

# **A Pneumatological Theology of Religion: Amos Yong's Approach**

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## **Abstract**

In our religiously and culturally pluralistic “global village,” Christians cannot bear witness to the gospel without engaging religious others missionally. Conventional models of the theology of religions—inclusivism, exclusivism, and pluralism—perpetuate the euro-centric hegemonic discourse on “civilizing mission” and fail to engage religious others on their own terms. Amos Yong, therefore, has proposed a Pneumatological theology of religions, which values the religious otherness of non-Christian traditions. His proposal includes a wide range of Christian practices in order to engage with religious others in the three domains of orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy.

**Key Words:** inclusivism, mission, orthopathy, pluralism, Pneumatology, theology of religions

## **Introduction**

Against the predictions of proponents of the “secularization thesis,” today we are living in a deeply religious world. While globalization is a worldwide phenomenon, changes in the “Western” immigration laws over the past half century have brought religious traditions and cultural practices from around the world to the West. Such accelerated immigration has radically altered the landscape of cities and towns with a mushrooming of mosques, temples, and exotic restaurants. Thus Christians, not only in the Global South but also in Europe and North America, live amid cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity. Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and others are our neighbors, colleagues, and fellow citizens. The merging of cultures and meeting of religions are unavoidable, and ignoring religious others is no longer an option in our “global village.” Christians cannot bear witness to the Gospel without engaging religious others missionally and formulating a relevant theology of religion.

Theology of religion is an emerging field of study, and it has established its place in the core curriculum of most theological seminaries and universities in the West. However, a theology of religion developed in a Western context, emerging from the familiar exclusivist-inclusivist-pluralist paradigm, is inadequate for today’s religiously pluralistic settings. How do we think theologically about the meaning and value of other religions worldwide? (Karkkainen 2003, 20). How can we take the particularities of each religious tradition—for example, hundreds and thousands of Islamic traditions practiced by 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide—and engage with them meaningfully and creatively? Amos Yong has made significant contributions in this regard by proposing a Pneumatological theology of religions, which values the religious otherness of non-Christian traditions. His proposal includes a wide range of Christian practices in order to engage with religious others in the three domains of orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy. This article explores the main contours of Yong’s Pneumatological theology of religion.

## **Amos Yong’s Pneumatological Approaches to Religion**

Amos Yong is one of the highly influential and eminent evangelical theologians and a leading scholar in the field of Pentecostal theology of religions. He was born in Malaysia and, at the age of ten, immigrated to the US with his parents, who were first-generation converts from Buddhism

to Christianity. Yong's migration experience and his family's Taoist-Confucian-Buddhist culture and heritage equipped him to articulate an engaging Christian theology of the interreligious encounter. He is a systematic theologian and a missiologist dealing with themes such as global Pentecostalism, Asian-American evangelical theology, theology of mission, theology of disability, political theology, and theologies of Christian-Buddhist dialogue. Currently he is the Dean of the School of Mission and Theology, and Professor of Theology and Mission, at Fuller Theological Seminary. He is a prolific writer and has authored or edited over five dozen acclaimed books, over 200 articles, book chapters, and essays in a wide array of journals, over 500 book reviews, and made around 400 academic presentations. His scholarship has been foundational in the development of Pentecostal theology (Yong 2002a; 2019). William Oliverio has commented that there is "no more influential Pentecostal theologian in the academic world today than Amos Yong" (Oliverio Jr. 2020, 4).

### **Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism Paradigm**

In 1982, Alan Race classified the Christian approaches toward other religions under the exclusivist-inclusivism-pluralist paradigm (Race 1982). All these Christian responses to many and diverse religious faiths debate the question of the salvation of non-Christians. Though exclusivists and inclusivists argue that salvation is only through Christ, the former hold that there is no salvation outside the church and Christianity. Exclusivists generally believe that a verbal declaration of faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation. In contrast, inclusivists believe God's salvific plan is open to all humanity, irrespective of their religious persuasions. However, they affirm that it is (unwittingly) through Christ that, ultimately, non-Christians are saved. Pluralists maintain that all religions are essentially salvific; therefore, Christ is just one of the many ways for salvation. They make no distinction, in terms of salvific efficacy, between various religious traditions of the world and have considered them complementary to each other. Pluralists like John Hick have argued that "all religions should give up their distinctive features and acknowledge the existence of one single reality behind all phenomenological, doctrinal and conceptual differences" (Karkkainen, 354). However, we cannot ignore the ambiguity and overlap between these mutually informing broad categories of theologies of religion.

