Intercultural Theology: A Pentecostal Apologia

AMOS YONG

Fuller Theological Seminary

Even at the end of the previous century (which is only a decade and a half plus ago, as of the time of this writing), the theological task in the Western academy had long been divided into four normative disciplines: biblical, historical, dogmatics, and practical. Mission studies may have been included within the practical domain, but, even if it was, that meant that the areas of Western and non-Western interfaces such interreligious dialogue, interfaith encounter, and intercultural theology were located in this area, rather than having any normative implications for theology, properly so-called or understood. Part of the result was that scholars were supposed to do their biblical scholarship first, biblical exegesis, for instance, before applying the results of their efforts to non-Western contexts and cultures. Similarly, one wrote the history of the Western church first and then added mission historical asides regarding outreach beyond the Western world, or one did dogmatic theology before turning to identifying contextual relevance of the historical tradition in majority world contexts (see Yong 2009).

Perhaps that is one reason why modern Pentecostalism did not, until very recently, develop an academic theological platform. It did not divide theological work in this way, did not separate theology and mission in this classical manner, and was always constituted by subaltern voices and perspectives (see Hollenweger 1997). One could suggest that there was a form of inter- and trans-culturality at the heart of the modern Pentecostal movement that did not allow it to engage the theological tradition in its academic (Westernized) forms. I might also add that such theologically interculturality is fundamentally Pentecostal, not necessarily in the sense embraced or understood as such by the modern Pentecostal movement but as manifest in the Day of Pentecost narrative in the second chapter of the canonical book of Acts.

The Lukan author of this ancient text records that the original group of those baptized by the Spirit derived “from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5), and that when the Spirit descended, “each one heard them speaking in the native language of each” (Acts 2:6) so that the crowd reported in amazement, astonishment, and perplexity (Acts 2:7a, 12a): “in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power” (Acts 2:11). Such an account invites understanding the primordial Pentecostal reality as intercultural. This means that at the heart of the church is an intercultural

movement of the Spirit desiring to redeem the many languages and cultures of human history for divine purposes (see Yong 2005, Chapter 4). This is neither to say that all cultural realities are equal nor is it to impose a Christian interpretive frame on other cultural understandings. Pentecostal interculturality suggests only that the many languages and cultures of the world are potentially conduits of the Spirit's redemptive work even as such a Christian perspective invites attentiveness to these cultural "witnesses" to hear them first and foremost on their own accord rather than being presumptive about their claims. Pentecostal interculturality thereby rejects any theological imperialism that reduces other cultural-linguistic discourses to Christian terms.

From this vantage point, all theology is intercultural so that the theological disciplines themselves ought to be reconstituted in this intercultural key. Historical-critical biblical scholarship, for instance, is one approach shaped by the Western context and Enlightenment presuppositions, even as other cultural methods ought also to be enacted in order to bridge the two horizons of scripture and contemporary readers or interpreters. Christian history, in this vein, includes mission history from the beginning so that each development can be understood in cross-cultural or intercultural terms. The dogmatic tradition, meanwhile, can be received as a series of intercultural articulations of Christian faith seeking understanding, each valid in its socio-historical context and with implications and limitations when applied elsewhere. The point is that the theological task should be reconceptualized as intercultural from the ground up.

If all theology is intercultural, then no theology is intercultural, right? Well perhaps, but in the contemporary milieu, the former ought to be accentuated so that such a truism is not lost sight of. Perhaps in a few generations, the interculturality of all theological discourse will be presumed and in that case, such a claim could be dispensed with. For now, however, we would be well advised to proceed with attentiveness to this intercultural dimension. What would be the outcomes for such intercultural theological inquiry?

First, intercultural theology helps us to understand ourselves and others as culturally constituted creatures. The many tongues of Pentecost invite first consideration of the voices of others. Thus intercultural theology prioritizes the witness of other aliens and strangers. The intercultural moment thereby insists that we heed such dissonance in their own tongues and languages. This may, or not, lead to more effective mission and evangelization of the other (Yong 2008).

Second, however, intercultural theology helps us to understand “God’s deeds of power” afresh. The witnesses of others somehow, sometimes obliquely but other times more directly, testify to the divine. We come to comprehend the deity better, despite the incoherence of the other voices. So, on the one hand, the intercultural encounter could facilitate Christian mission and evangelistic proclamation; on the other hand, the intercultural exchange could transform Christian faith and self-understanding. Intercultural theology is thus both missional and theological—together—even if retaining their distinctive moments.

How does the intercultural encounter generate such transformative knowing of other and of self? By virtue of the cultural mediations involved. I explicate the aesthetic, philosophical, and religious media. These are in some respects interrelated, yet we can discuss them separately as well. Each can be seen to represent Pentecostal polyphony and plurivocity.

