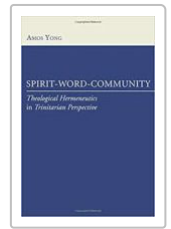


Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective (book review)

Books | 3/9/2018 @ 22:24

Following up on my recent review of Archer's [study](#) on Pentecostal hermeneutics, I picked up another gem, namely Yong's exercise in pneumatological hermeneutics. It is a different kind of book, as we shall see. **The busy reader should jump over the long abstract right to my assessment below.**



Amos Yong is a distinctive constructive theologian in Pentecostal tradition who currently serves as Director Of The Center For Missiological Research and Professor Of Theology and Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary. Yong is widely recognized as a leading author in “new school” Pentecostal theology. Yong's aim in this book is to “develop a trinitarian theological hermeneutic and method from a pneumatological starting point” (1). His theological hermeneutics is constructed as a fully blown theological method; his central thesis is “that theological hermeneutics—the activity of reading or interpreting things related to the divine—is a continuous interplay of Spirit, Word, and Community” (14).

Part one, Chapter 1. Yong intends to proceed from pneumatology to theology to metaphysics. The Spirit is revealed as Wisdom in Proverbs, in humans as rational beings, in their quest for meaning, etc.

The Spirit who breathed life at the beginning is the same Spirit who continues to renew life in the world, and who will someday recreate it completely. In anticipation of that eschatological breath of life, the present work of the Spirit is to be the healing force and agent of what is concretely manifest in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (cf. Johnson 1993a, 43). Thus Spirit's own mission is to heal the sick, the hurt, the wounded; to reconcile those who are alienated and estranged; to make whole that which is shattered, fragmented, and broken; to bring back into relationship those who are separated; to restore that which is lost; to provide meaning to the experience of the absurd, of apparently gratuitous evil and irredeemable suffering, of life in what might otherwise be a fortuitous universe; to complete that which is incomplete and longing for completion. (47)

Chapter 2. Only a pneumatological theism can overcome binitarian conceptions of God. Yong utilizes his substantial knowledge of patristics, quoting e.g. Irenaeus, for whom Word and Spirit are “two hands of the Father”. According to Athanasius, the Spirit is binding agent within the Trinity. According to Augustine's “mutual love theory”, Spirit is the mutuality within the Trinity and “constitutes relational character of the filioque” (68). The Spirit is “the dispositional vector of the divine life” (78).

Yong wants to walk the narrow path between theology and philosophy. So while Heidegger and Gadamer subordinated theology to philosophy and while Vanhoozer does exactly the opposite, Yong wants to maintain autonomy of both. Theological hermeneutic is more than biblical or canonical hermeneutic, for it must account for the world outside Scripture. Pneumatological approach insists on vigorous trinitarianism as it attempts to balance the Spirit with the previous two articles. Importantly, it “rescues the Spirit from theological oblivion—where she has been consigned, at least historically—precisely by truly filling out toward a robustly trinitarian vision of God which takes the perichoretic and reciprocal relationality of the triune persons seriously” (76). Yong argues that his trinitarian, triadic, trialectical concepts have potential to overcome many surpluses of the current trinitarian philosophical debates.

Chapter 3. Reality is constituted relationally and even God, who in Himself is independent, enters relationship with the world. Whiteheadism creates space for God as a consequence of opportunities, which are reality's constitutive components. Creativity then is “the dynamic, ongoing emergence of harmonized actualities from the infinite number of possibilities and preceding occasions which structure the advance of reality” (89). This triadic scheme is, however, thwarted by its nominalist outlook and ultimately reduces God too the world (90). Yong finds a remedy for this in the work of C. S. Peirce, who conceives this triangle hermeneutically: “Thirdness is the interpretant which makes meaningful Secondness' otherness over and against Firstness. Alternatively said, Thirdness is the interpretation of actual or concrete signs or symbols (Secondness) with regard to their objects (Firstness)” (93).

