

PRINCIPLES FOR A CHARISMATIC APPROACH
TO OTHER FAITHS¹

Andy Lord

1. Introduction

For many, to be charismatic and have a positive approach to other faiths seems a contradiction in terms. There is a tendency to stress the Christian “no” to other faiths rather than to explore how we might also say “yes.”² And yet many Charismatics and Pentecostals in the world live in places of religious plurality and they have at their heart an openness to religious experience and a strong belief in the work of the Spirit of God. There is a tension that is built into the roots of Pentecostal-Charismatic identities that is only just beginning to be explored. As thinking in this area is at an early stage it is important to identify a framework of principles that might guide us. In this article I want to outline the key issues to be explored and, through a critical appreciation of the theology of religions proposed by the Pentecostal scholar Amos Yong, suggest such a framework that can form the basis of further work in this area.

Starting with the broad picture I want to suggest that Pentecostal-charismatic theology of mission follows a pattern shaped by understandings of Christ, the Spirit and the kingdom of God. The basis of mission is shaped by five Christological doctrines relating to justification, sanctification, healing, pre-millennial return, and baptism of the Holy Spirit.³ These come out of a conservative approach to the Bible and a

¹ Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Anglican Charismatic Theological Seminar, Nottingham, 2002, and the United College of the Ascension, Birmingham, 2003.

² Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “Identity and Plurality: A Pentecostal-Charismatic Perspective,” *International Review of Mission* XCI, no. 363 (2003), pp. 500-503.

³ Donald W. Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*, Studies in Evangelicalism, 5 (London: Scarecrow, 1987).

desire to bring Word and Spirit, exegesis and experience, together. The practical mission focus of this approach has been a desire to “try to get people saved” although there is now pressure to come up with a more holistic approach to mission.⁴ In mission it is the experience of the Spirit in specific personal “crisis points” that is important to the directing and effectiveness of mission. Mission is given an urgency by an expectation of an imminent return of Christ, with “signs and wonders” being a taste of this soon coming kingdom.⁵

In order to bring a consideration of other faiths into this outlook we need to broaden the understanding of Christology, pneumatology and/or eschatology. Much work has been done in Christian theology of religions in broadening our understanding of Christology. Yet this work has come to something of an “impasse” and new approaches are being sought to take the thinking forward. Amos Yong believes that although Christological questions are crucial, to jump in with these first smacks of “theological imperialism” and does not allow Christians to appreciate other religions on their own terms first.⁶ He proposes a broader understanding of pneumatology as a basis for approaching other faiths from a more shared basis. This requires that we think further about the relationship between the Holy Spirit and both creation and Jesus Christ.

2. The Holy Spirit and Creation

The way in which we understand the Holy Spirit dramatically affects our approach to mission and to other faiths. And yet, surprisingly, this is a subject not well addressed in the mission literature. Even the otherwise comprehensive studies of David Bosch, Andrew Kirk and Timothy Yates

⁴ L. Grant McClung, Jr., “‘Try to Get People Saved’: Revisiting the Paradigm of an Urgent Pentecostal Missiology,” in *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel*, eds. Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Peterson (Carlisle: Regnum Books, 1999), pp. 30-51.

⁵ For more details of this pattern of Pentecostal-Charismatic mission theology see Andrew M. Lord, “A Pattern of Pentecostal Mission Theology” (submitted for publication, 2002).

⁶ Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions*, JPTSup. 20 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 57-58.

notably lack a treatment of the Spirit.⁷ The key theological question we need to consider here is: In what way is the Holy Spirit involved in creation? This is linked to the key missiological question: Is there a common ground to the different religions? The way we answer these questions will determine our attitude to those of other faiths, as well as our approach to other issues such as contextualization.

