously critical interreligious dialogue and encounter. For Kärkkäinen, a truly trinitarian theology of religions enables interreligious dialogue as a mutually respectful process of learning and sharing.

I suggest that the preceding indicates that balanced and sound Christian theology of religions is consistent with pneumatological emphases. I further suggest it indicates that Christian beliefs about and practices of interreligious dialogue and encounter are beneficially informed by pneumatology. Therefore, Merrick's concerns about the pneumatological turn occurring in Evangelical and Pentecostal theology of religions appear ungrounded. In short, exploring how pneumatology informs Christian theology of religions is a healthy and wholesome endeavor, not a compromise that will somehow eventually end up "selling the family farm."

On a practical, perhaps even, pastoral, note, many believe Christians are slowly but surely being backed into a corner. If we concede to religious pluralism, we surrender any semblance of biblical or historic Christian faith (contra Jude 3). If we contend for Christian uniqueness, some portray us as narrow and nasty, backward and bigoted fundamentalists. In too many minds, we become comparable to the Taliban or to Al Qaeda terrorists. What then are we to do? In my own interfaith experiences, I find employing a core group of commitments surprisingly effective. These will serve well in both formal and informal encounters with adherents of other faiths.

•Commitment to *the Word of God*: Our beliefs and practices must always align themselves with the teaching of Scripture rather than the pressure of culture. Proverbs 14:12 says, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death" (NIV). Accordingly, Christians cannot conscientiously affirm that all ways are equally

right. We must always insist on the uniqueness of Christ and the necessity of faith in Christ.

•Commitment to *the witness of the Spirit*: the Spirit testifies within us regarding our right standing with God in Christ (Rom 8:16-17). “The Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh” (Num 27:16 NIV) also reaches out to all people everywhere. Accordingly, Christians can cautiously identify signs of God’s gracious presence and influence beyond ecclesial or sectarian borders.

•Commitment to *the way of love*: Jonah knew the Lord is “a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love” (4:2 NIV). Yet he balked at interacting with those he considered godless heathen and begrudged them God’s love and mercy. However, God reproved the prophet’s rashness (4:10-11). Accordingly, Christians can confidently bear witness of Christ in a religiously plural world by treating religious others with Godlike love.⁴⁸ As an Evangelical and a Pentecostal, I find such an approach most satisfying biblically, theologically, and experientially. And it has Christological and pneumatological balance and poise.⁴⁹

Conclusion

I am afraid that I must assess as seriously deficient R. A. James Merrick’s treatment of the topic of Christian theology of religions. His critical conversation with Amos Yong, a leading Pentecostal theologian of religions noted for his pneumatological theology of religions, displays an incompleteness that leads to incorrectness. Consequently, this skews his treatment of trends in current Christian theology of religions as well. Although Merrick’s essay is informative and well written, it does not adequately address the contemporary globalization and consequent increase in confrontational conduct between religions demanding satisfactory development of a contemporary Christian theology of religions. Rather, it prematurely dismisses a Christian pneumatological theology of religions and misrepresents the nature of interreligious dialogue. I politely propose some reassessment. In my opinion, a less biased assessment will likely lead to an appreciation for the pneumatological aspect of Christian theology of religions and its importance for interreligious dialogue as well as for Amos Yong’s important place in that process.

Finally, in the interest of carrying this conversation forward, I suggest that possibly a problem with many contemporary approaches to theology of religions is that of failing to distinguish between the beauty of simplicity and the folly of being simplistic. In saying this, I do not at all mean to sound condescending. In fact, simplicity, as the apostle noted, is, in a certain sense of the term, of value in the life of faith (2 Co 11:3 NASB). However, there is a difference between simplicity and simplistic. The former commonly means to dispense with layers of affectation and pretense, the latter to ignore important complexities or complications to one's own detriment. Though of course true of other theological disciplines as well, Christian theology of religions is especially full of complexities and complications that one ought not to ignore.