Yong seeks a foundational basis upon which he could formulate not just trinitarian theology, but most importantly trinitarian metaphysics. In fact, Yong tends to marry the two. He argues for a triadic metaphysics (and does an impressive survey of intellectual history), just in order to show that “only a pneumatological rationality is sufficiently dynamic” and that “any truly relational theology is necessarily trinitarian” (105). Furthermore he writes:

If my intuitions in this essay are correct, approaching these perennial issues in method, ontology and theology via pneumatology is promising for a way out of the dualistic impasses— e.g., between Barth’s emphasis on dialectics, divine eternity, the priority of creation and of the past, the immanent Trinity, and christological method; and Pannenberg’s emphasis on synthesis, created temporality, the priority of the eschatological future, the economic Trinity, and the cosmological framework of theology (cf. Bradshaw 1988, esp. 345–61)—which plague Christian theology. The issue is not whether or not we are searching for epistemic and hermeneutic synthesis, since thought is driven toward synthesis. Rather, from the perspective of the pneumatological rationality, the question is whether or not the tension of dialectical movement of thought, of knowledge, and of interpretation, is ever cut off. If so, synthesis overwhelms both thesis or antithesis, and what is important about them is lost. In order for the system not to break down or stall on one or the other side of the pendulum of thought, a pneumatological rationality is required which drives the ongoing give-and-take of the dialectical tension even while it retains the importance of both thesis and antithesis, amidst the proposed synthesis.

[...]

Sure, theologies will come and go privileging either Spirit or Word, as they will with the other theological tensions. Inevitably, they will gravitate to that pole which is most easily defined, handled, and manipulated. And, between Spirit and Word, it is the latter which has most often provided the concreteness, particularity and stability conducive to the cognitive process. (108)

Is this not a manifesto of a new school in philosophy and theology? Christology is not supplemented, but conditioned by pneumatology. The Spirit does not animate the Church. It makes the Church be (111). Thirdness is the relation itself between firstness and secondness.

Part two, Chapter 4. Imagination in platonic thought is subordinated to reason (124) and so was in Christian thought. In Hebrew thought, imagination was the place of *yetsar* – nature, which could have been both good and evil. In medieval theology, however, imagination became associated more with the fallen nature of man. For Sartre, imagination is “not of real perceptions that increase our knowledge, but have a quasiobservative quality whereby we re-create our own realities” (127).

First, the imagination mediates the human engagement with the external world through the recording of images derived from experience. Second, the imagination enables human beings to actively construct the world. Finally, the imagination holds both of these activities— of reproduction and production— together coherently such that one and the same person moves from one to the other subconsciously and fluidly. (128–29)

Pneumatological imagination arises from encounters with the divine, the Holy Spirit (133). The first experience of the Spirit is found in the story of creation. The Spirit is power of creation and life. Relationality of pneumatological imagination lends it christomorphic structure.

Yong defines relationship between theology and imagination drawing on R. C. Neville, his *doktorvater*:

Theology, Neville therefore says, is theoretical activity that brings coherence to truthful inquiry (interpretation) of revelatory data processed by the imagination, and that issues forth in responsible spiritual and moral living. In less technical terms, theology is the cultivation of imaginative, interpretive, and practical skills with regard to religious images, metaphors and symbols (cf. Forbes 1986). (146)

Pneumatological imagination thus enables theologizing and worldmaking. It must be, therefore, put under scrutiny, as it may point in a wrong direction. At the same time, pneumatological imagination enables such discernment within the triadic framework.

The triadic, relational and realistic metaphysics of foundational pneumatology provides the conceptual framework to see how things are what they are not in isolation from other things but precisely in their relationships with and to other things. The pneumatological imagination then enables recognition of such relational autonomy and integrity, of the social character of individuality and particularity. Further, it sensitizes the imagination to the multi-dimensional—evaluative, affective, spiritual

— constitution and dynamic movements of things in the world of many others. In short, the pneumatological imagination provides the epistemic corrective to the ideological tendencies which otherwise plague human knowledge.