Moltmann addresses the question of experience in his understanding of the Spirit as the *Spirit of Life*. He wants to extend our understanding of experience beyond the personal to embrace the whole world. Developing a notion of “immanent transcendence” he suggests that every experience “can possess a transcendent, inward side.”⁸ Moltmann sees this as “grounded theologically on an understanding of the Spirit of God as the power of creation and the wellspring of life.”⁹ In the “religious” dimension of experience there is an “intensity of the experience of God in faith.”¹⁰ A more cautious approach is taken by Colin Gunton in a recent article where he argues that “the Spirit is the agent by whom God enables things to become that which they are created to be.”¹¹ Interestingly, he suggests that in Patristic thought the “Spirit is the one who makes holy”; in Reformation thought the Spirit’s role is “in creating and maintaining faith”; and now we need to develop an understanding of the Spirit as related to creation. Gunton begins an exploration of this theme through the biblical passages of Genesis 1-2, Psalm 33 and 104, Ezekiel 37 and Romans 8. His understanding of the Spirit allows for the Spirit’s work in creation outside the church—whatever “enables the creature...to join praise of the Creator” is the work of the Spirit. Of course we need to deal with the Fall and the need for discernment, but the Spirit does somehow link with our common human experience. God’s aim is enable the whole creation “to be perfected to his praise and glory” by the Spirit.¹²

⁷ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991); Andrew J. Kirk, *What Is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: DLT, 1999); Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life* (London: SCM, 1992), p. 34.

⁹ Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, p. 35.

¹⁰ Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, p. 198.

¹¹ Colin Gunton, “The Spirit Moved over the Face of the Waters: The Holy Spirit and the Created Order,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 4:2 (2002), pp. 190-204 (202).

¹² Gunton, “The Spirit Moved,” p. 204.

This is in line with Kirsteen Kim's argument that we need to move from a consideration of the "Spirit of mission" to the "mission of the Spirit."¹³ In the former we relate the Holy Spirit to the mission of the church and consider how he enables, empowers and directs that mission. In Charismatic writing this is often done with reference to the Book of Acts and the example of Jesus' mission. However, this does subordinate the work of the Spirit to specific understandings of mission and this should not exhaust our understanding of the Spirit. We need to consider the mission of the Spirit more generally, and Kim sees this as also demanded by our postmodern context that demands an answer to the questions of *where* and *how* the Spirit is active in the religious experience of others.

Our approach so far presupposes particular answers to the key missiological questions posed by Andrew Kirk: "Is there a common religious essence?" and "Where do Christians start in approaching other faiths?"¹⁴ A focus on the work of the Spirit in creation assumes that there is a common religious essence and that we start our theology with experience. This is open to a number of critiques, perhaps notably from that of Barth who separated religion and revelation. From an Evangelical perspective, perhaps the greatest critique of the suggested approach is that it underplays the "darkness" that characterizes people without Christ (e.g., Eph 2:1-5; Rom 2:19). The approach here takes the wide biblical revelation seriously and faces the challenge to engage seriously and humbly with other faiths whilst avoiding simple answers. In this it is important to trace the work of the Spirit in the whole of creation (including the religious dimension) facing both the *presence* and the *absence* of the Spirit, and the presence of other spirits, as Yong suggests.¹⁵

An emphasis on the Spirit in mission, experienced widely, has good support in the recent Anglican missiological tradition, the classic text being John V. Taylor's *The Go-Between God*. For him, religious experience relates to particular "experiences of awakening and disclosure," annunciation experiences.¹⁶ In these we experience the Spirit who goes between us and God, or between us and each other, to draw us

¹³ Kirsteen Kim, "Post-Modern Mission: A Paradigm Shift in David Bosch's Theology of Mission," in *Mission: An Invitation to God's Future*, ed. Timothy Yates (Sheffield: Cliff College Publishing, 2000), pp. 99-08.

¹⁴ Kirk, *Mission*, pp. 118-22.

¹⁵ Yong, *Discerning*, pp. 234-35.

