

Theology and Philosophy of Amos Yong: The First Twenty Years

Drenda Butler

Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA

Introduction

Reflecting on the work of Amos Yong is a daunting task. From my perspective as a graduate student committed to research in Pentecostal theology, I believe a compelling argument can be made for describing Yong as the most influential contemporary Pentecostal theologian. On more than one occasion, I have felt inspired with an “original idea,” only to do preliminary research and discover that Yong has already written an entire book on the topic. Perhaps, then, part of Yong’s legacy is keeping ambitious young scholars like me humble. Not only is Yong’s work important for its breadth but also for its influence beyond the world of North American Pentecostalism. Yong’s books can be found on the shelves of my Catholic university’s library, and my Benedictine classmates from around the world are familiar with his work. Most importantly, Yong’s contributions matter to someone like me because they have paved a way for constructive systematic theology that is distinctly Pentecostal.

By “constructive systematic theology that is distinctly Pentecostal,” I do not mean theology that organizes characteristics of Pentecostal thought according to conventional theological categories, or systematic theology that merely begins with pneumatology (for, as I hope is apparent to the theological academy by now, Pentecostalism encompasses more than just a privileging of the Holy Spirit). Rather, Yong’s theology demonstrates something more methodologically creative, in that Pentecostal distinctives serve as organizing principles of his theology. While the former methods I have described are valid and contribute important theological insights, Yong’s work does not just invite Pentecostals to contribute to theological systems already in place but to rethink those systems altogether. This very act of rethinking the way we do theology is itself deeply Pentecostal, for it involves critiquing structures that have become limiting, breathing new life into the academic *status quo*, and reimagining the future of theological endeavors. In doing all these things, Yong produces theology that is not merely sprinkled with references to Pentecostalism but that *is* Pentecostal at its core.

Yong’s Theology as Pentecostal Theology

Discerning the Spirit(s)

Since there are far more examples of this Pentecostal methodology within Yong's corpus of work than time will permit me to engage, I have limited the bulk of my reflection to three books that I feel represent both the topological and chronological breadth of Yong's theology; they are namely, *Discerning the Spirits(s)*, *In the Days of Caesar*, and *Spirit of Love*.¹ *Discerning the Spirit(s)* is important for both its status as Yong's first book and the foundation it establishes for much of Yong's subsequent work on theology of religions in later books such as *Beyond the Impasse* and *Hospitality and the Other*.² Furthermore, it exemplifies that doing theology from a fundamental Pentecostal perspective has been an essential quality of Yong's work from the beginning.

Certainly, the content of *Discerning the Spirit(s)* could be described as Pentecostal. In response to the impasse posed by christology for Christian contributions to theology of religions, Yong proposes the Spirit as a way forward.³ He employs a foundational pneumatology as a metaphysical framework for understanding religions and divine activity within the created order.⁴ This key framework is informed by what Yong describes as a "pneumatological imagination," a way of seeing the world that is fostered by the Pentecostal experience of the Spirit's movement in the world.⁵ Thus, a fundamental aspect of Yong's suggested approach to theology of religions flows from Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on experience of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world and, to quote Yong, a "holistic expression of spirituality in mind, body, and the affections."⁶

In addition to content, *Discerning the Spirit(s)* also models a robustly Pentecostal theology through aspects of its style. A prime example is that Yong begins each chapter with a brief personal narrative that frames the formal theological discussion that follows. For instance, chapter two, which treats the challenges christology presents for a Christian theology of religions, begins with Yong's own narrational description of his experience "accepting Jesus into his heart" as a young child, followed by a litany of theological questions that read like his own internal reflection on this conversion experience:

¹ See *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); *In the Days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and Political Theology*, *Sacra Doctrina: Christian Theology for a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010); and *Spirit of Love: A Trinitarian Theology of Grace* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), respectively.

² See *Beyond the Impasse: A Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003) and *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), respectively.

³ See *Discerning the Spirit(s)*, chapters 2 and 3.

⁴ See *ibid*, chapter 4

⁵ See *Discerning the Spirit(s)*, chapter 5.

⁶ *Ibid*, 162.

Is that not what being a Christian is all about—being a follower of Jesus, converted by his saving presence? ... Does it also not follow that everything else is secondary in light of our relationship with Jesus...? ... Or is it more the case that we are followers of the *Christ*? But is Jesus not the Christ, and is not Christ wholly the man Jesus? Is there a difference, or does it matter?⁷

Opening each chapter in a personal fashion like this places personal testimony as a springboard into theological reflection, a creative way of incorporating the Pentecostal affinity for narrational communication into a formal theological piece.⁸ In this way, *Discerning the Spirit(s)* demonstrates that doing Pentecostal theology is not merely a matter of content but also method, of finding creative ways to do theology that correspond to the ethos of the tradition.

