CHAPTER ELEVEN

A DISTINCT ECONOMY OF THE SPIRIT?
AMOS YONG, PENTECOSTALISM AND EASTERN ORTHODOXY

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If ever the old adage “it’s a small world after all” jumps off the page, one might look no further than an unexpected theological “East-meets-West” conversation between Pentecostal and Eastern Orthodox scholars. Furthermore, how ironic that Amos Yong and I, both with roots in the East, should share in this conversation as residents of the western world! Yong is a western Christian born in Malaysia (the East), and although I am ethnically Greek by decent, I am an Eastern Orthodox Christian born in the far-western United States!1 At the top of the list of typical topics that have piqued an interest in Eastern Orthodoxy by Pentecostal scholars are: the experiential and multi-sensory nature of prayer and worship, a non-juridical soteriology, its eucharistic (or communion) ecclesiology, and a thoroughgoing trinitarian witness. Yong is such a scholar who has engaged with Orthodox viewpoints in several areas. His corpus reflects a theological breadth and diversity that surpasses impressive. However, the robust list of authors with whom Yong interacts reflects an overwhelming representation of the Christian West. One finds only occasional nods to Orthodox authors, such as Metropolitan John Zizioulas and Vladimir Lossky in regard to the Trinity, and Metropolitan Georges Khodr in regard to Yong’s pneumatological theology of religions.2

Since Yong is one of the most prolific voices in Pentecostalism today, spanning the theological and religious spectrum of comparative views, the scarcity of his scholarly engagement with Orthodox Christianity might

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1 Orthodox Christians have always been in the geographic West, and “western” Christians, like Yong and his family, are certainly located in the geographic “East.” Most Orthodox writers do not use the term “Eastern” to self-designate, preferring simply “Orthodox” but the designations can be helpful nonetheless when making theological comparisons between the two.

2 An exception is Yong’s deliberate and detailed linking of the spiritual practices and attitudes of ancient desert monastic tradition of Orthodox Christianity with Theravada Buddhism in PCBD.
seem curious. On one hand, it may be shown that Yong’s emphatically-pneumatological methodology and affirmation of the benefits (yea, necessity) of religious pluralism, as an outgrowth of the many tongues of Pentecost, does not “sit well” with Orthodoxy’s emphatically trinitarian and conciliar (as opposed to individualistic or pluralistic) ethos. It may be that even though Yong has expressed his appreciation for the apophatic way of Orthodox theology, which Vladimir Lossky described as “an attitude of mind which refuses to form concepts about God,” Yong is a systematic theologian par excellence of the western Christian tradition, and the two “ways” of doing theology–systematic and apophatic–do not harmonize particularly well. And yet, Yong agrees with many Orthodox Christian perspectives, even though he might not always credit a specific Orthodox spokesperson in the list of authors. He agrees, for example, with the Orthodox consensus that the filioque clause is damaging to trinitarian conceptions of God for a number of reasons, including non-subordination of the Spirit and the recognition of the full personhood of the Spirit. Most notably, however, the foundational premise of the ecclesial mission of Orthodox Christianity and Yong’s theology of religions is that the Holy Spirit is active and working in the entire created universe, “everywhere present and filling all things.” This is not an insignificant theological concept on which to build a dialogue!

The Orthodox Church has maintained an unbroken historical connection to the New Testament Church. Unlike the historic development of the papacy in Roman Catholicism, however, the Orthodox Church is not