

The Dialogical Spirit
Christian Reason and Theological Method in the Third Millennium

Amos Young
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Amos Yong hosts a dialogue of contemporary voices representing a spectrum of thinkers and disciplines in search of “an effective model of Christian theological inquiry” (281). He writes with missiological focus and evangelical hope of forging fruitful dialogue between Christians and scientists, philosophers, and persons from other religious traditions. In some cases, these seem like disparate voices that are difficult to imagine connecting. Yong entices readers with claims that his methodology of dialogue offers an antidote to both relativism and ineffective types of foundationalism. Part of his goal is to maintain both the particularity of his pentecostal perspective and at the same time retain Christian claims to universality. He intends this method will advance Christian theology struggling with the challenge of bearing witness to Christian faith in our pluralistic world of the twenty-first century. This is demonstrated in Yong’s engagement with a broad range of thinkers.

Yong’s choice of the twelve conversation partners engaged in these essays embodies his hope that his dialogical method can be a useful tool for exploring unity amidst diversity. In Part one, he argues that evangelicals could utilize the work of C.S. Peirce to bridge a contemporary theological impasse. Yong presents his argument that Richard Rorty should reconsider Peirce’s conclusions in light of the reality of contextual intricacies of how language functions in dialogue. The postmodern christology of Donald Gelpi built on Peirce’s conception of knowledge braids together praxis, language, and metaphysics in ways that Yong believes can provide theoretical accounts for pentecostal belief and practices. In this way, Yong attempts to revive conversations between the work of philosophers like Richard Rorty and that of C. S. Peirce to explore new angles on old epistemological problems. What can be salvaged from the foundationalist project? Can a concept of knowledge grounded in pragmatism help to smooth out conflicting interpretations and perspectives? Yong suggests that revisiting Peirce could help. Then in part two, Yong curates a potential theological forum by connecting the theology of James W. McClendon, Jr, with voices of reformed orthodoxy like James K.A. Smith and world theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen. In this section, Yong names the tension between the ecumenical impulse and the evangelical loyalties of these thinkers.

Having identified potential areas for fruitful conversations weaving together new combinations of theological perspectives, Yong moves on to highlight collaboration between Christian and Buddhist thinkers addressing scientific methodology. In Part three Yong reviews the Mind and Life Institute’s fifteen dialogues that took place over a couple of decades at Emory University. Yong explores the work relating brain science and the study of disabilities as a site of

interreligious dialogue between Christians and Buddhists. Here Yong weaves together ideas of John Polkinghorne, the Dalai Lama, and B. Alan Wallace as an embodiment of the type of dialogical method he proposes. In part four, Yong concludes by identifying the comparative methodology of Francis X. Clooney and the methodological ludism of anthropologist, André Drooger as potential tools for theological exploration. By claiming as dialogue partners Buddhists, philosophers, scientists, and anthropologists as well as theologians Yong is demonstrating his dialogical methodology.

Despite the breathtaking scope of ground covered in these discussions, Yong's book illustrates the fragmented nature of contemporary theological discourse by the types of perspectives that are not invited to join the conversation. One thinks of the very philosophers Yong first invoked here. For example, Peirce's insistence that it is not as atomized individuals but as members of a community that we engage in inquiry. Although Yong does draw out potential partners for dialogue, they represent a fairly narrow slice of the complex postmodern global religious landscape. Ministerial practitioners and those interested in spiritual formation will be left wondering how Yong's theory helps with the problem of atomized communities that act as if they are sufficient unto themselves. Put another way, readers will notice the lack of engagement with a true diversity of liberal voices.

