

Discerning the Spirit in World Religions: The Search for Criteria

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1 The Pneumatological Turn in the Theology of Religions

The last thirty years have seen a widespread interest in the activity of the Holy Spirit in non-Christian religions,¹ so much so that it has even been referred to as a “pneumatological turn” in the theology of religion.² It is noteworthy that this is exemplified in a broad range of Christian traditions. One of the first voices was George Khodr who addressed the issue from an Eastern Orthodox perspective, arguing that the Orthodox criticism of the *filioque* (of the Spirit “who proceeds from the Father *and from the Son*”) invites one to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit outside the boundaries of the church.³ Similar perspectives were developed in Roman Catholicism by the Jesuit Jacques Dupuis,⁴ in the circles of the World Council of Churches (wcc) by Stanley Samartha,⁵ in evangelical Protestant circles by the charismatic Baptist Clark Pinnock,⁶ and

1 I am aware of the problematic side of the term ‘religion’ (see Benno van den Toren, “Religion,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017³)) but use it here in a very loose sense for those phenomena outside the Christian tradition that we from a Christian perspective recognize as religious.

2 Amos Yong, “The Turn to Pneumatology in Christian Theology of Religions: Conduit or Detour?” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 35.3–4 (1998): 438.

3 George Khodr, “Christianity in a Pluralist World: The Economy of the Holy Spirit,” in *Living Faiths and the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. Stanley J. Samartha (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1971), 131–42.

4 Jacques Dupuis, “The Cosmic Influence of the Holy Spirit and the Gospel Message,” in *Jesus Christ and His Spirit: Theological Approaches*, ed. Jacques Dupuis (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1977), 181–210; Jacques Dupuis, “The Cosmic Economy of the Spirit and the Sacred Scriptures of Religious Traditions,” in *Jesus Christ and His Spirit: Theological Approaches*, ed. Jacques Dupuis (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1977), 211–28; Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997).

5 S.J. Samartha, “The Holy Spirit and People of Various Faiths, Cultures, and Ideologies,” in *Holy Spirit* (Nashville: Tidings, 1974), 20–39; S.J. Samartha, “The Holy Spirit and People of Other Faiths,” *Bangalore Theological Forum* 21.4–1 (1990): 68–93.

6 Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1996).

most elaborately by the Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong.⁷ In my assessment, these different contributions cannot be traced back to a common origin, but rather reflect shared developments in the broader theological scene, such as a renewed interest in the theology of the Holy Spirit in the second half of the twentieth century, the urgency of theological reflection on religious plurality and a desire to move beyond what is perceived as a “Christological impasse” in the theology of religions.⁸

This pneumatological turn brings a number of gains to the Christian theology of religions. The main is that it allows for an openness to the presence of God in non-Christian religious traditions that is different from a human response to the general revelation of God as Creator and the universal presence of the cosmic Christ. The proper nature of the Spirit’s activity encourages us to also look for the intimate presence of God at work in aspects of other religions as God guides them in various ways towards his purposes. In an earlier article, I have explored some of the main critical issues related to this pneumatological turn.⁹ In this contribution, I take a step further and explore some of the critical issues concerning the Christian task of ‘discernment of spirits’ in non-Christian religious communities and whether there are criteria that might help us in this task.

In what follows, I begin with a brief consideration of the nature of and need for discernment. Subsequently, I focus on two issues that are crucial for bringing the wider debate on discernment and criteria for this discernment a step further. The first issue relates to the question of whether the multiple criteria that have been put forward are sufficiently helpful, precisely because they are multiple and may point in different directions. The second issue is the question of whether the formulation of criteria for discernment will not unhelpfully burden interreligious encounter. When we approach other religious traditions in the light of our own criteria about where God might be present, active or absent, we appear to be coming with a pre-determined point of view which effectively blocks true dialogue. This leads to the central theological issue at

7 Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000); Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003); Yong, “The Turn to Pneumatology in Christian Theology of Religions”; Amos Yong, “The Holy Spirit and the World Religions: On the Christian Discernment of Spirit(s) ‘after’ Buddhism,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 24, no. 1 (2004): 191–207.

8 The expression ‘Christological impasse’ comes from Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s)*, chap. 2.

9 Benno van den Toren, “The Relationship between Christ and the Spirit in a Christian Theology of Religions,” *Missiology* 40.3 (2012): 263–80.