

Yong, Amos. *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religion*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2003. ISBN # 0801026121

Amos Yong's *Beyond the Impasse: Toward an Pneumatological Theology of Religion* attempts to construct a new framework for Christian theologizing about other religions. Yong grew up in a Pentecostal denomination, raised in Malaysia and the United States, was educated in a Wesleyan-Holiness seminary and earned a doctorate at Boston University. His diversity of life experience and training equips him to offer a unique perspective regarding a Christian theology of religion. He considers himself an evangelical, but does not hold to an epistemological exclusivism with respect to soteriology. His dissertation was later published as a book by the title *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religion*. He has taught at Bethel College and Regent University's School of Divinity.

Yong hopes to spur dialogue concerning a theology of religions beyond conventional soteriological categories. He considers the exclusivists' concerns too narrow and weakly defensible. He feels that since religion is all encompassing with the scope of human life, so to must a theology of religions address more than after-death salvation. Accordingly, *Beyond the Impasse* suggests we move toward a more fully Trinitarian theology of religions. That is, instead of centering discussions on God the Father or Christology, might not the Holy Spirit be a better starting place for dialogue?

Theologically, Yong grounds his proposal on the omnipresent, divine nature of the Holy Spirit, who mediates the presence of God throughout history and the world. He briefly recounts the Spirit's work at creation, "re-creation", and "final creation" (Yong 2003, 36-42). What God has done in Christ is equally accomplished in the Spirit. This includes the existence of the world

religions. Yong assesses the traditional judgments of the world religions as overly harsh; instead, he judges that God has divinely purposed each of them. He responds to potential criticisms, such that his view minimizes the centrality of Christ. He asserts that by stressing the universal presence of the Spirit in the world, traditional Christocentric theologies gain some needed balance and their theologians should be humbled. Furthermore, he endorses a “pneumatological foundationalism” by which the Holy Spirit becomes the basis for interreligious dialogue and theological discourse. He cites 1 Cor. 2:11, “no one comprehends what is truly Gods except the Spirit of God” (73). In affirming the ability of non-Christians to experience the Spirit, Yong wants to compare those experiences with Christian experience “in order to render claims of such experiences universally comprehensible (at least potentially) and invite others toward deeper and more specifically experiences of the Spirit” (67-68). For Yong, it follows that a pneumatological theology of religions will be “a posteriori in nature, building on the empirical finds of our engagement with the world and the convergences that emerge out of the ongoing theological dialogue” (81).

Yong then moves to examine other proposed pneumatological approaches to the religions. In breaking from the soteriological question centering on the person of Jesus Christ, he notes that a pneumatological approach may open the way for understanding the potential for non-Christians to receive “the saving grace of God” (Yong 2003, 83-84). In general, he interacts with more liberal and non-evangelical writers, such as Paul Knitter and Georg Khodr. In the end, they conclude that the Holy Spirit’s can be seen in other religions and their scriptures. Yet, Yong finds that these writers inevitably return to Christological questions, thus seeming to make the Spirit secondary to Christ, a move Yong is uncomfortable with. Even those Protestants he does cite, like Clark Pinnock, agree in principle that the universal activity of the Spirit in other

religions makes salvation theoretically possible for non-Christians. Nevertheless, Yong laments the lack of criteria by which Christians can discern the Spirit's movements in the world.

Accordingly, Yong unpacks a view of discernment by noting that, in the Bible, "spiritual discernment" is a broad concept encompassing the whole of life necessitating the use of empirical data gathered by the senses. Given human finitude, the complexity of life, and the sovereignty of the Spirit, Yong rejects any formulaic notions that claim certainty about the Spirit's work. However, any attempt to discern the Spirit's presence in the world, especially in other religions, must seek such an objective path. His emphasis on experience is checked by a rhetorical question he poses to the reader, "Do not Christians have the Scriptures, and the normative life, death, and resurrection of Jesus through which to discern the presence and activity of God in the world?" (Yong 2003, 167). However, he does not articulate what a Biblical "hermeneutic of life" would look like in practice.

Throughout the book, the author clearly intends to spur interreligious dialogue. Therefore, he urges the reader to proceed with humility. He frequently reminds us of the dangers of subjectivity. He pleads for religious adherents to accurately depict and engage other faiths on their own terms. His project suggests that while religions must undoubtedly understand each other's differences, dialogue flourishes where commonalities can be recognized. In the end, Yong believes that a careful inquiry into the nature and practice of other religions will help to refine Christian theology "in such a way as to be able to speak the gospel effectively and meaningfully in a world context generally and in the context of the diversity of religions in particular" (Yong 2003, 191).

The aforementioned aim of Yong's proposal, of furthering the gospel, raises a number of questions and concerns. Foremost is the absence of any discussion or clarifying remarks as to

what Yong means by the “gospel”. Any debate over a *Christian* theology of religions must take account of and make explicit what Paul calls “of first importance” (1 Cor 15:3, ESV). Indeed, preaching the gospel is often depicted as the central ministry of Jesus’ earthly life. Therefore, soteriological and Christological issues cannot be so quickly laid aside in the name of constructing a more Trinitarian theology of religions. While he is correct to point out that different religions have vastly different views of salvation and that we should understand other religions on their own terms, Yong and others must keep in mind that the goal presumably is to construct a *Christian* theology of religions. Therefore, clarifications must be made as to the limits of such dialogue and specifically what can be compromises and what is essential to being “Christian”.