¹⁶ John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission* (London: SCM, 1972), p. 185.

together in a deeper way. Taylor sees “a religion as a people’s tradition of response to the reality the Holy Spirit has set before their eyes.”¹⁷ Here is a very universal understanding of the Spirit, and yet the character of the Spirit is defined for Taylor in terms of the cross: “We are citizens of a forgiven universe.”¹⁸

A similar theme is found in the writings of his successor at Church Mission Society, Simon Barrington-Ward, who sees a movement of the Spirit across the world, in all religions, “towards the person of the crucified and risen Christ, the personal God...the wounded Man in the heavens.”¹⁹ It is the experience of “yearning” that links people across the world drawing them to prayer “in the Spirit.” These approaches are usefully grounded in the detailed experience of Andrew Wingate with Muslims in Birmingham entitled *Encounter in the Spirit*.²⁰ However in all these approaches, we do see a certain rush for the Christological that may mean that the role of the Spirit is not fully appreciated. This anticipates the key question of our next section.

3. The Relationship between the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ

Clark Pinnock raises a key question: Since most of us allow for God’s working in the life of communities outside the church, why do we struggle to accept that God is “present and makes himself felt...in the religious dimension of cultural life?”²¹ Why do we seem to exclude the Spirit from the religious? I think the reason is that we worry about Christ not being proclaimed. Sometimes our concerns here stop us appreciating the work of God outside the Christian faith. The key question for us has to be: How are the ministries of the Holy Spirit and of Jesus Christ related? Are they identical? Are they completely independent? These are crucial questions.

Pinnock, working largely from the biblical material, talks of “a tension inherent in the Christian faith between universality and

¹⁷ Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, p. 182.

¹⁸ Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, p. 180.

¹⁹ Simon Barrington-Ward, *Love Will Out* (Basingstoke: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1988), pp. 15, 17.

²⁰ Andrew Wingate, *Encounter in the Spirit: Muslim-Christian Dialogue in Practice*, Risk Book Series (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1988).

²¹ Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), pp. 200-01.

particularity,” which he relates to “the twin, independent missions of Son and Spirit.”²² In these there are the dangers of universalism and restrictivism—“to say dogmatically that all will be saved...[or] to say that only a few will be.”²³ Pinnock feels that Evangelicals are more likely to run into the error of restrictivism and hence need to be challenged towards a more universal understanding of the Spirit. In addition to emphasizing the “Spirit of Christ” (two NT verses) we need also to consider the “Spirit of God” (twelve NT verses)—there is one Spirit who is both tied to Christ and yet free within the Trinity.

Much ecumenical work has been done in recent years re-examining the *filioque* clause of the creed which is of vital importance at this point. For Pinnock “the *filioque* might threaten our understanding of the Spirit’s universality.”²⁴ In attempting to trace the differing roles of Spirit and Christ, Pinnock suggests that the Spirit is at work in anyone as they “open themselves up to love” and receive “an impression of God’s true self.” In doing so the Spirit “helps inculcate holiness and virtue.” Yet he is quick to say that “Jesus is *the* criterion of salvation.” The ministries of the Spirit and of Christ are complementary but ultimately directed toward Christ, and in this Pinnock argues that we take our lead from the future eschaton rather than from the present.

Amos Yong feels that Pinnock fails to tackle the question of “experience” adequately and rushes too fast to a Christological basis for discernment. Yong’s concern is to develop a “metaphysical framework” that will ground a “pneumatological interpretation of the religions.”²⁵ His philosophical explorations go beyond our concern at the minute but he wants us to see that every experience is to some degree one of both Word and Spirit and that Word and Spirit are “related but sufficiently distinct”—he uses the image of Irenaeus of the “two hands of the Father.”²⁶ There is a certain amount of independence between the Spirit and Christ that is crucial to any positive consideration of other faiths, but these come together under the Father. Drawing on the Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition and interacting with the work of Harvey Cox, Yong

²² Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, p. 192.

