

On the Holy Spirit & Christian Scholarship

An Interview Between Amos Yong and Joseph E. Gorra

Amos Yong is a professor of theology at Regent University (Virginia Beach, VA) and director of their doctor of philosophy program. He is an accomplished scholar on several fronts, with research interests in global Pentecostalism, theology of disability, Pentecostalism and science, and many other multidisciplinary areas. EPS members will be interested in his recent philosophy of religion article, [“Disability and the Love of Wisdom: De-forming, Re-forming, and Per-forming Philosophy of Religion,”](#) *Ars Disputandi* (2009). Over the years, Amos has also contributed to *Philosophia Christi* as a book reviewer.

During Spring 2012, Amos was a Fellow at Biola University’s [Center for Christian Thought](#) where he did research toward a future book on the significance of the Spirit in Christian scholarship and higher education. This is a question not only of interest to self-identified Pentecostals and Charismatics, but also of interest to evangelicals.

In the interview below, Amos discusses his own vocation as a scholar, along with how he sees the ‘pentecostal’ contribution to so-called ‘faith-learning integration’ discussions and theology’s work in multidisciplinary contexts.

I want to start off by asking how you view your vocation as a theologian

The first thing I say is that I identify myself as a pentecostal *scholar*. *What does it mean to be a pentecostal scholar?* It means not dismissing pentecostal spirituality, pentecostal life, pentecostal practices, pentecostal ways of being in the world, and since there’s sometimes a lot of craziness going on in those ways of being in the world, it makes it a very exciting job!

In other words, as a pentecostal I don’t want to bracket all of that. As a pentecostal, I theologize with all of that, which is very messy.

As a pentecostal scholar, what in the pentecostal tradition informs the manner in which you do scholarship?

Certainly the role of the Holy Spirit in pentecostal imagination and worldview is prominent. So in that respect, it may be that pentecostals are more attentive to the Holy Spirit.

But as a theologian I also want to step back and say, “let’s also take, for example, the evangelical tradition which may not foreground the work of the Holy Spirit quite that much.” Now here I am asking a theological normative question: For evangelical foregrounding of the Spirit, does it mean that the Holy Spirit isn’t at work just that much? I probably want to say something like No. For the Holy Spirit is at work whether you or I name the Spirit.

But it’s possible that one may not have or use what I call ‘pneumatological language’ to foreground the Spirit’s work. So are we theologizing about the same thing but using different languages? That may be possible. I think what is distinctive is the kind of things we are paying attention to.

My way of looking at the world as a pentecostal may probably mean that I am more comfortable saying that just because there’s a lot of craziness, it doesn’t mean that we want to throw out the baby with the bath water. It does mean that discerning the work of the Holy Spirit will be a lot more complicated and we have to make some very fine distinctions in a particular phenomenon. In other words, to say whether the Holy Spirit is working here or not here seems a little bit artificial, so we will have to cultivate what I have called ‘pneumatological sensitivity.’

Discernment has to be a very precise kind of a thing in terms of how the Spirit is present or not present here, and even when we say that the Spirit is not working here, how then is the Spirit still working redemptively in this very dark scenario?

Can we say, then, that part of your job as a pentecostal theologian is to help draw attention to how God is present in the world, colored by the social imaginary of what it means to be a pentecostal?

I like that. Because I do think at the end of the day, at some fundamental level, all Christians are interested in this question – the question of drawing attention to how God is present – and they all should be.

Is this also a contribution that pentecostal scholars bring, ecumenically, to the broader Christian tradition?

Yes, so I’ve just re-read Jonathan Edwards’ *Religious Affections*, a well-recognized classic treatment of the subject. A careful reading of it will show that Edwards worked very

hard to develop criteria, and to be nuanced, and to be very sensitive about other different ways of discerning things. He doesn't want to be presumptive. I think this should be something that resonates with pentecostals.

I know Edwards is not a pentecostal in our sense of the term, and as a pastor he's very concerned about these things. Colonialism is in the background coupled with a kind of bias against enthusiasm. Edwards is attentive to this.

Maybe a pentecostal bias, or "colored" perspective – to use your term – is less suspicious, which opens up a possibility, perhaps of naming and discerning these materials. Edwards can be very helpful for us. For he still provides a kind of well-received classical way of articulating these things at a certain level of theological respectability. Pentecostals are a little bit used to the messiness of reality, but Edwards is still very helpful. He's a good conversation partner. And we can help call attention to that. That could be a good starting point.

