

Trinitarian Influences upon Christian Interreligious Discourse
in a Globalizing World

Stephen L. Hawkins

Presented at

The University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee

Religious Studies Conference

April 10th, 2021

Abstract

In pluralistic societies, religious literacy among the populace is crucial for building relationships between people of differing faiths. Approaches to interreligious engagement for Christian theologians have historically been grounded in the emphasis of one Person of the Holy Trinity over the other two Persons, establishing distinct Christocentric, theocentric, and pneumatological approaches. A focus on Christ's role in Christianity's telos inevitably makes a claim on whom can be "saved." Thus, Christocentric theologies dismiss other religions as containing inaccurate or, at best, incomplete knowledge. Alternatively, focusing primarily on the First Person of the Trinity, i.e., God the Creator, inappropriately reduces all religions to a presumed identical purpose, often based on Western philosophies. While these first two approaches fall short, Christian theology nevertheless requires a framework for understanding how to engage other religions; yet this must be achieved in a way that allows Christians to be true to their own claims while also accurately acknowledging the claims of other religions. Seeking to balance these goals, Christian theologians, such as Amos Yong, have more recently explored the possibilities of placing greater emphasis on the role of the third Person of the Trinity, i.e., the Holy Spirit, promoting a more hospitable context for interreligious discourse.

Keywords: pluralism, globalization, religious differences, Christocentrism, theocentrism, pneumatology

Trinitarian Influences upon Christian Interreligious Discourse
in a Globalizing World

Introduction

With the proliferation of globalizing activities in both our professional and personal lives, once homogenous communities are increasingly able to interact with a diversity of languages, races, and worldviews. Such engagements provide opportunities to solve old problems with fresh perspectives, to satisfy curiosities of new possibilities, and to maintain relationships beyond one's current address. Yet despite the benefits promised by an increase of global encounters and the sustainability of global relationships, fear may seep into our imaginations as we weigh the consequences of corporate competition, natural resource exploitation, or misunderstood expressions of morality. According to ethicist William Schweiker, "Globality is a space of reasons marked by violence as much as creativity and discovery."¹ It is "the time of many worlds,"² within the same physical world. If we are to promote a peaceful and fair existence, we accordingly must increase our literacy of other cultural expressions.

For societies with historically Christian backgrounds, this call to increase our cultural literacy must include a more accurate and deferential understanding of other religious traditions. Yet where does one begin this noble endeavor? Like learning a new language, mental bridges of words and imagery are necessary for describing the new pictures of reality being learned until there is eventually a high enough literacy in a new worldview that concepts may no longer need linkage back to Christianity for further learning to occur.

¹ Schweiker, William. *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics*, 9% Loc 344 of 3818.

² *Ibid*, 2% Loc 59 of 3818.

It is therefore evident that establishing some commonality between Christianity and other religions is necessary as an entry point to interreligious discourse. Yet, it is ineffective and inappropriate to reduce all religions down to the same truth claims.³ As Christians continue to engage other religions, they must continue to listen for both points of commonality and points of unique difference. It is thus the difficult task of Christian theologians to make space for understanding these points of similarity and difference within the framework of their own Christian theologies.

If a Christian worldview is upheld as an accurate description of ultimate reality, then how shall we properly account for the differing views from other religions? Answering this question from a Christian perspective requires careful reflection on the emphasized roles of each Person of the Holy Trinity. We must therefore explore the historical consequences and future potentialities of Christocentric, theocentric, and pneumatological theologies,⁴ acknowledging the dead ends and cul-de-sacs as we search for bridges to aid our crossings between these many worlds.

1. Christocentric Theologies

One of the simplest explanations for the relationship between Christianity and other religions comes from a Christocentric approach to theological examination. From this perspective, other religions may have made honest efforts towards describing reality, yet each has somewhere fallen short—for it is only through Christ, this reasoning defends, that humanity can participate in any proper connection to the Divine.

Historically, this view can be seen as early as the 2nd century with Justin Martyr's "The

³ Prothero, Stephen. *God is Not One*, 2-3.