If readers don't find hope in these efforts to point a way to constructive dialogue, it is because Yong identifies but leaves indeterminate his own position regarding hard choices. Readers are left wondering exactly how this dialogical method will help when a Christian community is discerning how to practice in light of thorny issues such as the ordination of women or the full affirmation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender members, or faithful hospitality for immigrants in times of terrorist threats and Muslim/Christian conflict. Without explicitly naming this as a challenge, Yong insinuates limits of his own pneumatological imagination by his consistent vagueness regarding unanswered questions. His attempt to do theology dialogically calls for a deeper, more generous listening and sustained accompaniment with those outside of evangelical Christian circles. Yet, on the other hand, Yong maintains loyalty to a critically discerning model of theological inquiry that continues to uphold scripture as an authoritative norm.

Exactly how we are to manage remaining faithful to orthodoxy while at the same time genuinely opening to particular atheistic others remains unclear. In each chapter, Yong skillfully names key questions, but does not clearly commit himself to answers to such questions. For example, he hopes to open up dialogue but also avoid "the relativization, isolation, and privatization" of discourse in a world of many faiths (13). He asks, but does not answer questions like: how is scripture an authoritative norm for theology? Yong points to contemporary ecclesialist Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen as a promising theologian, but also identifies unanswered problems with the diversity of practices and perspectives in contextual realities facing attempts at truly ecumenical theology. Yong reviews worries that Polkinghorne's "bottom-up" approach may cross the line of orthodoxy, asking whether or not it is "sufficiently Trinitarian" (177). Yong names but does not take a clear stand on questions about whether or not Francis X. Clooney maintains "fidelity to Christian faith" or stands "in danger of apostasy from faith in Christ" (246). Yong insists that dialogue is a way to maintain relations across sharp polarities. With the patience of a peacemaker, Yong hopes to reconcile those long divided. The contribution Yong's book makes is the generous and gentle effort to bridge divides.

Are we left with only relativism unless we salvage some type of foundationalist moves? Drawing on the ludic model of Andre Drooger's study of dynamics of play, Yong suggests that mutually exclusive propositions can be held together dialogically. He thinks that the study of religion can accommodate "atheistic, theistic, and even agnostic perspectives, simultaneously, sequentially, and dynamically" without any one perspective having "the final word" (270). Here and elsewhere Yong seems to have in mind something like Hegelian synthesis. Even as a focused reflection on dialogue as a method, Yong could take his argument another step or two to convince readers that this offers something new for doing theology. Hopefully, Yong will round out the presentation of what he has in mind by demonstrating how this method will foster helpful connections with those less friendly to his starting point. How can this reconcile both more progressive theological perspectives and secular thinkers working on dialogue? For instance, mention of Jürgen Habermas is strikingly absent in these reflections. Although a study of religion may envelope that type of diversity, it is quite another thing to further effective theological dialogue without taking a stand on particular practices and premises.

Amos Yong set out to develop a way of engaging in a "post-Rortyeian, pragmatist, and truly postmodern" pathway to Christian practice and dialogue. His impressive set of interlocutors represents potential pathways for this methodology both within his own theological circles and intersections with some epistemologists in science and philosophy. Scholar practitioners interested in intercultural and interfaith dialogue will find Yong's book provocative in its granular approach to this particular slice of conversations. Although professional academics may need Yong's reminders of humility for constructing theological theory and education, the book is not written for pastors leading communities of practice like congregations.

Those whose worldview situates them in contexts other than evangelical or pentecostal communities may decide this book is a conversation that does not interest them. In terms of a contribution to epistemology, Yong makes some salient intellectual moves regarding intercultural dialogue and comparative religious study. Yet the homogeneity of his chosen conversation partners limits his effect. In philosophical circles debate is hardly over about epistemological moves made by Plantinga, much less C.S. Peirce. It is difficult to imagine that many secular philosophers would be captivated by Yong's argument here. Yong's book will be welcome among evangelical and conservative theological circles. Nevertheless evangelicals are not delivered by this new method from the dilemma of facing hard choices regarding how to hold together tensions between reason, experience, and their quest for inspiration and inerrancy of scripture. Yong could clarify what he means by "effective" theological discourse to expand his argument in ways relevant to the practice of ministry and spiritual formation.