Chapter 5. Pneumatological imagination engages the world with images. These images are semiotic representations, which mean something (sign, representamen), which stands for something (object, interpretant) to someone (an interpreter). Possibilities of signs are surprising and limitless and their triadic structure requires a socially originated community of inquirers.

At the hearth of hermeneutics is the question of truth. Truth is something revelatory, salvific, and something not only cognitive, but also ethical. Truth is fundamentally a conformity of the sign to its object, or of language to reality. Yong challenges narrative theory, which tries to allocate truth in larger context of narrative. He suspects that in narrativist framework, truth becomes a mere appendix to the narrative (173).

Knowledge arises out of our being located relatively to our places. However, one can attain moral, not absolute certainty of knowledge from engagement with the world and immersion into the knowing process. All knowledge is teleological “to the extent that it seeks to provide some sort of order” (180). Knowledge and interpretation is of reality, is engaging it and is being corrected by it.

Chapter 6. But how is reality normative? Yong's pneumatological imagination rejects nominalism and recognizes interdependence of the relationship between the knower and known. This enables it to acknowledge “the axiological and spiritual dimensions of reality” (185). Engagement with reality is, however, also an ethical issue. Encounter with the other exposes myself and us and “through the face of the other, I become aware of the infinitude, the depths, which envelop our relationality” (thus Levinas, 192). Levinas “divinizes the relationship with alterity” (192) and so does Yong. Religion is primarily about action, not so much about a static reality. Pneumatological imagination illuminates mutual indwelling of face-to-face relationship.

But how do we engage nature normatively? Well, our minds seem to be uniquely designed just for that purpose, as some contemporary physicists concede (199). “The natural world is not only what appears to the human senses on the surface, but is deeply significant and symbolic beyond its phenomenological manifestations” (200).

God's living actuality does not preclude in the divine life a dispositional dynamic which shapes first and foremost the eternal self-communication of the intra-trinitarian relationality. More important for our purposes, however, is that this dispositional essence communicates ad extra, and in doing so extends “being” to the world in order that the world may reflect the glory, power, and character of God (cf. Lee 2000 and Boyd 1992). In this sense, the world is an expression of the dispositional overflow or effulgence of divine glory, and creation as a whole reveals, piecemeal to be sure, the glory of God. Thus nature is to be understood as the interpretant (to use Peirce's term) of God's glory, and our interpretation of the world is our engagement with the glory of God, refracted, that is, through the created order. (205)

Now the question is “whether or not there is a direct experience of the divine apart from our experiences of and with each other and the world” (207), in other words, whether we can read something else than the two of God's books.

To say that theological reflection is mediated semiotically is to affirm that religious knowledge is communicated through a variety of forms— i.e., through evoking a sense of the plenitude or depth dimension of perceptible signs (as in glossolalic prayer, or meditative contemplation); through propositional or literal statements (as in the recitation of a creed, or the reading of Scripture); through experiential attitudes, feelings, and activities (as in liturgical participation), and so on (cf. Dulles 1992, 18–19). Put epistemically, all knowledge is semiotically mediated and therefore at least one step (or sign) removed from the richness of experience. (208)

Signs and symbols that mediate the divine must not be perceived as absolute or final. Our knowledge is fragmentary due to its semiotic character. This lengthy quote is probably necessary in order to understand kernel of this chapter:

Emergent are demonic realities bent on intensifying the radically finite character of all religious and theological symbols such that not only do the symbols not point beyond themselves to the divine (a passive stance), but they mobilize habits of resistance to the very divine realities they originally witnessed to (an active field of demonic force). In fact, it is fair to say, given the dispositional character of all reality, that there are no purely neutral signs, symbols or semiotic systems as such since all habits, tendencies and legalities— reality's Thirdness— are trajectories in one direction (the divine) or other (the demonic). Thus, the spiritual gift of discernment of spirits enabled by the pneumatological imagination is crucial for

identifying and countering the qualities, reactions, and illegitimate forces of demonically inspired symbols. More to the point, normative engagement with the divine cannot proceed effectively or in a sustained manner apart from the discerning function of the pneumatological imagination.