The cultural realm includes the literary, musical, performative, and visual arts, each of which is carried by distinct capacities correlating with a range of human intelligences, aptitudes, and dispositions. Yet because the Spirit is poured out “upon all flesh” (Acts 2:17b), the aesthetic and the carnal are interrelated. Cultural creativity and artistic imagination is embodied and affective. There is a kinesthetic and tactile dimension to the cultural arts, burgeoning it would seem from deep within the human gut, manifest in the creative works of arms, hands, and bodies (Felix-Jäger 2015).

The arts, understood as cultural carriers, express the many tongues of the Spirit through their distinctive contributions of cultural histories, traditions, and reasons. Intercultural theology therefore will have to tune in to these artistic sites. While there will be various emphases among aesthetic cultures, comparative analyses can be done across each of these registers since no culture is completely bereft of any of these modalities. Intercultural theology therefore is always and already comparative and contrastive, listening to, viewing, reading, or observing the aesthetic witness of others.

Beside—although not exclusive of—the artistic and the aesthetic, the cultural sphere also includes the various philosophical traditions. While philosophical and religious traditions are often intertwined (e.g., Confucianism, Daoism), we can take philosophical traditions on their own terms rather than as religiously interwoven. In that case, intercultural theology would involve Eastern philosophical traditions now global in character and expansiveness (Yong 2014b; see Neville 2000). Intercultural

theological undertakings would thus have to be inter-philosophical, looking at also intra- and trans-cultural dialogues on the nature of things (ontology), of knowing (epistemology), and of morality (ethics), etc. It was already obvious in the pages of the New Testament that the earlier Messianists had to reckon with “all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22) as well as with the implications for theology of the Roman imperial ideology (Walls 2002, Chapter 4). Intercultural theology proceeding self-aware can no longer remain oblivious to the world’s philosophical or wisdom traditions.

Last but not least, the cultural arena includes the religious traditions of the world, both major and indigenous (or local). Here we can simply add that, when considering the Eastern traditions, our considerations of their philosophical discourses bleed into the interreligious domain: the Buddha, Confucius, Lao-Tze, Shankara, et al., are *both* philosophical *and* religious interlocutors, each with something to teach us. Yet we have also to take into account that these *world religious traditions* never exist in the abstract but are always inculturated among and within various indigenous forms of life, each with their own religious sensibilities. Hence, intercultural theology operating along the religious register has to be mindful of the complexity of the category, that it includes not only official teachings but, more importantly, ritual practices, devotional life, pietistic attitudes, communal expressions, and other spiritually weighty elements. Sure, intercultural theology can proceed by abstracting one of these from the other features, engaging in comparative philosophical theology for instance, and neglecting the other dimensions. Any theological project, intercultural included, will be self-limited and constrained in various respects. Yet the ongoing theological task requires that these neglected domains eventually be factored into the conversation. Intercultural theology will have to move inevitably into engaging with indigenous traditions and their appropriations of world religious forms (Yong 2012a; Yong 2012b).

My proposal is that a Pentecostal approach to theology, normed by the Day of Pentecost narrative (rather than by modern Pentecostal theological developments) invites an intercultural stance. The many tongues unleashed by the Pentecostal Spirit empowers many aesthetic, philosophical, and religious testimonies of which witnesses demand intercultural discernment. The results will be further comprehension of others, appropriate missional interactions with them, and, arguably most importantly, deeper self-understanding in relationship to the wondrous works of God in the world (Yong 2014a; Yong 2014c).

References

- Felix-Jäger, Steven. 2015. *Pentecostal Aesthetics: Theological Reflections in a Pentecostal Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics*. Leiden: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004291621>
- Hollenweger, Walter J. 1997. *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.
- Neville, Robert Cummings. 2000. *Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in the Late-Modern World*. Albany, NY: State University of New York.
- Walls, Andrew F. 2002. *The Cross-cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- Yong, Amos. 2005. *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.
- . 2008. *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- . 2009. “Restoring, Reforming, Renewing: Accompaniments to *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*.” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 33(2): 179–183.
- . 2012a. *The Cosmic Breath: Spirit and Nature in the Christianity-Buddhism-Science Trialogue*. Leiden: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004230491>
- . 2012b. *Pneumatology and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue: Does the Spirit Blow through the Middle Way?* Leiden: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004231245>
- . 2014a. *The Dialogical Spirit: Christian Reason and Theological Method for the Third Millennium*. Eugene, OR: Cascade.
- . 2014b. *The Future of Evangelical Theology: Soundings from the Asian American Diaspora*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP.
- . 2014c. *The Missiological Spirit: Christian Mission Theology for the Third Millennium Global Context*. Eugene, OR: Cascade.

Amos Yong is Professor of Theology & Mission and Director of the Center for Missiological Research. Email: amosyong@fuller.edu