In the Days of Caesar

In the twenty years since the publication of *Discerning the Spirit(s)*, Yong's subsequent work has demonstrated that theology of religions was just the beginning: Pentecostalism can offer meaningful contributions to a variety of theological domains. Yong's 2010 book, *In the Days of Caesar*, illustrates such a reality within the realm of political theology. As a vast work of intricate arguments spanning nearly four-hundred pages, *In the Days of Caesar* easily warrants a distinct reflection on its legacy alone. I wish only to highlight a couple ways this piece demonstrates the importance of Yong's work as Pentecostal theology. First, as with the pneumatological imagination put forth in *Discerning the Spirit(s)*, many of the guiding principles of *In the Days of Caesar* are also intricately connected to Pentecostalism. For example, the underlying thesis Yong employs in his framework for Christian engagement in a pluralistic society is the theological maxim, "many tongues, many political practices."⁹ Here, Yong uses a biblical concept of great importance to Pentecostals—the Spirit's gifting of diverse tongues—to construct a theological logic for multiplicity of Christian action in the public sphere.¹⁰ In so doing, Yong demonstrates that the implications of the concepts inherent to Pentecostalism extend beyond just personal devotion or communal worship; they can also serve as organizing theological principles within domains perhaps even Pentecostals ourselves have historically overlooked or refused to consider.

⁷ Ibid, 33.

⁸ In the introduction to this text, Yong himself notes regarding these "autobiographical vignettes" that "any argument presented by a Pentecostal in part for Pentecostals needs to communicate in a tangible manner the emphasis on orality that is part and parcel of the narrative structure at the heart of Pentecostalism." See *Discerning the Spirit(s)*, 28.

⁹ *In the Days of Caesar*, beginning on 109.

¹⁰ Yong's use of this maxim in *In the Days of Caesar* is an extension of his initial development of "many tongues, many practices" in an earlier book on religious pluralism. See *Hospitality and the Other*.

This expansion of Pentecostalism's theological possibilities is further exemplified in Yong's use in *In the Days of Caesar* of the Pentecostal fivefold framework of salvation as the Spirit's work in Christ that is saving, sanctifying, empowering, healing, and eschatological.¹¹ Rather than settling for a vision of salvation that is entirely eschatologically-oriented or strictly personal, Yong illustrates the deeply political nature of this Pentecostal soteriological matrix. By expanding the implications of this matrix to include concrete social realities, Yong furthermore demonstrates that Pentecostal principles have important and meaningful contributions for the Church broadly conceived. *In the Days of Caesar* is thus one example of how Yong's work evidences that the Pentecostal worldview is not bizarre or inconsequential but rather offers a crucial theological perspective beyond the walls of our communities.

Spirit of Love

Yong continues this theme of expounding upon key aspects of Pentecostal spirituality as part of a constructive theological endeavor in his 2012 book, *Spirit of Love*. In this work, Yong develops a theology of love thoroughly rooted in Pentecostalism, arguing that Spirit-baptism can be understood as "a baptism of holy love."¹² What stands out about this work is that while Yong himself admits, in his own words, that "Pentecostalism has become known more as a religion of power than of love," he nonetheless intuits that beneath the surface, Pentecostalism possesses a theological richness that extends far beyond merely concerns of power.¹³ By mining the depths of Pentecostalism to construct a theology of love, something seemingly absent from the tradition, Yong not only shows once again that Pentecostalism is capable of meaningful contributions to systematic theology but also that theological reflection can produce deeper insights into Pentecostalism's own self-understanding: we are a people baptized in the Spirit for power, but we are more than that. Yong thus demonstrates that a robust Pentecostal theology is both external and internal in focus.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not also highlight that Yong's theological method involves placing Pentecostalism in conversation with a variety of sources. In *Spirit of Love* alone, he consults Christian tradition that has historically understood love through a pneumatological lens; social scientific perspectives on Pentecostalism; and the biblical witness, spanning Luke/Acts, the Pauline corpus, and the Johannine literature. Through such an interdisciplinary approach, Yong grants legitimacy to the Pentecostal voice. He demonstrates that we need not be afraid of outside perspectives but rather welcome them as important dialogue partners. And is such a disposition not itself inherently Pentecostal? For to be people of the Spirit is to seek the Spirit wherever she might be found. Yong's theology embodies just that.

¹¹ See *In the Days of Caesar*, beginning on 95.

¹² *Spirit of Love*, chapter 5 especially.

¹³ *Ibid*, 55.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have merely scratched the surface of reflecting on Yong's theology as Pentecostal theology. I could have explored his work on hermeneutics, theology of disability, creation, and much more.¹⁴ My goal has been to highlight the breadth, depth, and creativity of Yong's work and its implications for constructive systematic theology that is distinctly Pentecostal. As I hope has been clear, Yong's theology is important not just for its content but also its method and style, which capture the heart of Pentecostalism. In the spirit of the tradition, I would like to close my remarks with my own brief personal narrative:

As a woman immersed in the world of academic theology, and a Pentecostal woman at that, I have felt discouraged at times. Did I mishear God? Is this actually the path the Spirit is leading me to pursue? I sometimes wonder if "Pentecostal" and "academic" are contradictory terms and if attempting to construct Pentecostal theology is a fruitless and naïve task. "No one will take me seriously," I sometimes think. "This work doesn't actually matter." But, the work of scholars like Amos Yong often gives me hope in the face of these thoughts. I am reminded that to be Pentecostal is to believe wholeheartedly in the Spirit's work in body, heart, as well as mind. My journey has been one of reconciling my embrace of Pentecostalism with my passion for theological scholarship. I am grateful for the work of people like Yong, who have gone before me to demonstrate that an embrace of Pentecostalism is Spirit-inspired nourishment for robust theological scholarship.

¹⁴ See, for example, *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006); *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity*, Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability (Baylor University Press, 2007); and *The Spirit of Creation: Modern Science and Divine Action in Pentecostal-Charismatic Imagination*, Pentecostal Manifestos (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), respectively.