⁴ Yong, Amos. *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions*

First Apology.” Here Justin appeals to the Emperor of Rome to end Christian executions, providing justification for the legitimacy of the Christian message by citing parallels between the words of Moses and Plato. “So it seems that there were indeed *seeds of truth* in all men, but they are proved not to have understood them properly....”⁵ For Justin, any viable orientations to truth drawn from philosophical discourse regarding spiritual matters are merely “imitations” of the Christian message,⁶ which preceded the great philosophers through the Israelite prophets, who received their wisdom through God’s Word.⁷

Yet how were those living prior to Christ still somehow able to speak truth with partial capacity? In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas asserted in his *Summa Theologica* that God interacted with humanity prior to the Incarnation, but only “implicitly.” Since the advent of Christ, however, the church has received “explicit” knowledge of God’s self-revelation.⁸ Shortly thereafter, Christocentric theology becomes fully distorted into religious exclusivism, when Pope Boniface VIII, in 1302, issued a papal bull declaring that “there is one holy Catholic and apostolic Church, outside of which there is neither salvation nor remission of sins.”⁹ Here, we see an overt emphasis on the ultimate goal of salvation through the church. While previous theologians such as Justin and Aquinas affirmed the supremacy of the Christian message, they still acknowledged the benefits of engaging the lesser wisdom of those outside the church, e.g., Plato and Aristotle. Boniface, however, extends Christocentric theology beyond the defense of reason to focus solely on salvation.

⁵ Justin Martyr. "The First Apology," 49. (emphasis added)

⁶ Ibid, 54.

⁷ Ibid, 56.

⁸ Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*, 111-112.

⁹ Boniface VIII. “Unam Sanctam.” 124.

If Boniface's claim is a defining tenet of Christianity, then any collaborative motivations for dialoguing with other religions become irrelevant. Because other religions cannot bring their followers to the same salvific end as Christianity, other religions are not simply marginalized as incomplete views of ultimate reality; rather, they are misguided attempts serving false ends. Consequently, any Christocentric view that focuses solely on soteriology may easily account for the differing worldviews of other religions but at great cost. Such exclusivist thinking does a disservice to those Christians seeking to positively interact with other religions without marginalizing their beliefs. And such an approach does little to invite the interpersonal closeness necessary to match the physical proximity brought by our globalizing world.

2. Theocentric Theologies

Having observed the shortcomings of a Christocentric approach, let us then look to the remaining Two Persons of the Holy Trinity for establishing a positive justification for Christians engaging their religious neighbors. Utilizing a theocentric approach, which focuses on the First Person of the Holy Trinity, i.e., God the "Father" and "Creator," may mitigate any dismissive tendencies within Christian thought. After all, Christian doctrine teaches it is one God who created the universe and all the people within it; are we not all, therefore, connected somehow as created beings? Whereas Christocentrism may morph into exclusivism, here an opposite extreme may occur—that of radical inclusivism. Seeking a common denominator that unifies all religions, a theocentric approach may affirm interreligious commonalities as ultimate truth while glossing over any unique or conflicting truth claims. In historically Christian societies, this mode of thought grew to

prominence with the formalization of the modern scientific method as theologians sought to accurately identify the “machine-maker” behind the natural order of existence.¹⁰

One prominent promoter of this effort was Edward Herbert, Lord of Cherbury, England. In his 17th century writing, “Common Notions Concerning Religion,” Herbert outlines five “fundamental principles” that he believes all religions affirm through humanity’s “universal wisdom.”¹¹ These common principles affirm: (1) there is a Supreme Being, (2) this Supreme Being should be worshipped, (3) Virtue and Piety should be the emphasis of religious practices, (4) humanity’s wickedness must be corrected through repentance, and (5) rewards or punishments await humanity in an afterlife.¹² From this list it is clear Herbert had little interaction with non-theistic religions or with more regionally isolated religions outside Europe. While Herbert’s goal was to find a common wisdom linking all religions, the Western world at the time of his writing still lacked the exposure necessary to fulfill his goal of ultimate commonality.

While admirable in its intension for unity, Herbert’s method of focusing only on the commonalities of religions produced an inclusivist approach that dilutes the potency of each religion’s ultimate message. All religions are not making the same claims simply with varying emphases through varying rituals, and it is self-serving for Christians to consider practitioners of religion to be merely disguised as “anonymous Christians” as Karl Rahner proposed.¹³ How can Christians engage their religious neighbors without dismissing either the uniqueness of others’ teachings or the central claims of their own

¹⁰ Plantinga, *Christianity and Plurality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, 169.

¹¹ Herbert, Edward. “Common Notions Concerning Religion.” 171.

¹² *Ibid*, 172-177.

¹³ Rahner, Karl. “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions.” 300.

teachings? In order to find balance, we must look beyond theocentric positions of inclusivism and Christocentric positions of exclusivism.