How does a 'pneumatological sensitivity' and a responsiveness to God in doing scholarship lend themselves to particular practices as a scholar?

The tradition hands these issues down to us in a way that is both helpful and unhelpful. In one sense, we speak of "faith and reason." But sometimes we speak of using earlier terms like "enthusiasm" and "religion within the limit of reason alone" – these are like poles on two sides of a spectrum. I think it's helpful in some respects like when we're talking about the left brain and the right brain. There's day and night, there's male and female. I do think at one level pentecostalism puts its fingers on those aspects of the human constitution such as the affective, the emotional, the subjective.

But with all of this, I want to say something like this: I want to be sensitive to the lesson we learned from modern liberalism. It's not a mere return to Schleiermacher's kind of pietism, but not returning to that doesn't mean to not attend to the affective, the pietistic, and the emotive at bodily level.

Perhaps pentecostals might be more sensitive to the fact that reason and cognition can be involved in the affective and emotion?

Yes. I guess being a pentecostal, because of the foregrounding of affective reason and embodiment, affectivity and emotion is not mere emotionalism, mere spiritualism. Some people may think pentecostalism is all about the spiritual, I think as a pentecostal scholar I try to call attention to my own pentecostal friends about the fact that our spirituality is not much about otherworldliness.

We are very concerned with the material, the affective way of inhabiting this world. As a pentecostal scholar I think it's very difficult to separate reason from faith, the emotion from the intellect, and the body from the spirit. Maybe pentecostals can help Christians think about all these things in their intertwined, interdependent, and interconstitutive manner. We have a take on it.

I try to encourage my pentecostal scholarly friends to keep helping us all to think about this and maybe perhaps our combined reflection will contribute to the broader Christian discourse, which I think will need a little bit of help in all these points. I would suggest a pentecostal approach that is holistic, paying attention to embodiment and the material dimension. That perspective is a springboard for me to think in interdisciplinary terms. All of this is helpful to think in terms of the embodied and social dimensions of our life. So for me this pneumatological imagination has already been interdisciplinary.

An intuition for interdisciplinarity?

Theology is already informed by experience, which is unpacked by many disciplines. I always have this kind of interdisciplinary intuition, methodologically, when I do my theological work. Intuitively, I don't have to think too much about them, and I try to bring some theological coherence coming from the other side.

It could be that this theological coherence, coming from the other side, is a kind of back door for theology, as "the queen of sciences." It could be, but it is not my intent. It's the Pope's business to make theological announcements on all things, not mine. My intent is that if I am to speak theologically about something, there's no way I can do it if I do not pay attention to what I call the 'many tongues' of the 'many experiences' of the 'many disciplines' that constitute the totality of the world that we live in. So how can theology make a claim in this world if you are using only theological resources?

So, what are your thoughts on pentecostal theology as an interdisciplinary enterprise?

This is actually a good question. In the last couple of weeks I was in a seminar here at the Center for Christian Thought at Biola University. We have Barthian and Reformed epistemologists considering how to do interdisciplinary work. We also have Husserlians. It's very interesting. I don't think there's a wide agreement on how to do it.

Let me try to speak from both sides now, because I do think that illuminates. I think the life tension for me as a pentecostal scholar that seeks to be interdisciplinary is this: be authentically pentecostal, but yet at the same time seek to pay attention to many other ‘tongues.’

On the one hand, I think like Jamie Smith in his book, *Thinking in Tongues*, which is subtitled [‘Pentecostal contributions to Christian philosophy.’](#) This is interesting in terms of how you try to parse that. First of all, he speaks of “Christian philosophy.” Now, in some circles this is a bit questionable. For some think there isn’t something called ‘Christian philosophy.’ And to a degree, Jamie agrees with them. On the other hand it seems to me what Jamie is attempting to do in the book is to say that when you factor pentecostalism in terms of intuition then certain types of questions open up. On the other hand, do I want to ‘divide’ and ‘conquer’ and turn pentecostal philosophy to a pentecostal enterprise? I’m not sure that’s what I want to do. Should I pay attention to my metaphor of the ‘many tongues’ and the way it functions? Should I allow the philosophical conversation to speak to my experience in all of this otherness or to let the otherness of the philosophical tongues register themselves so that I’m now enriched by philosophy?