I have personally gained important insights regarding the complexities and complications of theology of religions from Lesslie Newbigin, truly one of the towering figures of the twentieth century when it comes to the theory and practice of Christian mission. As is well known, scholars usually classify the major types of theology of religions as exclusivist, pluralist, or inclusivist. Ever overflowing categorical classifications, Newbigin creatively describes himself thus:

The position which I have outlined is exclusive in the sense that it affirms the unique truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ, but it is not exclusivist in the sense of denying the possibility of the salvation of the non-Christian. It is inclusivist in the sense that it refuses to limit the saving grace of God to the members of the Christian Church, but it rejects the inclusivism which regards the non-Christian religions as vehicles of salvation. It is pluralist in the sense of acknowledging the work of God [i.e., the Holy Spirit] in the lives of all human beings, but it rejects a pluralism which denies the uniqueness and decisiveness of what God has done in Jesus Christ.⁵⁰

That may be just about the most beautifully balanced description of Christian theology of religions ever. It calls for careful inspection and reflection. I cannot do that now, but it may still serve to illustrate my point. If this conversation is to go forward, we will need to give careful attention to numerous complexities and complications, for example, relations of Christology and pneumatology to interreligious dialogue praxis. In other words, we will need to be cautiously on guard against polarizing ourselves into positions ignoring the insights of other perspectival angles.

¹ Merrick's article was first published in the *Trinity Journal* 29:1 (Spring 2008), 107-25. Initially *TJ* editorial staff expressed interest in a response from me but later decided, due, they said, to internal issues quite apart from my article itself, not to continue a conversation about a topic they did not wish to pursue in depth or at length. Although disappointed and saddened at what appeared to me to be *TJ*'s retreat from an academic engagement it had perhaps initiated injudiciously, I am contrariwise quite grateful to *Cyberjournal* for graciously and courageously carrying the conversation forward.

² In the interest of full disclosure, Amos Yong is a colleague and good friend. However, Amos did not request my participation in this response, nor has he made any recommendations or even read it, though he is aware of it. Nevertheless, in spite of (and because of) our friendship, as will be observed, I am ready and willing to be critical of Yong's work when appropriate. I also appreciate some general comments from Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen on an earlier draft of this article.

³ Upon occasion, I have found it feasible to critique some of Yong's ideas myself. E.g., in a review of his *Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), published in part in *Pneuma Review* (Winter 2007), 65-69, and in greater length at http://pneumafoundation.org/article.jsp?article=article_0073.xml, I seriously questioned his suggestions about utilizing Oneness Pentecostalism's theology of the Godhead as a basis for Christian-Muslim dialogue.

⁴ Of course, this assumption is much more than mere personal opinion. Cf. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical & Contemporary Perspectives* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 17-29.

⁵ Merrick's work appears inspired by his instructor, Graham A. Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology series, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, ILL: Crossway, 2007), 199-200. However, Steven M. Stuebaker's terse review of Cole's contribution, *Pneuma* 31:1 (Spring 2009), 146-47, suggests its understanding of Pentecostalism in general is "unfortunately misinformed and dated". In particular, claims Stuebaker, Cole totally misunderstands Yong's pneumatology and Christology. Significantly, Cole makes the same claim Merrick makes (repeats?), that Yong divorces Christ/Christology and the Holy Spirit/pneumatology; but Stuebaker demonstratively refutes that charge as patently false. I offer the same refutation of Merrick's misrepresentation.

⁶ Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 38.

⁷ *Ibid*, 47.

⁸ *Ibid*, 50. Cf. 134.

⁹ *Ibid*, 89, 101. Cf. 169.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 135.

¹¹ Robert H. Mounce, *New International Biblical Commentary: Matthew* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1985, 1991), 163.

¹² Cf. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament Ib: Matthew 14-18*, Ed. Manlio Simonetti, Gen. Ed. Thomas C. Oden (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 46-47, and *Wesley's Notes on the New Testament: Matthew* (Rio, WI: Ages Software, Inc. 2002), 78.

¹³ See my review of Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield, Eng: Sheffield Academic, 2000) in *Pneuma Review* 8:4 (Fall 2005), 68-71, especially 70-71.

¹⁴ In his review of Yong's more recent work, *Hospitality & the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008), Edmund J. Rybarczyk, *Pneuma* 31:1 (Spring 2009), 139-41, also questions the extent of Yong's pneumatological theology of religions. Rybarczyk's concern appears to have to do primarily with blurring categorical lines between creation and redemption, between Christ/Christology and the Holy Spirit/pneumatology, and between Christianity and non-Christian religions (140-41). Perhaps something of the complexity and subtlety of Yong's thought is reflected in the fact that he is accused both of divorcing and of blurring traditional categories! And yet, is either charge entirely correct? Is it possible he is relating these "categories" in creative ways challenging and stretching traditional presuppositions but not dismissing or destroying them?

¹⁵ Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield, Eng: Sheffield Academic, 2000). In the following I draw on my earlier review *Pneuma Review* already mentioned.