²³ Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, p. 190.

²⁴ Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, p. 196.

²⁵ Yong, *Discerning*, p. 98.

²⁶ Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), ch. 2, “Pneumatology and Trinitarian Theology,” esp. p. 43.

suggests three foundational categories that give a common grounding to a study of religions and also give the basis of pre-Christological categories of discernment. In short, these are: religious experience, religious utility, and religious cosmology. In discernment we need firstly to appreciate how the Spirit may be working through the religious experience of someone of another faith; then we must value the ethical change wrought by this experience on the person by the Spirit; and finally we must understand the theological and soteriological meaning of the experience. Practically speaking, Yong is trying to get us to pause and appreciate others before we rush in with Christ.

Yong's most significant contribution, I think, is to outline a philosophical basis for the distinct yet linked roles of the Spirit and Christ in our experience. In this he builds particularly on the work of C. S. Pierce and Donald Gelpi. For him, "all experience can be understood as mediatedness and is, theologically, essentially of the Spirit."²⁷ The religious dimension of experience is characterized by "heightened sense of truth, beauty, excellence, goodness and reality as it was and is meant to be." The Spirit is seen,

...as the divine power who constitutes the manyness of world, each in its own authenticity and integrity, and who unites the manyness of the world in harmony. Insofar as the Spirit is present and at work, the norms, ideals and values of each thing will be fulfilled. In this sense, it is possible to understand the mission of the Spirit as distinct from that of the Word. Eschatologically, of course, there will be a convergence of Spirit and Word in the full revelation of the divine mystery.²⁸

Hence it is also possible for Yong to say that Word and Spirit "are *both* present universally and particularly in creation.... However, the dimensions of universality and particularity differ for each."²⁹ In a sense the work of the Spirit is to bring each thing to its integrity (to be what they were created to be), and where there is an absence of the Spirit we see a lack of integrity and creativity. The ultimate integrity can of course be seen in Christ, and in this sense the Spirit cannot be seen separate from Christ.³⁰ This understanding has much in common with the approaches of

²⁷ Yong, *Discerning*, p. 122.

²⁸ Yong, *Discerning*, p. 132.

²⁹ Yong, *Discerning*, p. 116.

³⁰ Yong, *Discerning*, p. 179.

Moltmann and Gunton outlined earlier, although surprisingly Yong does not interact at any length with such scholars.

Having allowed a greater role for the Spirit, the question of discernment comes to the fore. If the Spirit is only seen under Christ, then discernment is much easier—all who reject Christ reject the Spirit. When we allow for the Spirit's working even where Christ may not be named, we have to be more careful, particularly when considering the religious sphere. Hence Pinnock and Yong, and indeed Moltmann, end up stressing the need for discernment and proposing appropriate categories for this task. The question is: What characterizes the work of the Spirit? This is complicated by an acknowledgement of the working of the Spirit in the whole of life, individual, communal and political, life-giving and demonic: "A robust sense of discernment is therefore needed so as to be able to engage the various dimensions of human experience in all of their interconnectedness and complexity."³¹ In this task Yong outlines two approaches: one based on the broad categories of divine presence, absence and activity,³² and one based on the foundational categories that is more appropriate to a consideration of other faiths.³³ He gives a very thorough and penetrating approach to Christian discernment which will benefit from further study.

4. A Charismatic Framework for Approaching Those of Other Faiths

If Amos Yong's strengths lie in his philosophical engagement and his holistic and detailed approach to discernment, then his weaknesses are perhaps more in the realm of personality and eschatology. Although Yong desires to maintain the personal nature of the Holy Spirit and possible personal interpretations of "spirits," he stresses the working of the Spirit in all things in a way that is hard to conceive of in personal terms. The move away from understanding the Spirit as the "bond of love" between Father and Son, as in Augustine,³⁴ whilst gaining much in terms of the working of the Spirit in the world has lost an immediate personal context for the Spirit. Moltmann starts from a similar perspective to Yong and, although he lacks the philosophical precision, he does wrestle rather better in

³¹ Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, p. 165.

³² Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, p. 165.

³³ Yong, *Discerning*, ch.7.

³⁴ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), pp. 46-48.

understanding the Spirit by means of the personal as well as impersonal metaphors in the scripture.³⁵ But the Pentecostal scholar Chan does not feel Moltmann give a personal enough account and his criticisms could also be aimed at Yong.³⁶ In terms of approaching other faiths, the lack of a more personal understanding of the Holy Spirit tends to mean that Yong's approach lacks an emphasis on the people of other faiths—these seem secondary rather than primary as has been often argued.³⁷ He does address questions surrounding mediums in the Umbandist tradition, but his interpretation of the spiritual forces involved is more impersonal than personal (in contrast to the views of the mediums themselves).³⁸ The question of the personal can also be raised in terms of community, the body of persons. Yong appears to reduce the importance of community in discernment and does not consider at any length the relationship between the church and communities of other faiths. If the Spirit is at work in all things, then how do we define the uniqueness of the Spirit within the Christian community? There are a number of issues here where further thought is required in developing Yong's approach.

One of the other points of contention in a dialogue between Moltmann and Pentecostal scholars was the difference between the “growing” work of the Spirit in bringing life and the “eschatological critical” work of the Spirit in challenging current experience.³⁹ How the work of the Spirit finds a foundation in eschatology as well as in creation is a key issue. Yong prefers to talk of sacrament rather than eschatology in his understanding of Pentecost, although he does make brief mention of the Spirit as “usher in the new creation.”⁴⁰ In a more recent book Yong expands on this, but his concern is more for the universal workings of the Spirit in all creation than in considering the different kinds of working of the Spirit.⁴¹ These thoughts are in need of further development and interaction with the wider Pentecostal and Charismatic understandings of Pentecost and eschatology.

³⁵ Moltmann, *Spirit*, pp. 268-88.

³⁶ Simon Chan, “An Asian Review [of *Spirit of Life*],” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 4 (1994), pp. 35-40 (39).

³⁷ E.g., Wingate, *Encounter*.

³⁸ Yong, *Discerning*, pp. 273-75.

³⁹ Andrew M. Lord, “The Moltmann-Pentecostal Dialogue: Implications for Mission,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 11:2 (2003), pp. 272-88.

⁴⁰ Yong, *Discerning*, p. 167.

⁴¹ Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, ch. 2.

Without this it is difficult to address the question of “conversion” and the prophetic aspects of mission, where sometimes Christians find themselves working alongside those of other faiths. In terms of conversion Yong is trying to overcome the reliance of Gelpi’s philosophy on conversion and to balance the Evangelical stress on conversion with an appreciation of other people in dialogue. He has not yet devoted himself to the subject of salvation and conversion in any depth, but perhaps hints that this may relate to the criteria of discernment which focuses on Jesus in support of a more exclusivist position.⁴² We wait with some expectancy these developments in Yong’s thinking and we must take care of making judgments ahead of time. But I think it is useful to suggest a general framework of principles that may be a guide in these developments and be of general use in constructing any charismatic approach to other faiths.

The framework that I am suggesting is based around the universal and the particular workings of the Holy Spirit.⁴³ It can be summarized as follows:

- Universal:
 - g1) Everything in creation is *influenced* by the Holy Spirit
 - g2) Everything in creation is *challenged* by the Holy Spirit

- Particular:
 - p1) The Holy Spirit is personal
 - p2) This influence and challenge is shaped around Jesus Christ
 - p3) The *intensity* of the Holy Spirit relates to the response to God

- Mission:
 - m1) Mission involves a sending movement from the particular to the universal

The challenge in our current context, as identified by Yong and Moltmann, is to see the general, universal, workings of the Holy Spirit which have been so often neglected. Here the foundational pneumatology of Yong provides a solid basis for seeing the work of the Holy Spirit as influencing all of creation (g1). But his understanding of the work of the Spirit needs to be nuanced through a differentiation between the

⁴² Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, pp. 127-28.

