Dialogue Sustained: The First Twenty Years of Amos Yong's Theology

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The arrival of the twentieth anniversary of the publication of Amos Yong's first major work is an occasion especially ripe for assessing his voluminous theological contributions. That first book, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions*, became the first installment in Yong's sustained engagement with the relationships among Christianity and other religions. It also gave readers the first substantive insight into the methodological engine of not only Yong's theology of religions but also of his investigation of all of the major topics that have surfaced in his work since then—including religion and science, theology and disability studies, political theology, and theological interpretation of Luke-Acts. While Yong has not written a book-length treatment of theology of religions in several years, the topic remains important to him. Perhaps more important for an assessment of his theology and philosophy to this point is the fact that the dialogical methodology that he first developed in *Discerning the Spirit(s)* has remained constant, sometimes in connection with theology of religions and sometimes in connection with other theological topics. I will briefly describe Yong's methodology of dialogue to demonstrate that it is one of the most consistent features of his thought. In the process, I will prioritize selections from a forthcoming Reader that brings together representative samples of Yong's thought.[1]

Already in *Discerning the Spirit(s)* (2000), Yong is clear that he seeks not only a Christian theology of non-Christian religions. He also calls for comparative Christian theology, an enterprise that invites the Christian theologian to investigate the beliefs and practices of a non-Christian religion in part to consider whether some of the elements of the other religion might be able to transform elements of Christian theology. After all, the possibility that the Holy Spirit may be present and active in non-Christian religions amounts to the possibility of insights in those religions that can positively impact Christian theology. Instead of ignoring non-Christian religions, he says, theologians should be perceptive to the truths of the Spirit wherever they are found. Thus, a theology of religions that is sufficiently pneumatological necessitates and enables a reformulation of systematic theology that is informed by those truths.[2]

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[1]*An Amos Yong Reader: The Pentecostal Spirit*, ed. Christopher A. Stephenson (Eugene: Cascade, 2020).
[2]Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 311–19.

And yet, as early as *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh* (2005), it is not only theology that may be transformed by interreligious dialogue and comparative theology; it is also the dialogue partners themselves who may be transformed, a theme that continues in Yong's *Pneumatology and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue* and *The Cosmic Breath* (2012). Because genuine human relationships are dialogical, he writes, interreligious dialogue transforms Christian self-understanding, which affects Christian identity. Transformation through personal relations may come in the process of formal dialogue or during social interaction around shared meals, in which Christians are sometimes guest and sometimes hosts. True dialogue entails both speaking and listening, but it may come in the form of either discursive exchanges or informal conversations. The Christian participant in interreligious dialogue discerns both oneself and the religious other. When the Christian discerns in another religion elements that do not contradict the character of the kingdom of God, Christian self-understanding—and in turn, Christian identity, not only Christian theology—is enriched. Yong continues that complete transformation of Christian identity to another religion is a theoretically possible result of dialogue, which may involve multiple levels of conversion. He adds that this possibility demands the Christian dialogue partner to place her confidence in the Holy Spirit rather than in herself.[3]

At the same time, according to Yong, Christian theologians do not tend to expect interreligious dialogue to reveal truths that contradict their most fundamental Christian beliefs. The more common expectation is that misunderstandings and stereotypes of the religious other may be set aside and that any truth discerned in the other religion will enhance truth revealed in Christ. Yong then states three requirements for interreligious dialogue. The Christian interlocutor must have, first, the ability to state the perspectives of his own tradition, second, patience to hear other interlocutors, and third, the capacity to evaluate juxtaposed positions.[4]

One of the specific comparative theological dialogues that Yong stages is between Christianity and Buddhism. For example, after asking whether an understanding of the similarities between the two can be deepened when set within a pneumatological framework, he observes two viable answers. First, one might contend that the respective mechanisms of Christian and Buddhist salvation/liberation are in fact one and the same; that is, there is a singular reality variously manifest and understood within the two religious traditions. While Yong fears that this approach could terminate dialogue altogether—since there may no longer be need to converse about genuine differences at the ontological level—he cautions against dismissing it too quickly, if one