In the twenty-first century, in a religiously and culturally pluralist world, Christians cannot understand the meaning of the gospel or engage in God's mission in isolation. Terry Muck, therefore, has argued that, in order to contextualize the gospel, we should enter fully into the religious and cultural world of other people, "doing religious thinking alongside them, using their terms, asking their questions, using methods common to their way of thinking religiously" (Muck 2007, 20). J Dudley Woodberry, who was the former professor of Islamic Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, has echoed the same feeling in arguing that "any meaningful dialogue with Muslims needs to start by walking with them, listening to them, and asking them questions" (Woodberry 1989, xiii). That is, it is impossible to develop a relevant theology of religion without engaging people of other faiths on their own terms. However, it is significant to note here that familiar existing conceptual categories—namely exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism—consider soteriology as the exclusive theological framework to understand Christian responsibility towards religious others. That framework requires us neither to take into account the particularities and religious "otherness" of non-Christian traditions nor to engage with them from their own self-understanding. Amos Yong, therefore, in his seminal work *Beyond the Impasse: Towards a Pneumatological Theology of Religion*, claims that the three-fold domains of exclusivism,

inclusivism, and pluralism created an impasse (Yong 2003, 20-22). These approaches restricted Christians' dialogical, orthopraxial, and orthopathic engagement with religious others.

### **Pneumatological Theology of Religion**

In order to move past the *cul-de-sac* and boundaries created by conventional Christological and salvific approaches and engage with religious others positively, Yong critically analyzed the familiar frameworks (Yong 2007, 13ff). Since pluralists reject the particularity of Christ and focus on the more general level of God or "ultimate reality," Yong rejected pluralism as a viable Christian approach (Yong and Richie 2010, 252). He was equally uncomfortable with narrow exclusivism that restricts Christ and the Spirit to the church and its members (Yong and Richie 2010, 256). Moreover, Yong recognized that both exclusivist and pluralist positions do not engage religious others in their otherness while developing their theologies of religion (Yong 2020b, 184). Yong, therefore, chose the moderating position of "inclusivism" as a compelling framework to develop his theology of religion, recognizing its ability to accommodate Christological and Pneumatological considerations (Yong 2003, 27). At the same time, he cautioned about the limit of a Christological starting point as a relevant theological framework for engaging religious others (Karkkainen 2003, 278). While centering on the particularity of Jesus Christ is important for bearing appropriate Christian witness in our dialogue with people of other faiths, Yong argued that prioritizing the work of the Holy Spirit is particularly important today when Christians need also to hear the testimony of those in other faiths on their own terms. Pneumatology enlarges a theology of religion's framework and provides the best relational framework to engage with people of other faiths (Yong 2003, 21). Hence Yong was instrumental in initiating a paradigmatic shift in the field of theology of religion by approaching religious others within a Pneumatological rather than a Christological framework.

Yong's case is built on three axioms: (1) "God is universally present and active in the Spirit" (Yong 2001, 44). (2) "God's Spirit is the life-breath of the *imago Dei* in every human being and the presupposition of all human relationships and communities" (Yong 2001, 47). (3) "The religions of the world, like everything else that exists, are providentially sustained by the Spirit of God for divine purposes" (Yong 2001, 47-48). The universal presence of God through the Holy Spirit is the foundational principle for Yong's Pneumatological approach to other religions. The Spirit blows where it wills, inside as well as outside the boundaries of institutional forms of church and Christian traditions (Jn 3:8). If the Spirit, which symbolizes the divine agency in the world, is active in the socio-economic and political domain of human societies, Yong wondered how we might discern the Spirit's activity in different cultural and religious contexts.