In other words, am I am colonizing these philosophies and making them my playgrounds? I am sensitive to the charge of imperialism. I urge my colleagues to be robust pentecostals and at the same time I am a bit hesitant about turning the whole world into pentecostal. Do we really respect the otherness of philosophy or science? I guess I want to inhabit the tension. I don’t have a good answer for it, and maybe a good answer is to live within that tension rather than to enter into a kind of straight ‘integration’ as it does not allow the otherness of the others to be preserved...

I think I hear what you are saying. For some of the reasons you are stating, I think the term ‘integration’ can be problematic. My philosophy colleague at Biola, Garry DeWeese, writes about ‘convergence’ instead of ‘integration’ in his [Doing Philosophy as a Christian](#). In this regard, the integrity of both philosophy and theology can be maintained, and yet there’s a mutual openness and reception to the ‘other,’ at least as much as there can be.

I like that. I like the notion of the integrity to be maintained. I’m sensitive to theology’s imposing a kind of an imperialistic image. I think God creates and allows creation integrity. The many tongues of pentecost also preserve the otherness. It wasn’t like our tongues are all translated into one *lingua franca*. The many tongues are all preserved, so finding a way to preserve that distinctiveness is important for me and therefore not to hegemonize. There has to be room for all. It sounds like political correctness, but for me, it is a theological correctness as a pentecostal. You just can’t

tame the Holy Spirit. That's what the tradition teaches me. There has to be an otherness to it.

What do you think of the issue of theology coming to collaborate at the level of discourse and conceptual analysis with other disciplines like philosophy? Is philosophy a 'handmaiden'?

I read John Henry Newman's lecture, *The Idea of a University*, again yesterday. He tried to articulate the idea of theology as the queen of science. A theologian will never really get away from that but for Newman the more important thing is that theology was a part of the discourse of the university. Now that's in the 19th century university and it's very different from the 20th and the 21st centuries.

I do think that's the challenge for today – to think about theology in the university. Now if it's a Christian university it's easier at a certain level, but at a secular university it's trickier. So the emergence of religious studies as a discipline within the secular university is one way in which theology can remain and does remain in the wider conversation. One of the other points that Newman said, and I thought was interesting and I resonated with it in the 21st century, was that on the one hand other disciplines were incomplete without theology, but he also said that theology was also incomplete without other disciplines.

So there's that idea of openness to the other, even in the nineteenth century?

Yes. So I think what I am striving as a theologian is toward an approach that does not see other disciplines as *only* maidservants. That may have been fine three hundred years ago but not today. Theologians are looking through a glass dimly, no less dimly than any other disciplines. Other disciplines are not just servants of theology. Somehow theology also has to play the servant role to other disciplines, which means that we respect them as they are doing their work and we come along side and we inform. Sometimes we are uninvited so we must be attentive to that.

But getting back to the notion of looking through a glass equally dimly, for pentecostals sometimes the assumption is that we rely on the Holy Spirit so maybe we have further insights into things than other people who don't rely on the Spirit. That is a very problematic issue. At some level it is scriptural: Paul in I Corinthians 2 talks about natural mind does not know the mind of God, but I've just heard too many pentecostals use texts like that to justify their views over against people who weren't Spirit-filled like them. It may be true in the ontological scheme of thing that Christians have a kind of insights that others don't. But I certainly think that's the wrong way to *talk* about doing Christian scholarship. It's not that I have the Holy Ghost so I must

have a kind of illumination that you don't. Even if that's true, I don't want to *claim* it. But I am not even sure that's true.

As a pentecostal, I am even more susceptible to these misguided ruminations about the Holy Spirit. The Spirit-filled life – I don't like to use that as a factor of accomplishment, as if we are Christian/Pentecostal scholars and now we have the Holy Ghost so we have the insights that physicists, biologists, chemists or others don't have. I want to let you know that we have certain commitments and we bring those to the discussion table but we cannot speak from the position of having seen things eschatologically. If we were, we wouldn't be at the discussion table. And it's called the 'discussion table' precisely because it's for discussion, not for kerygmatic proclamation. I think that [kerygmatic proclamation] happens outside of these kinds of [discussion] contexts that we are talking about.

Are you saying that there is not much of a qualitative difference between pentecostal scholarship and nonpentecostal scholarship.