[3]Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 250–57; idem, *Pneumatology and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue: Does the Wind Blow through the Middle Way?* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 10-11.
[4]Yong, *Pneumatology and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue*, 8–12.

is committed to the unity and singularity of truth. Second, as Yong prefers, one could conclude that the Holy Spirit may be present and active in different facets of each religious tradition. The latter approach goes further to invite ongoing dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism, since it resists the assumption of convergence between the two in favor of discerning concretely, through *a posteriori* investigation, the extent to which they are or are not similar.[5]

To the dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism, Yong adds the natural sciences, in pursuit of a Christian environmental theology and ethic. His hope for this dialogue—now "trialogue"—is not an uncritical syncretism of Buddhism and Christianity but rather Christian ideas that are more thoroughly Christian precisely because they are "now able to return to, retrieve, and reappropriate the scriptural resources of Christian theology albeit within a global, intercultural, interdisciplinary, and interreligious discursive context."[6] Yong adds that it is his belief in Christian theological truth claims that motivates his attempts to understand those claims in dialogue with Buddhism.[7]

So much for Yong's earlier and stunningly impressive work on theology of religions and its concomitant dialogical methodology, which has implications for far more than his contributions to interreligious dialogue. Yong's theological method holds together qualified elements of classical liberal and postliberal methodologies that are often thought to be at odds with each other. This expresses itself most clearly in his commitments to universality and particularity. One way to see the tensions that Yong holds together is to situate part of his methodology with parts of those of David Tracy and George Lindbeck.[8] Although both Tracy and Lindbeck recognize the hermeneutical nature of theology and both write in light of the linguistic turn, they differ significantly on whether (at least some) experiences precede linguistic and symbolic structures (Tracy) or whether linguistic and symbolic structures precede and therefore help to create (all) experiences (Lindbeck). In turn, Tracy affirms the existence of universal human experiences that may come to expression in the form of different linguistic and symbolic structures, and Lindbeck concludes that different linguistic and symbolic structures produce different experiences. These notions, then, lead them to different approaches to the nature of theological truth claims. Tracy

[5]Yong, *Pneumatology and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue*, 171–77.
[6]Amos Yong, *The Cosmic Breath: Spirit and Nature in the Christianity-Buddhism-Science Trialogue* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 240.
[7]Yong, *The Cosmic Breath*, 234–41.
[8]See especially David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); idem, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1982); idem, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

sees them as public, in part because one can correlate them with the experiences of persons in the public sphere who are not part of the community of discourse out of which theological truth claims arise. Thus, those in the public sphere may understand, evaluate, and correct theological truth claims. Lindbeck sees theological truth claims as statements whose primary meaning is for those internal to the community of discourse from which the theological truth claims arise. Thus, those in the public sphere are likely to find theological truth claims largely, if not entirely, unintelligible and are not adept at evaluating whether they are true.

Regarding universality, based in part on Tracy's account of the different arenas in which theological discourse takes place, Yong concludes that theology must address the academy (fundamental theology), ecclesial self-understanding (systematic theology), and ecclesial praxis (practical theology), each of which Yong connects to three criteria of truth—correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic, respectively.[9] The acceptance of these distinctions also forms the basis of Yong's commitment to formulate a foundational pneumatology for debate in the public arenas outside the church. Yong's adoption of Tracy's various "publics" is a significant driving force in his decision to include world religions, the sciences, North American philosophical traditions, persons with intellectual disabilities, and others in his quest for truth.