3. Pneumatological Theology

We must finally explore a Christian theology of religions that emphasizes the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, i.e., the Holy Spirit, an approach championed by contemporary Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong, a first generation Malaysian-American whose mother converted to Christianity from Theravada Buddhism.¹⁴ Can the same God who “blows wherever it pleases”¹⁵—perhaps even through other religious expressions—simultaneously claim that Christ is the only mode of access to God?¹⁶ In his book *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions*, Yong describes the connection between religion and the multiple aspects of human existence by asserting that “the study of religion is, effectively, the study of what it means to be human.”¹⁷ Because religion is so deeply linked to each aspect of human life, no religion is capable of maintaining a sense of neutrality or existing in any pure form.¹⁸ “[T]his also means that there is never a ‘pure’ Christianity in the sense of an unacculturated Christianity.”¹⁹ Culture mediates religious expression, a helpful reminder in a globalizing world.

Yong’s connection of religion to culture serves his overall position that the Holy Spirit also works outside the church through society.²⁰ Thus, the Spirit is also at work in

¹⁴ Yong, Amos. *Discerning the Spirit(s)*, 319.

¹⁵ John 3:8

¹⁶ John 14:6

¹⁷ Yong. *Beyond*, 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 18.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 21.

other religions connected to their diverse cultures. By observing the mutually influential relationship between society and religion, dominant religious voices can be humbled to no longer hear themselves as *the* appropriate expression of faith. Rather, each will come to be heard as *an* appropriate expression among many, while making space for those at the margins to join in religious discussions.²¹

A pneumatological approach to a theology of religions is the most beneficial approach according to Yong because the Holy Spirit is able to address the universality of Christianity as the Spirit of *God* while also addressing the particularity of Christianity as the Spirit of *Christ*.²² Yong thus calls into question the Christocentric notion that outside the church there is no salvation, and he boldly declares that “the Spirit cannot be limited to the institutional forms of the church.”²³ If it is indeed the case that the Holy Spirit can be found outside the church, then surely the Spirit can also be found inside other religions.²⁴

To test this claim, Yong presents a dialogical case study between his own Pentecostal Christian tradition and the Afro-Brazilian spiritual syncretistic religion of Umbanda, which he deemed “especially important since Umbanda is considered by many Christians...to be a spiritist cult,”²⁵ where trance-inducing spiritual possessions are regularly practiced as forms of healing. Therefore, guiding this dialogue was Yong’s theological question: “[I]s the Holy Spirit present and active in Umbanda, and how is

²¹ Ibid, 19.

²² Ibid, 21.

²³ Ibid, 21-22.

²⁴ Ibid, 22.

²⁵ Yong, *Discerning*, 321.

such presence and activity to be discerned?”²⁶ If criteria can be established in this interreligious dialogue, then perhaps it may apply more broadly to other interreligious engagements.

For Yong, one of the critical elements in interreligious dialogue is the ability to listen to one’s religious neighbor. Often, this begins with understanding their history and ritual practices. Umbanda is a relatively young religion, emerging in the 1920s from the combined political, racial, and religious tensions following the outlaw of slavery in Brazil in 1888, which produced a fusion of Catholic and African religious practices.²⁷ Their rituals include meeting throughout the week in sessions where congregants perform sacred songs to welcome deities and spirits who slowly possess mediums. The deities and spirits then provide consultations through the mediums to clients who may come to the meeting with a variety of problems, e.g., interpersonal conflicts, financial hardships, or physical ailments.²⁸ Many of these deities and spirits in the Umbanda cosmos parallel figures within Christianity, e.g., Oxala, the sky god, may resemble Jesus, or Yemanjá, the sea goddess, may resemble the Virgin Mary. But Yong asserts that each spirit must be “discerned” in each particular circumstance for parallels to Christianity. “Discernment is always of concrete situations and can never be in general. What is discerned as the Holy Spirit or some other spirit in this or that particular situation today, may,” according to Yong, “be decidedly reversed or no longer applicable when the situation is examined tomorrow.”²⁹

²⁶ *Ibid*, 339.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 331.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 336-37.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 359.

Initially, Yong's determination to "discern the spirits" of other religions sounds eerily similar to the prior pitfalls of Christian exclusivism, judging the legitimacy of other religions by one's own religious standards. However, Yong is quick to warn against what he calls "theological imperialism."³⁰ Instead, Yong steers the conversation towards two points that are necessary for "equitable and viable dialogue:" (1) the exchanging of similarities and differences, which we previously discussed, and (2) the learning that occurs, not simply for one religious tradition but for both religious traditions.³¹ Consequently, the discernment that occurs between religions is hardly a zero-sum game, as prior discussions focusing on Christian salvation had described.