Yong’s exegesis is sloppy at best, at times even irresponsible and negligent. In one instance, he cites Hebrews 1:1 to argue that God speaks through other religions; yet, the verse itself speaks of God’s communication to the prophets, contextually pointing to those of ancient Israel (cp. Heb 11:32). From this starting place, Yong deduces that inherent truthfulness inherent of other religions, specifically “the universality of divine revelation and salvation history” (Yong 2003, 102). In addition, he builds upon Stanley Samartha’s argument from silence, in which he states that the Scriptures “do not necessarily deny [the Spirit’s] work in the secular world” (93). From this, Yong adds, “As such, to deny that the Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of others in and through their faith traditions is to run contrary to the assertions of Scripture itself regarding both the wedding of the spiritual and material dimensions of reality in creation and the divine drawing of all persons to salvation” (93-94). Here we confront many problems. First, he moves from Scripture’s *silence* to claim authority from “the assertions of Scripture itself”. Second, he subtly shifts the topic, from talking about the Spirit’s activity in the world to an ontological

discussion of the unity between spirit and the material world. Third, on top of this misdirection he appends the notion of God's drawing all persons to salvation. The reader is thus led to conclude that the Spirit's universal presence affirms the salvific warrant of other religions. This is exactly what he seems to imply when recounting Pinnock's argument: "Because the religions exist within the scope of God's providence, they are therefore an expression of the presence and activity of divine grace" (109). This is a blatant non sequitur. Evil in the world is certainly within the bounds of God's providence, but we would not assert that salvation is to be lumped in with any evil, death, Satan, and demons in the same way as evidences of "divine grace". Such logical disorientation unfortunately clouds how he reads a text fundamental to his propose, 1 Corinthians 2:11, "no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God" (ESV). From this verse he surmises, "If the things of God are discerned only spiritually through the charismatic endowment of the Spirit's presence and activity (cf. 1 Cor 2:9-16), then all authentic theological engagement that occurs in the interreligious dialogue is pneumatologically infused" (73). He presumes that "genuine spiritual and theological engagement is inevitably a gracious gift of the Spirit of God" (73). Could it be that much of what we call dialogue does *not* reveal the thoughts of God? He leaves no room for interreligious conversation filled with error rather than truth.

A consistent problem with his analysis is his confusing institutional Christianity or Christendom with authentic, Biblical Christianity. He writes, "the Spirit cannot be limited to the institutional forms of the church, and in that sense the Spirit "blows where it chooses" (John 3:8). If that is the case, why would the Spirit blow 'outside' the church but not at all the religions" (Yong 2003, 21-22)? Ironically, uses Acts 4:17; 10; and 19:1-7 to affirm "the Spirit's activity outside the boundaries of the institutional ecclesia" (95). Later, he adds, "There is as much human frailty and demonic activity 'within' Christianity as there is 'without'" (48). He describes

the “tradition missionary objective” as the “conversion to Christendom” (89). Yong has falsely collapsed the categories of “Christendom”, “institution” and “Christian”. The merely nominal church should not be confused with Christ’s true church. The case is similar to many of the Jews who opposed Jesus or Paul. Simply having a name did not necessarily make them one of God’s people (or “Christian” to speak anachronistically). Therefore, it proves nothing that the Spirit works outside the confines of the bureaucratic church, since many inside the visible “church” may not be Christian at all.

His efforts due bear some fruit for the sake of missions. He alerts us to the influence of world religions and cultures on Christian theology as Christianity expands globally. Exclusivists may reject interreligious dialogue on the grounds that non-Christians are “blinded” to the “glory of the gospel of Christ” (2 Cor 4:3, ESV); yet, Yong’s point cannot be ignored. New converts to Christianity around the world will import any number of categories of thinking, habits, and worldviews. His warnings against subjectivity and western imperialism must be taken seriously lest westerners pass along more western culture than Biblical theology. It is in this light that Yong writes, “to the extent the non-Western world is religiously infused with Hindu, Taoist, Confucian, Buddhist, and other traditions of belief and practice, the gospel will itself be read and reread through those lenses. If we naively push ahead with our efforts to contextualize the gospel in the non-Western world as if these non-Western religious ways are not deeply embedded in the languages and socio-cultural practices of these peoples, should we be surprised if Christianity is rejected in the long run?” (Yong 2003, 189). Yong warns against the presumption that “ours” is a pure “Christian theology” untainted by history, personal bias, and cultural limitations.

*Beyond the Impasse* is a valuable example of how many people are attempting to construct a theology of religions. For a conservative evangelical, the book shows how subtle

mistakes are made when careful exegesis is neglected and definitions are not made explicit. Yong should be commended for his attempt to formulate a more holistic Trinitarian theology. Yet, his work demonstrates the danger of going beyond the text and “bracketing” off the soteriological question when consider a theology of religions (Yong 2003, 29). Overlooked in this book is an explicit elucidation of the Spirit’s relationship to general revelation. In addition, Yong’s pneumatological approach wishes to remain inclusivistic while [theoretically] separating Christology from the Spirit. Yet, all such proposals must explain how it is that the “Spirit of Truth” will glorify Jesus (as he promised in John 16:14) even if other religions may never hear his name. In the end, a distinctly “Christian” theology of religions may not find enough common ground with other religions to move “beyond the impasse”.