With respect to particularity, Yong qualifies and accepts some aspects of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic theory. Yong affirms that truth claims arise from particular, finite contexts with limited perspectives. These communities of discourse make all human knowing perspectival and partial. Truth claims must cohere not only with the other truth claims internal to a particular system of thought, but with an entire way of life manifested in part through practices and behaviors. Perhaps the strongest point of continuity between Yong and Lindbeck is on the inseparability of beliefs and practices, such that one must speak of beliefs to a certain extent as being performed. This point is crucial for Yong because of its implications for interreligious dialogue. The practice of hospitality is an important gesture in interreligious dialogue. Both giving hospitality to and receiving hospitality from practitioners of non-Christian religions can bring greater understanding of beliefs held by both religious dialogue partners.

Nonetheless, Yong resists the insularity and incommensurability to which cultural-linguistic theory may tend. He denies that communities of discourse are hermetically sealed and observes that many people participate in multiple communities and traditions at the same time. He also insists that truth is pragmatic in the sense that all of us—even when we participate in different communities of discourse with different linguistic and symbolic structures—continually bump up against reality. Discerning reality is itself part and parcel of the pneumatological imagination, and

[9]Amos Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002), 275–310.

the Holy Spirit—in all of the Spirit's universality—can guide members of different communities of discourse to truths about reality. Therefore, new insights may render invalid one's current linguistic or symbolic structure, and new insight may come from those who are different than we but who live in the same singular world.

Therefore, Yong maintains commitments to universality—often associated with classical liberal theology—and particularity—often associated with postliberal theology. The universality has less to do with universal human experience than with the universal outpouring of the Holy Spirit "on all flesh" (Acts 2:17). The particularity acknowledges the endless complexity of local contexts but resists retreat into intellectual silos. These features alone make Yong's dialogical methodology worthy of attention in and of itself; they are also indispensable for understanding all of the many topics that his theology treats. Practitioners of non-Christian religions, natural and social scientists, persons with disabilities, and Christian theologians—all of these are members of communities of discourse that might seem incommensurable at first glance—but Yong believes that they both can and should dialogue with each other for their mutual understanding and benefit. He also realizes, however, that as members of different communities of discourse they do not speak exactly the same language and that the translation required for genuine dialogue among them may be a task so difficult that it can proceed only with the help of the Holy Spirit.[10]

While Yong's more recent monographs have not focused explicitly on interreligious dialogue, the theme of dialogue among different communities of discourse in general persists. In 2014, he devoted an entire book to the topic, titled *The Dialogical Spirit*. Here, his interlocutors are not only practitioners of other religions but also philosophers, theologians, scientists, scholars of other faiths, comparativists, anthropologists, and missiologists. Yong states that dialogue with them requires patient listening, and that a legitimate basis even for *disagreeing* with them should emerge only after sustained engagement with both their ideas and their ways of life. He adds that the context for dialogue with these interlocutors is fourfold: (1) the epistemological climate after the end of foundationalism; (2) the cultural period after Christendom; (3) the information age that interfaces science and religion in the public square; and (4) the late modern world in which the increased interaction among the many world religions threatens either violent conflict or bland relativism. All of this adds up to our world being utterly pluralistic. On the one hand, dialogue partners should be discerned on a case-by-case basis; on the other, Christians should not refrain from making universal truth claims. Yong realizes also that dialogue may not remain positive throughout. He writes, "[I]n some instances, when greeted by the devil…the dialogical

[10]See Ruben Binyet, "A Pentecostal Critique of the Postmodern S/spirit: Amos Yong and David Tracy on Theological Method," *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 40, no. 1 (2020): 3-16.

approach ought to be replaced expeditiously by an exorcistic strategy."[11] Of course, he continues, the difficulties are that evil often masks its identity and that we may prematurely conclude that we are encountering it when, in fact, we are not.[12]

Also in 2014, Yong developed an Asian American, evangelical theology of migration, in which he enumerated the various dialogue partners that Asian American Evangelicals encounter in the US—for example, other nonevangelical and non-Christian Asian Americans, other non-Asian Americans, and other non-Asian American Evangelicals.[13] As an Asian American pentecostal, Yong offers some autobiographical reflections on the various ways in which he feels torn between different groups and dominant voices. These reflections undermine any naïve imagination that we or our interlocutors will always be neatly situated within our own respective single communities of discourse—I, "here and only here," and my interlocutor, "over there and only over there." Hybrid identities are far more likely.