### **The Trinitarian Framework of Pneumatological Theology of Religion**

In order to open up lines of dialogue and engagement with people of other faiths, Yong recommended that, rather than starting with Christological questions, Christians prioritize the universal work of the Spirit, especially the Spirit's sustaining of the many languages of the peoples of this world. It helped Yong "to speak of the presence of the Spirit in the world in wider terms than the strictly Christological" (Karkkainen 2003, 279-280). However, Yong's proposal to bracket Christological categories or postpone Christological questions in order to lift up the distinct economy of the Holy Spirit admittedly fueled the fear that he did not take Christology seriously. Critics also charged him with sacrificing Christology for the sake of Pneumatology or divorcing Pneumatology from Christology (Merrick 2008, 107-125). Karkkainen dismissed such objections by arguing that "Yong is too good a theologian to undermine the role of Christology in any

Christian theology of religions” (Karkkainen 2003, 278). In the same vein, Tony Richie opined that Yong desires to give “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 achieve richer results” (Richie 2013, 112).

Yong’s turn to Pneumatology needs to be interpreted as his commitment to formulate a fully trinitarian theology of religion. (It is significant to note here that the three-fold Christological approaches to other religions displace or downplay the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. Therefore, they are strictly not trinitarian in their orientation). Yong’s move is not a rejection or dismissal of Christology but rather a mere postponing of Christological questions in order to foreground the Spirit’s work. Karkkainen notes, “Yong envisions a trinitarian theology in which there is a mutual relationship between the economy of the Son and the Spirit” (Karkkainen 2003, 279-280). In *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, Yong articulates a Spirit-Christology avoiding subordination or displacement of either Son or Spirit (Yong 2005, 81-120). Yong, therefore, does not separate Pneumatology from Christology because these two categories are not “competitive but complementary” for him (Richie 2013, 113). Yong advocates the “essential interdependence of Jesus of Nazareth and the Spirit” (Yong 2003, 135). By doing so, he has revived the patristic metaphor of Irenaeus, the second-century Church father, that the Logos (Word) and Pneuma (Spirit) are “two hands of the Father” (Yong 2003, 43). Thus, in Yong’s understanding, “pneumatology can never be loosed from Christology since the World and Spirit are ‘related dimensions of being’” (Karkkainen 2003, 280).

### **Significance of the Day of Pentecost Event**

The Day of Pentecost narrative recorded in Acts 2 gives Yong insights to expand his Pneumatological theology of religion, especially on how to honor and respect the particularities of other faiths. Luke recorded that, after Jesus’ Ascension, the Spirit of God was poured on 120 of Jesus’s disciples who were gathered in Jerusalem. The Spirit gave them the ability to speak in different languages and reconstituted them as “new” people of God (Yong 2003, 38). At that time, diasporic Jews from 15 regions of the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe had gathered in Jerusalem for the Pentecost Feast Day. (Yong argues that Luke’s list is not an exhaustive one. It is more or less suggestive rather than definite. It is a shortened version of the Old Testament “table of nations” (Gen 10; I Chron 1).) It is significant to note there that Jews were living in far-flung regions of the world—India, Afghanistan, Armenia, Germany, Spain. Yong 2019, 173). They were astounded that “we hear, each of us, in our own native language” (Acts 2:8). After studying the Acts 2 narrative, Yong noted that many tongues spoken in various regions of the ancient Mediterranean world were brought together on the Day of Pentecost. However, the “outpouring of the Spirit did not cancel out but rather enabled an eruption of a diversity of tongues.... each witnessing in its own way to God’s deeds of power” (Yong and Richie 2010, 258).

Yong further reflected on the meaning and significance of tongues or languages. Languages, as well as religious beliefs and practices, are part and parcel of culture. Various components of culture—history, politics, economics, religion—cannot be separated from their constituent elements. These elements mutually shape each other and together constitute what we call culture. So, for Yong, “many tongues” recorded in Acts 2 signifies many cultures—with all of their constituent elements, including religious beliefs and practices of the ancient Mediterranean world. These cultures, with their religious traditions, declared God’s goodness and beauty. In other words,

“many tongues intimated the possibility that other faiths bear witness to ‘God’s deeds of power’” (Act 2:11b) (Yong 2020b, 184). Here, it is significant to note that Yong is not endorsing that various languages, cultures, and religions in the world are whole conduits of God’s saving grace. Rather, all cultures and religions can reveal to us various grades of God’s love and beauty. Yong, therefore, advises us to discern the presence and activity of the Spirit in every cultural and religious tradition. The discernment is to identify as well as endorse those cultural and religious beliefs and practices that serve righteousness, peace, and truth—characteristic values of the Kingdom of God. Those traditions and practices that challenge the signs of the coming Kingdom need to be rejected (Yong 2018, 243-255).