When actively engaged, however, the pneumatological imagination grasps the divine reality with ever-increasing intensity not only in the ecclesial context, but in and through every single perception or apprehension. The mundane otherness of history (Levinas) and of nature (Edwards and Rahner) become revelatory of the divine as inspired by the Spirit. And, insofar as such revelation does occur, human beings are placed under obligation to respond normatively in certain ways. Of course, one's capacity to discern the divine could simply be dulled, and one could resist the Spirit's work of bringing about a transformed imagination. Or, one could refuse to acknowledge the normative structures of what is engaged, or insist on imposing one's own perspectives, values, and structures on the historical or natural other. Or, one could use the other as a means toward one's own ends, and deny either the integrity of the other or the other's mediatory significance regarding the divine. Such idolatry that elevates either the self or the other to ultimate status is directed toward the satisfaction of self-serving and destructive ends. In each case, only a pneumatically inspired imagination can counteract the emergent habits of interpretation because it continuously directs attention beyond itself to the other as other. (214)

Here Part II ends. Pneumatology has given way to a triadic metaphysics and triadically structured epistemology. Spirit, Word and Community are aligned with imagination, engagement and truthful normativity.

Part Three, Chapter 7. Interpretation is “a subjective enterprise which nevertheless retains certain objective and communitarian aspects” (221). Understanding is gift of the Spirit (1Cor 2:9–16) in the converted mind. Now since imagination is faculty that “bridges the gap between the self and the other”, it is also well suited “to mediate the creative human engagement with the transcendent” (224). Transcendence, however, is more than what we encounter in ourselves, in other, or in the future. All theologizing is enabled by the Spirit (229). Even the Scripture itself is “interpretation of a people's experiences” and the people of God itself “can only be understood in terms of a process of tradition-making such that the people of God are transformed by its continuous encounter in and through the Spirit with the biblical and later traditions even while the content of Scripture itself is in some sense transformed by the Church for the Church as it engages the world” (235–36).

Theological interpretation includes not only grasping certain propositional truths about God but also developing the proper affection for Him. Human inquiry is motivated by the experience of doubt. Each doubt requires its specific solution. Christianity is, however, uniquely open to intellectual inquiry and asking hard questions, yet “the Spirit's inner soteriological work includes epistemological effects” (242).

Chapter 8: Word How to discern interpretation that is truly inspired by the Spirit? How to tell it from the demonic or the subjective? Theological interpretation “is the continuous interplay of Spirit, Word, and community” (245). Now theological reflection is directed towards experience. Yong wants to discuss three aspects of experience: (1) Enthusiasm, like that of St. Paul or St. Augustine. Pentecostal experience of glossolalia and spiritual gifts also lead to theological reflection which defies cessationism of 19th century (248–49). (2) Ritual is also kind of experience which supports theological reflection. “Taking the sacrament of the Eucharist for the moment, it is arguable that no matter what one believes about the presence of Christ, the result is encouragement for Christian life” (249–50). (3) Another kind of experience is mystical, e.g. experience of mystical union with Christ, which also serves as an “objective datum of theological reflection” (252). Listening to the voice of the Spirit is transformative. “[M]y listening to what the Spirit is saying”, Yong contends, “includes my being open to being transformed by what is said, and not just myself, but all those claim to be of the Spirit of God and are claimed by that same Spirit” (255). And further:

The spoken Word of God thus confronts us as an other, a locution. It also makes demands of us, as an illocution. Finally, it actually transforms us, as a perlocution. Thus is the Word of God “living and active” (Heb. 4:12). (256)

Living Word of God and spoken Word of God are mutually subordinated. “Word defines Spirit, and Spirit defines Word” (258). Christians ought to understand that “the collapse of the ‘house of authority’ (the stronghold of the understanding of the Word of God as the written text) during the modern period is a good thing because it frees Christians to once again grapple with the Word of God as mediated, rather than circumscribed, by Scripture” (262). This house of inspiration, inerrancy and infallibility was a mere human construct. If God revealed Himself in history, shaped by all its particularities, so has the Bible. Moreover, there is an infinite struggle between Scripture as *norma normans non normata* and tradition as *norma normata* (264).