First, Yong is between East and West, between Asian and American traditions. He is comfortable in both but does not belong entirely to either. Second, he is yellow in a country in which racial identity is sometimes oversimplified as "white or black." His interracial marriage to a Mexican American woman complicates this identity further, and all the more for his children. Third, he is between colonial and postcolonial dynamics. He is thankful that missionaries from the West brought the gospel to Malaysia—which ultimately led to his conversion—and, as an academic theologian, he acknowledges the dominant theological tradition's participation in colonialism. Fourth, he senses socioeconomic tension. While his immigration to the US depended on financial support from sources outside his family, he now enjoys many of the benefits of upper-middle-class life. Fifth, Yong wrestles with exclusivity and inclusivity. Some of his faith commitments are mutually exclusive of some of those of other religions. At the same time, his Chinese identity cannot be neatly separated from non-Christian philosophical and religious traditions in Southeast Asia. Sixth, his Christian identity is between ancient Israel and contemporary Judaism. Although Christianity is Jewish in important ways, Christians should not ignore their contributions to the historical and political tragedies of Jews. Seventh, as a pentecostal, he tries to navigate both an evangelical and an ecumenical identity. While these relationships are not as strained as they once were, debates persist between "liberals" and "conservatives," between "progressives" and "orthodox." Eighth, and closely related, Yong feels drawn both to many of the particulars of pentecostalism and to those of the wider Christian tradition. He accepts the truth and value of baptism in the Holy Spirit, even while he realizes that the lack of such an experience has

[11]Amos Yong, *The Dialogical Spirit: Christian Reason and Theological Method for the Third Millennium* (Eugene: Cascade, 2014), 282.
[12]Yong, *The Dialogical Spirit*, 282-90.
[13]Amos Yong, *The Future of Evangelical Theology: Soundings from the Asian American Diaspora* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 180–85.

sometimes been misunderstood as an indication of deficient Christian identity. Ninth, he affirms egalitarian relationships between the sexes without forgetting that many Asian American Evangelical churches are complementarian. Tenth, he understands Christian identity to be between now and eternity. Christians live between the present world and the fullness of the kingdom of God. Yong sums up all of these autobiographical reflections by claiming that everyone has a hybrid identity in one way or another.[14]

By way of conclusion, Yong has recently tried his hand at introduction to theology texts, both of which exhibit his ongoing interest in dialogue.[15] The more recent of these, on at least one occasion, couches dialogue again in interreligious terms and with an added ecclesiological dimension. It is worth quoting in whole:

> The work of interreligious apologetics is to clarify convictions in relationship to those in other faiths and to defend them when under questioning. Where contextually appropriate, interreligious apologetics also mounts critical questions and dialogical counterquestions. The catholicity of the church remains an unfinished hope to the degree that the members of Christ's body do not develop appropriate skills to engage with people of other faith traditions in the public square. Such interactions can only be edifying…if conducted with theological skill and maturity.[16]

My brief look at a facet of the first twenty years of Yong's thought has necessarily been cursory. I hope, however, that it shows his sustained commitment to the inherently dialogical nature of high-quality Christian theology—indeed, an interest in dialogue spans his entire career up to this point. Perhaps my comments will also whet readers' appetites for an extensive reading of his impressive corpus. That is at least one way for the dialogue with Yong's theology to continue.

[14]Yong, *The Future of Evangelical Theology*, 238–49.
[15]Amos Yong and Jonathan A. Anderson, *Renewing Christian Theology: Systematics for a Global Christianity* (Waco: Baylor University Press), 2014; idem, *Learning Theology: Tracking the Spirit of Christian Faith* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2018).
[16]Yong, *Learning Theology*, 84.