¹⁶ Harvey Cox in *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (NY: Addison-Wesley, 1995).

¹⁷ Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s)*, 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 311, 315-16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 324.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 312-15, 321-22.

²² Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). Cf. Tony Richie, "On Fire and Up to Date," A Review Essay of *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, Pneuma Foundation in Depth Resources online index (Winter 2007), http://pneumafoundation.org/article.jsp?article=article_0073.xml.

²³ *Ibid.*, 81-120.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 83 and 156; cf. 28, 203, and 226.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, see 227-31, 264.

²⁶ I was actually raised in an independent Oneness Pentecostal environment. Although I am personally Trinitarian, I had/have beloved family members and friends deeply entrenched in the movement. What follows is in no way intended to be disparaging or pejorative toward Oneness Pentecostals, but a statement of fact regarding majority Christian identity, including Pentecostals, and its implication for interreligious dialogue.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 235-36.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 236.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 236.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 236-40. Here Yong dialogues with Benjamin Valentin, *Mapping Public Theology: Beyond Culture, Identity, and Difference* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002) and Miroslav Volf, "When Gospel and Culture Intersect: Notes on the Nature of Christian Difference," *Pentecostalism in Context*:

Essays in Honor of William W. Menzies, ed. Wonsuk Ma and Robert P. Menzies, JPT Sup 11 (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 223-36.

³² Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, 241-47.

³³ Ibid, 247-57. Yong explains that, "In a nutshell, Fletcher understood the various covenants between God and humankind as differing dispensations" through which God dealt with different classes of human beings, including Gentiles, Jews, and Christians (248).

³⁴ Ibid, 257-66 (265-66). In this "dialogue," Yong does a comparative study of the Spirit in Christianity/Islam and in the Bible/Qur'an.

³⁵ See Tony Richie, "God's Fairness to People of All Faiths: A Respectful Proposal to Pentecostals for Discussion Regarding World Religions," *Pneuma* 28:1 (Spring 2006), 105-119.

³⁶ Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, 266.

³⁷ For more on religious truth and religious plurality see Tony Richie, "Approaching the Problem of Religious Truth in a Pluralistic World: A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 43:3 (Summer 2008), 351-69.

³⁸ Amos Yong, *Hospitality & the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008).

³⁹ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Grace & Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 145-53.

⁴⁰ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 215-21.

⁴¹ Kenneth J. Collins, ed. *Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 10.

⁴² Ibid, 13. Italics are original.

⁴³ Cf. E. B. Chappell, *Studies in the Life of John Wesley* (Salem, OH: Schmul, 1991 [1911]), 104, 170-76, Herbert Boyd McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace: John Wesley's Evangelical Arminianism* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2001), 76, 266-67, 318-30, and Jerry L. Walls, *The Problem of Pluralism: Recovering United Methodist Identity* (Wilmore, KY: Good News, 1986), 24-27 and 29-50.

⁴⁴ See my work on Wesley in Tony Richie, "Mr. Wesley and Mohammed: A Contemporary Inquiry Concerning Islam," *Asbury Theological Journal* 58:2 (Fall 2003), 79-99.

⁴⁵ Gerald R. McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴⁶ See especially Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Theology of Religions* (Aldershot, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 2; cf. also his *Toward a Pneumatological Theology: Pentecostal and Ecumenical Perspectives on Ecclesiology, Soteriology, and Theology of Mission*, ed. Amos Yong (Lanham: University Press of America, 2002), ch. 14.

⁴⁷ E.g., Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions: A Pentecostal-Charismatic Inquiry," *International Review of Mission* 91: 361 (2002): 187-98, and "How to Speak of the

Spirit among Religions: Trinitarian ‘Rules’ for a Pneumatological Theology of Religions,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 30:3 (2006): 121-27.

⁴⁸ See Tony Richie, “Much More than a Man among Men: The Supreme Significance of Jesus Christ”, *Church of God Evangel* (December 2007), 6-7.

⁴⁹ Cf. Tony Richie, “Neither Naïve nor Narrow: A Balanced Pentecostal Approach to Christian Theology of Religions”, *Cyberjournal for Pentecostal/Charismatic Research* (February 2006) <http://www.pctii.org/cyberj/cyberj15/richie.html>.

⁵⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), 182-83. Cf. Tony Richie, “Effectively Engaging Pluralism and Postmodernism in a So-Called Post-Christian Culture: A Review Essay of Lesslie Newbigin’s *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*,” *The Pneuma Review* (Fall 2007), 27-39.