Yong, therefore, argues that we need to retain the otherness of non-Christian traditions and engage them impartially and sympathetically, as they can teach us about God’s deeds (Yong and Richie 2010, 252-257). However, Christians will not be able to learn from other religions if they construct other religions exclusively after the pattern of Christianity. In the same vein, Lesslie Newbigin advised us to approach each religion “on its own terms and along the lines of its own central axis” (Newbigin 1977a, 252-270). We should not lose track of the fact that each religious tradition is unique and a complete unit in itself with scripture, doctrines, practices, institutions, and traditions. Every religious tradition orients its followers to perceive the world, the ultimate reality, and society from a particular perspective. Therefore, searching for a common core underlying all religions is meaningless (Hedges 2010, 28). Hence to understand the dynamic nature of each religious tradition, Christians should not approach it from a Christian perspective but rather study it on its own terms, considering the perspective of those who practice it. Yong opined that “The goal is to allow the tongues (testimonies) of other religious people to be heard first on their own ‘insider’s’ terms (just as we clamor to be heard on our terms)” (Yong and Richie 2010, 259). Imposing a Christian interpretive framework on other religious traditions would eliminate such serious encounters with other traditions.

### **“Ortho”-triad: Orthodoxy, Orthopraxy, and Orthopathy**

According to Yong, the diversity of tongues spoken on the Day of Pentecost invigorated a wide range of Christian practices to engage the religious others (Yong and Richie 2010, 260-263). He, therefore, argues that Christians must engage religious others at three levels of an “ortho”-triad: orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy. At the level of orthodoxy, Christians engage the religious others in interreligious dialogue in order to compare religious teachings and doctrines. Though engaging others at this discursive level is often quite “successful,” often such engagement is the result of Christians’ passion for articulating and defending the truth of Christian orthodoxy. The orthopraxic domain invites engagement with people of many and diverse faiths at the practical level. It includes “biblically and theologically responsible practices, actions, and behaviors, ranging from the various ritual we perform (e.g., baptism, the Lord’s Supper) to the values we live out in the realm of social ethics (justice, mercy, prudence, etc.)” (Morehead and Benziger 2020, 5). At this level, Christians are invited to think about issues of the common good and envision and act together to create a just and equal society for all. However, the third component of the “ortho”-triad, orthopathy, involves engaging with religious others on the affective level. It is engaging others at the heart level “in a much kinder, humbler, and more loving, empathetic manner” (Morehead and Benziger 2020, 7). This level of engagement takes the moral significance of human passions, affections, emotions, and desires seriously (Morehead and Benziger 2020, 6). Therefore, out of the three levels, it is the deepest level of inter-faith engagement.

It is possible to understand Yong's orthopraxic and orthopathic domains of inter-religious encounters as his critique of the modern tendency to privilege the mind over the body in European epistemology and the modern construction of the category of religions (Coulter and Yong 2016). These ideas can be traced back to the writings of Rene Descartes, who is known for his famous dictum, "I think, therefore, I am." Descartes distinguished between body and mind and considered humans primarily as thinking beings. "I think" is the most important part of his slogan. Thinking, an activity of the mind, became prominent in modern Western intellectual traditions. Consequently, the domain of religious rituals and practices, which is the activity of the human body, has been downplayed. In his famous book, *Sources of the Self: Making of the Modern Identity*, Charles Taylor reflected on this issue (Taylor 1989). He described the tendency to privilege the mind in modern thinking as intellectualism or an intellectual view of the human being. Taylor used the term "excarnation" to describe this phenomenon of disembodiment of life in general and religion in particular. With excarnation, in the modern period religion came to be understood apart from the human body and affectivity. The idea of excarnation not only shaped modern notions of religion but also Western Christian engagement with people of other faiths. As a result, from being a set of beliefs and bodily practices attached to specific processes of power and knowledge, religion has been understood as an abstract and universal phenomenon originating from a rational individual in the modern period. Wilfred Cantwell Smith coined the phrase "reification of religion" to denote this phenomenon (Smith 1962). From being a set of practices, religion came to be understood as a set of doctrines and beliefs. Thus, in religious studies, learning theology and scriptures have been privileged over the study of rituals. Equally, Christian engagement with religious others was reduced to the domain of orthodoxy.