Again, you can recognize my hesitance here. Even if there is a qualitative difference, do I want to *proclaim* that? I am not even sure that there is. Or, if I do say there is a difference, it's not in terms of superiority or inferiority but in terms of distinctiveness of work. In that respect, I think there's a difference. But my point would be that I can very well imagine many Catholic theologians who are not charismatic but they do their retreats once a year and all of their scholarship is flowing out of that three-week retreat. So there's kind of a very spiritual process involved there but it's not pentecostal or charismatic. I have no reason to think that the Holy Spirit isn't at work in that.

My point is that I don't want to claim a monopoly on the Holy Spirit. Some pentecostals can be ignorant about these matters. I know many pentecostals that work in the sciences that raise their hands on Sunday and then become very "normal" on Monday, whatever that "normal" means.

I do think different traditions develop a variety of responses for that. I would definitely say that there is some sort of a tension. I do wish all people have the experience with the Spirit that we as a pentecostal community have had and embraced and looked forward to. Obviously I do. But the previous generation of mine might have said that we're superior because we have that experience and you don't, and that's what I am very sensitive to. I don't want to say that. But it does seem a bit hypocritical because obviously I want you to have these experiences, so why wouldn't I express my view? So there is a tension right there.

How do you think about a “pentecostal faith-learning model”?

As a scholar I do want to say on the one hand I think pentecostals are in the position to develop a faith and learning model that is helpful, but I also think we pentecostals don't want to say that our model is superior. In fact I think we are just barely learning how to articulate our model. And it may be the case that we haven't yet had the number of generations to think about these matters that other traditions have had.

Catholics in the Thomistic tradition have long been struggling with these things. I want to say that maybe pentecostal experience can contribute a bit to a deepening of this Catholic sensibility. I definitely want to say that pentecostals can learn a lot from dialoging with Catholics and, certainly, from the Reformed traditions, about faith and learning models. Pentecostals have been learning a lot. And we can also do something with our pneumatological sensibility as well. In the learning process maybe a few have been converted to become Reformed. My goal is not to convert all Reformed or Catholic people to pentecostalism. At the end of the day I do think it's God's business to convert people, so if you are converted, don't blame us! I want to respect and learn from the Reformed, the Catholic, and other models out there, which have been wrestling with these kinds of things. Can we contribute something? I don't want to assume that we can. I think that question must be asked by the other folks when they listen to and see what we do. If their answer at the end of the day is “Not really,” then it's still been a good time trying.

Okay, but to you, what would be distinct about a pentecostal faith-learning model?

For one thing, the mind and heart are intertwined. I would say that the heart, the affect, the emotions, the feeling – these are all at the heart level. Our hands are at the *praxis* level. I want to respect the integrity of these domains but at the end of the day want to see them all together.

From my perspective, it's a pneumatological imagination which is attentive to both the intertwined and the distinctiveness of these. On the one hand the seamless curriculum, in terms of thinking of the university, recognizes there are classrooms, chapels, service learning, etc. These are different domains in a certain sense. But at the same time, everyone in these domains continues to learn: the cognitive learning, the affective learning, the body learning... maybe one of these domains is foregrounded than the others. That's what I mean by the seamless curriculum. So that it's not that we go to the chapel to get one thing, and go to the classroom to get another thing. There are different sources of learning. Somehow we as faculty and administrators

need to think about how we as a community have been doing all these things in different ways.

So, there's a kind of holistic, organizational intention to recognize all those as sources of learning?

Yes. And here's where I think pentecostals are not *doing* anything different than others. We just provide a different *theological rationality*.

Because on one hand we have pentecostals saying what we need to do is to get the Holy Ghost in our classroom, and what they mean by that is a lot more charismatic, speaking in tongues in the class. And as a Pentecostal, I am saying "No." I don't think that's a good idea. I am not opposed to more speaking in tongues. What I want to say is that these are distinctive domains that we cannot turn into something else.

But at the same time we can be more attentive to the Holy Spirit in our education because we realize that as pentecostals our affects and emotions are not second class citizens. They are as first class as the intellect so we don't privilege the intellect. But we hope we also don't privilege the others. So paying attention to all of that is important. Spiritual discipline, intellectual exercises... are all part of this.

Readers can learn more about Amos Yong's work by visiting his [faculty page](#) at Regent University website. His forthcoming book, *Finding the Holy Spirit at the Christian University: Renewing Christian Higher Education* (tentatively titled), with Regent's Dale Coulter will be published by Eerdmans.