In the case of the Pentecostal-Umbanda dialogue, Yong highlights at least three areas where Pentecostals can learn from practitioners of Umbanda, as well as three areas where practitioners of Umbanda can learn from Pentecostals. For Pentecostals, Yong affirms that Umbanda can teach them: (1) to respond to the transcendent through additional phenomenology, (2) to embrace the connection between community and healing, and (3) to appreciate the ambiguity between both the finite and infinite, as well as between "the divine and the demonic."³² Likewise, Yong suggests that practitioners of Umbanda may also learn from Pentecostals. Such beneficial teachings may include: (1) "discerning the spirit-world both at the level of spirit possession and in the larger context of Brazilian society," (2) healing as a "socio-ethical dimension of health and wholeness," and (3) applying lessons from "spiritual warfare" to the significance of "dealing with the

³⁰ Ibid, 349.

³¹ Ibid, 359.

³² Ibid, 360.

Exu spirits of the world.”³³ As a result of this dialogue, both religious groups learn in a way that enhances either their own cosmological worldview or ritual praxis through the outsider perspective provided by their dialogue partners.

Ultimately, Yong grounds his pneumatological approach in historical Trinitarian thought,³⁴ which allows him to see the Holy Spirit’s presence in creation,³⁵ redemption,³⁶ and the new creation of heaven and earth.³⁷ Yong therefore affirms, “The religions of the world, like everything else that exists, are providentially sustained by the Spirit of God for divine purposes.”³⁸ Christians are then called into dialogue with other religions “at an interpersonal level” where all parties can proclaim their views without severing relationships.³⁹ Dialogue allows Christianity to continue proclaiming its own message while providing a forum for discerning God’s purpose through the other religious messages.

Conclusion & Future Work

Looking towards the future, an increase in interactions between diverse societies makes it necessary for Christianity to continuously reestablish relationships with the other world religions. Christian theologians must therefore respond anew to the question: If a Christian worldview is a true description of ultimate reality, how then are we to account for the diverse views of other religions?

³³ Ibid, 385.

³⁴ Yong, *Beyond*, 42.

³⁵ Ibid, 36.

³⁶ Ibid, 38.

³⁷ Ibid, 40.

³⁸ Ibid, 44-46.

³⁹ Ibid, 52.

While previous responses to this question, based on the First and Second Persons of the Holy Trinity, i.e., the Father-Creator God and Jesus the Son, have ineffectively focused either too much on the uniqueness of Christianity, to the exclusion of other religions, or too much on the commonality of all religions, thus depriving every religion of its distinct teachings. However, a focus on the Third Person of the Trinity, e.g., the Holy Spirit, provides a promising balance, allowing Christians to be true to their own truth claims while also respecting the differences of other religions. Nevertheless, future work is still needed in order to fairly and effectively “discern the spirits” of other religions, as Amos Yong believes a Christian theology of religions requires.

Although a pneumatological approach to a theology of religions is the most beneficial of these three approaches, incorporating both the *universality* of Christianity and the *particularity* of Christianity through the Spirit’s relationship to both the Father and the Son respectively,⁴⁰ Yong also cautions that “because of the relationship between Spirit and Son, any Christian theology of religions that begins pneumatologically must ultimately include and confront the Christological moment,”⁴¹ which intrinsically leads to the soteriological categories already proven inadequate. Similarly, if the main benefit to using the pneumatological approach in interreligious dialogue is a list of learning outcomes, does this inadvertently reduce other religions to incomplete truths already found in the Christocentric approach? One significant difference through the pneumatological approach, however, is the emphasis on mutual learning. It is not only other religions that have something to learn from Christianity; rather, Christianity also has something to learn from other religions. Does this imply that Christianity must then

⁴⁰ Ibid, 21.

⁴¹ Ibid, 103.

also affirm its own incomplete knowledge of the cosmos? Such an implication could either be seen as appropriately humbling for Christianity or devastatingly disorienting for maintaining its sense of identity unless future theologians can address such a concern.

Bibliography

- Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*. In *Christianity and Plurality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Richard J. Plantinga, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999.
- Boniface VIII. "Unam Sanctam." In *Christianity and Plurality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Richard J. Plantinga, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999.
- Herbert, Edward. "Common Notions Concerning Religion." In *Christianity and Plurality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Richard J. Plantinga, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999.
- Justin (Martyr). "The First Apology." In *Christianity and Plurality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Richard J. Plantinga, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999.
- Plantinga, Richard J. *Christianity and Plurality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999.
- Prothero, Stephen. *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World*. New York: Harper One, 2010.
- Schweiker, William. *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics in the Time of Many Worlds*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004.
- Rahner, Karl. "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions." In *Christianity and Plurality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Richard J. Plantinga, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999.
- Yong, Amos. *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions*. Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.
- Yong, Amos. *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003.