⁴³ Here I am applying the methodology I briefly outlined at the end of “Moltmann-Pentecostal Dialogue.”

“growing” and the “critical” work which will better highlight the importance of challenge (g2). In terms of eschatology we are in a general sense seeing the work of the Holy Spirit as starting from the current creation and growing it in the direction of the new creation that is to come, or as bringing inbreaking tastes of the new creation into the present.⁴⁴

I have already commented on the need for the Holy Spirit to be seen in personal terms. As we see in Acts the working of the Spirit is so often particular, personal and recognizable (p1). This working is shaped around the person of Jesus Christ who is preached and to whom people are drawn (p2). The personal and relational working of the Spirit around Christ leads to the formation of the church as the community of Christ. There is a sense here that the response of people to God indicates that there exist different “intensities” of the Spirit—there is a general intensity of the Spirit’s working in the world, and a particular more intense working of the Spirit seen in the response of people to Christ (p3). This intense working is linked to personal response and to a greater Spirit-Christ overlap in terms of their working. Yong hints at this in his eschatology in which the future creation is marked by a greater overlap (equality?) between the workings of the Spirit and Christ.

In thinking about the meaning of “mission” in the context of other faiths, we need to go beyond the idea of individuals sharing “the gospel” with other individuals, valuable though this is. I want to suggest a broader understanding of mission in terms of the movement from the particular to the universal. Christians are caught up in a movement of the Holy Spirit who is ever drawing us out of our personal and communal experience of God in Christ towards the world and the whole creation which we are called to influence and challenge. As we get caught in this movement we realize that the Spirit is already at work, in creation and in those of other faiths, and so we find ourselves in a movement alongside others as the Spirit leads. This is not to deny our particular experience of the Spirit centered around Christ, but rather to say that this cannot exclude other workings of the Spirit in people and creation. This movement is, for us, one in the Spirit with Christ and one in which we cannot but share through our whole lives the reality of Christ. Yet it is more than evangelism, for we may be moved alongside others of all faiths or none in social action, in protest for justice, in environmental concern. Such holistic mission, as part of a wider movement of the eschatological Spirit, cannot but result in a

⁴⁴ This point is made in a broader mission context in my Andrew M. Lord, “Mission Eschatology: A Framework for Mission in the Spirit,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 11 (1997), pp. 111–23.

deepening Spirit-Christ overlap by which others see more of Christ. Response to Christ does determine final individual salvation but this is not to say that those who do not respond cannot be caught up in a movement of the Spirit now that brings in more of God's kingdom and gives them a greater reality of Christ to respond to.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined some of the basic questions involved in constructing a Christian theology as it relates to other faiths. Two general approaches to this task can be seen: a creation-focused approach that stresses the universal working of God; and a conversion-focused approach that stresses the particular individual responses to Christ. I want to suggest that the creation-focused approach can often fail to take adequate account of the personal nature of the Spirit, the relationship between the Spirit and Christ and the importance of personal response. The conversion-focused approach can often fail to appreciate the work of the Holy Spirit outside the church and the need to find common ground between people of differing faiths.

My framework attempts to draw these two approaches together and in doing so overcome some of their limitations. I have proposed six principles to guide the development a Christian theology of other faiths that picks up on the significant work of Amos Yong. There is still much work to be done in fleshing out these principles and in tackling some of the difficult issues raised. But this framework could act as a useful guide against which to evaluate different approaches to such a theology. Even if everything is not worked out, yet may we be captured afresh by the Spirit as he moves us out into creation to discover anew the breadth of his working and the intensity of Christ's presence.