The biblical practice of hospitality is a key theme in Yong's writings. Accordingly, hospitality is an integral dimension of interreligious encounters and dialogue, which can be practiced in all three domains of orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy. Christians are known for practicing hospitality at the ideational level to defend Christianity's truth and invite others to convert. Very little honest dialogue and mutually edifying conversation with persons of other faith are assumed in such interreligious encounters. As Newbigin has noted, we often encounter religious others with the attitude that we have "nothing to lose but everything to give" (Newbigin 1977b, 19). In the same vein, John Thatamanil highlights Gandhi's encounter with English missionaries in India. Gandhi invited them to reciprocate their social Gospel by learning with an open heart as well as in humility what India can teach them (Thatamanil 2020, 193). For Yong, genuine hospitality is an invitation to open up ourselves to the ideas and teachings of religious others. "Those in other faiths have beliefs and practices that can challenge or enrich—sometimes both—our way of thinking and living." (Yong 2020b, 185). Hospitality assumes a humble posture to understand the world from others' perspectives and a commitment to be persuaded by others' ideas. So genuine dialogue is not risk-free: "The goal of dialogue is not to establish an agreement or to ignore the differences" (Richie 2013, 115). Rather, it leads to self-criticism and self-discovery, which produces "authentic transformation in both parties" (Yong 2003, 182 and 2020b, 185).

### **Orthopathic Engagement with Religious Others**

In a recent lecture, Yong elaborated on his ideas about the orthopathic level of hospitality (Yong 2022). For him, it is the deepest level of interfaith engagement because Christians are open to the feeling of religious others. It is more profound than being open to the ideas and teachings of religious others and the willingness to work with them on issues of common interest. Yong argued that human beings are motivated and driven by the affective dimensions of our bodies. People are

driven affectively more so than discursively or intellectually. Even though the pathic dimensions of human beings are subterranean, they powerfully impact people's engagement with others and the world. Only a part of what people are feeling ever gets to the level of cognition and intellectual articulation or formulation. Thus discursive articulations of beliefs, which have been elevated highly in modern Western Christianity, are of second order. Furthermore, engaging religious others in dialoguing about doctrines and teachings take place only at a minimalist level. Engaging religious others at the orthopathic level can be more profoundly meaningful and effective than interacting with them at the ideational level.

According to Yong, mission in a culturally and religiously pluralistic world requires a wide range of Christian practices. Evangelism, witnessing, hospitality, interfaith dialogue, social activism, and organized debates are notable practices conducive to living missiologically among people of other faiths. Yong suggests the possibility of upholding various practices promoted by traditional theologies of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism: the pluralist emphasis on social justice, the inclusivist insistence on recognizing the possibility of divine revelation and activity among the unevangelized, and the exclusivist commitment to the authentic proclamation of the gospel and its redemptive power. Young warns that "pneumatological theology of religion does not and must not downplay the importance of evangelization" (Yong and Richie 2010, 251). Evangelism needs to be carried out along with interfaith dialogue, and the need for dialogue should not trump the necessities of evangelism and vice versa. However, he also warns, evangelism should not be done out of a superiority complex or contempt for other cultures and religious traditions.

## Conclusion

In the wake of post-colonial studies, the euro-centric understanding of the Christian mission, tainted with economic and cultural imperialism of Europe, has been under heavy criticism for the last few decades. It was known for its reluctance to discern the activity of the Spirit in non-European cultures and traditions which, therefore, were approached as the domain of evil and darkness. Conventional models of the theology of religions—inclusivism, exclusivism, and pluralism—perpetuated the euro-centric hegemonic discourse on "civilizing mission" and failed to engage religious others on their own terms. In order to move past the boundaries created by these models and to creatively engage people of other faiths, Amos Yong has developed a theology of religion based on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. He argues that the Spirit, which symbolizes the divine presence and agency in the world, cannot be confined to institutional forms of the Church or European Christianity. If the Spirit is an active participant in all dimensions of human life, Christians need to open up lines of dialogue and engagement with people of other faiths. Yong's Pneumatological theology of religion values the religious otherness of non-Christian traditions. It pays attention to the dynamic nature of other religions and people's agency in interpreting scriptures and traditions to command good and prohibit evil. His proposal includes a variety of Christian practices to engage with religious others in the three domains of orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy.

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