Tradition is also subject to hermeneutics, but only as a historically contingent effort to understand biblical text. Theological interpretation cannot neglect its wrong turns (heresies), lest we risk their repetitions. But even the act of retrieving tradition must include the trialectic of Spirit-Word-Community. To speak of the “Great Tradition” could be very similar to bibliolatry of those who overemphasize authority of Scripture.

Trialectic of Spirit, Word and Community even in its relation too tradition is clearly alluded to in Acts 15, esp. in verses 16–17 and 28.

Chapter 9: Community. Community of believers is attested by the Spirit through the Word. “The Spirit addresses, empowers, quickens or confirms a community of faith with the Word of God, or the Word proclaimed to a docile community of believers creates faith for the reception and experience of the Spirit” (275). Central to the community of faith are narratives, which are “told, retold and embodied because they mediate a soteriological experience” (279). Theological reflection of these narratives helps the community to live according to its core convictions. Such theologizing can be seen with liberation theology, Minjung theology or the Dalit movement in India. It is simply opposed to simply repeating Western formulaic theologies. It is based on experience of the Bible in an environment of injustice.

Early Pentecostals rised up from a multitude of traditions. Glossolalia, which some of them considered as normative evidence of Spirit's subsequent authority, had an “important social function for the marginalized” (283). It has provided marginalized and insignificant persons from lower class to have clear evidence of God's powerful activity in their lives.

Historical theology is an effort to portray how post-biblical and popst-canonical communities of faith have engaged and articulated their understanding of the biblical message regarding God, the self, and the world” (289). Now historical theology plays an important role in shaping the modern Pentecostal theology. Pentecostal seminaries used to gravitate in evangelical/fundamentalist direction. Since 1970's, when the Azusa generation was practically gone, historical consciousness raised questions, such as:

How could Pentecostalism give a coherent account of itself amidst the theological conflicts and disputes its historians had now uncovered? How could the second-work of grace theology be reconciled with third-work of grace theology? What did it mean that practically from its inception, Pentecostals were divided into trinitarian and non-trinitarian movements and trajectories? What are the implications for soteriology, ecclesiology and the theology of the sacraments of early Pentecostal baptism in Jesus' name over and against baptism using the trinitarian formula? And in the forefront, what did Spirit-baptism now mean since its discussion within the Wesleyan Holiness tradition at the turn of the century was very different from the late twentieth century discussion between Pentecostal and mostly Reformed-type evangelicals? (291)

Pentecostals were able to answer some of these questions, other questions remain unanswered. It is now certain that Pentecostals cannot return to pre-critical mindset and must walk the path of their tradition. Dogmatic theology represented by statements of faith (such as the Assemblies of God Sixteen Fundamental Truths) surely “arise out of specific engagements at certain places and times with Scripture and tradition” (294), but still they are formative, so that each new dogmatic statement cannot really deny or undermine previous dogmatic statements, which already brought about their formative consequences in their particular historical conditions. Dogmatic truth is like a correspondence, because theological truth is ultimately eschatological.

Yong then briefly discusses place of natural and environmental theology, role of culture as the place of Christian theological reflection. Yong contends that “theology that intends its claims to be universally applicable needs to be a fully public theology, engaging any and all claims to ultimate truth” (304). All truth is God's truth, wherever it is found, and all people are created in God's image, and thus are being able to reflect truth in their lives and thinking (305–6). The Spirit moves, the Word is engaged and dogmaticians respond. Athens, Rio, or Beijing must not prevail over Jerusalem. Discerning totality and plurality of the world is necessary for engaging the divine mystery triologically in the interplay of Spirit, Word, Community.

Provisional conclusions. Sola scriptura has never been practiced as such. Moreover it is self defeating, because it cannot be biblically defended. It must be supplemented with sola Spiritus, sola traditus and sola communitas. Triadic approach provides good ballance. It connects well with canonical approaches of Sanders, Childs and Scalise or with e.g. Wesleyan quadrilateral. Primary rationale for this hermeneutical trialectic is “the pneumatologically driven doctrine of trinitarian perichoresis” (315).

This book was rightfully voted as the 2005 book of the year by the Society for Pentecostal Studies Book Committee. In a sense, it is one of the boldest apologetic works of the Pentecostal movement, as it attempts not so much to just defend Pentecostalism as a distinctive current, but more importantly, to define Pentecostal understanding of epistemic activities of the mind.

Difficulties which some readers might encounter probably stem mainly from the book's overall... imperspicuity. Yong's argument presupposes a well-read reader and highly charitable reading in those moments where its paths seems to be way too untrodden and provisional. Throughout the book Yong basically assumes that "all theologizing is charismatic in the sense that it is enabled by and through the Spirit" (229) because reality itself is immersed in the Spirit. What he doesn't seem to demonstrate, or at least not clearly, is how does one's spiritual polarity affect his capability of listening to Spirit's voice. In other words, is *theologia irrogenitorum* possible? Or yet in other words, how exactly is pneumatological imagination initiated, how is it vindicated as truthful discernment (chap. 5), and (to put it tongue-in-cheek) how exactly is Yong's proposal immune to "nonsense or myth", which he explicitly tries to avoid (84).

This leads us to another question. Yong claims right in the beginning that "sensitive readers will notice that its deep structures and guiding motifs, as pneumatologically driven, are profoundly pentecostal" (ix). It would have probably been helpful to define what exactly does his notion of "pentecostalism" cover. He doesn't seem to be really comfortable with the doctrine of initial evidence, doesn't want to go back to pre-critical mindset and does not see Pentecostalism as a continuation of a specific tradition, but rather as a convergence of a multitude of them. It is not my intention to ostracize Yong from his cherished worldwide Pentecostalism, which indeed is like a dancing tapestry rather than like a monochromatic sketch. What I would want to do is to press Yong to define what exactly does he see as the kernel of Pentecostal tradition, which he so vigorously and creatively pioneers.

Indeed, it is understandable that Yong didn't engage first, second or third generation Pentecostal theologians. What I find, however, rather perplexing is the absolute lack of explicit engagement with such figures as Frank Macchia, Simon Chan or Stephen J. Land. Now considering that the latter two mentioned have done substantial work on trinity and have even contemplated triadic schemes as vantage point of pentecostal theological method, this seems to be a profound lacuna. This lacuna is not detrimental not detrimental to the proposal itself but indicates need for a better two-way communication with other pentecostals not only on informal level (which is acknowledged e.g. on page X), but also on the level of formal thought.

What I find especially refreshing is Yong's affirmation of the place of natural theology as something that shouldn't be understood apart from theology of specific revelation (cf. 298). Another germ of possibly important contribution of this book is Yong's reminder that theological truth may not stem solely from exegesis, but also from pneumatic and traditio-critical influences, which in turn means that these two may play a significant role in exegesis and that one can possibly "critique Scripture" under the covering of the other two members of the triad (308).

It must be noted in the end that Yong presents his case humbly and cautiously, drawing our attention to possible caveats and cul-de-sacs without really attempting to definitively answer them. This doesn't make this proposal more easily dismissible. On the contrary, it makes it even more appealing call to join the author on this unexplored journey of Pentecostal theological hermeneutic. Who knows, perhaps I will join him.

<https://selah.cz/books/yong-spirit-word-community-theological-hermeneutics-book-review/>