

# Toward a Perichoretic Trinitarian Theology of Religions: A Response to Amos Yong, Harold Netland and Gerald McDermott

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## KEY WORDS

| Perichoretic Trinity | Son and Spirit | Two Hands |  
| Revelation | Salvation | Mission | Church |

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to interact with the methodologies of evangelical trinitarian theology of religions developed by three leading evangelical theologians—Amos Yong, Harold Netland and Gerald McDermott. I will show how they converge and diverge with the strength and weakness of each. I will conclude the paper by proposing a perichoretic trinitarian theology of religions and expand their ideas from a trinitarian and kenotic ecclesiological perspective that is rooted in a perichoretic drama of the Father’s sending of the Son and the Spirit as two hands within a single economic mission of salvation.

## INTRODUCTION

A general theology of religions has widely been developed within two main approaches: Theocentrism and Christocentrism. Pneumatocentrism is the recent turn. According to Veli-Matti Karkkainen, “the first Pentecostal Christian who has worked hard to construct a pneumatological [Trinitarian] theology of religions is Amos Yong who came originally from Malaysia in particular, Asia in general, where the challenge of religious diversity is most pervasive.”<sup>1</sup> Yong appeared on the world theological scene as a Pentecostal theologian with his first book *Discerning the Spirit(s)*.<sup>2</sup> Yong is unquestionably one of the

most prolific and celebrated Asian theologians alive today.<sup>3</sup> As a Pentecostal scholar, Yong’s scholarship is deeply foundational in a pneumatological hermeneutics of theology and missiology. In response to a twofold theocentric and Christocentric theology of religions, Yong proposes a pneumatological approach as a complete fulfiller to the Trinity. While Yong’s methodology of Pneumatocentrism certainly offers a positive attitude toward other faiths with the recognition of the Spirit’s prevenient and cosmic presence in their cultures before Christians’ interaction with

*of Religions* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000). Before this first book, Yong had published an article on a Pneumatological Theology of Religions in 1998. See Amos Yong, “The Turn to Pneumatology in Christian Theology of Religions: Conduit or Detour,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, vol. 35, no. 3-4 (1998): 39-65.

<sup>3</sup> See Yong’s CV, <https://www.fuller.edu/faculty/amos-yong/> (accessed on March 8, 2018).

<sup>1</sup> Veli-Matti Karkkainen, “Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions: A Pentecostal-Charismatic Inquiry,” in *International Review of Mission*, vol. 91, no. 316 (April 2002): 187-198 (at 192).

<sup>2</sup> Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit (s): Toward a Pentecostal/Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology*

them, overemphasizing Pneumatocentrism may create the problem of limiting or de-emphasizing Jesus.

In response to this imbalanced emphasis and other theological issues, two of the leading evangelical theologians of religions, Gerald McDermott and Harold Netland have written one of the most substantive books on a Trinitarian theology of religions from an evangelical perspective.<sup>4</sup> In this book, they have not only appreciated, but also criticized Yong's Pneumatological approaches. One of their main critiques is Yong's separation of the Spirit from the Son. Their comments on Yong's methodologies are as follows;

So while Yong does not want to server the two economies of the Son and the Spirit too sharply, he also does not want the economy of the Spirit to be subordinated to that of the Word by defining the Spirit's work with Christological criteria. Yet in his later work, he regularly downplays the usefulness of Christological criteria in discernment.<sup>5</sup>

In his review article<sup>6</sup> on their book, Yong's comments are as follows;

While evangelical thinking about the religions can remain disjunctive [apologetic] at the discursive level, evangelical mission vis-à-vis those in other faiths demands a more dynamic Trinitarian praxis than that developed by authors. I thus propose a more Pneumatologically informed Trinitarian theology of holistic Christian mission to undergird evangelical practice in our pluralistic world.<sup>7</sup>

4 Gerald R. McDermott and Harold A. Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions: An Evangelical Proposal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

5 Ibid., 56.

6 Amos Yong, "Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Religions: A Pentecostal-Evangelical and Missiological Elaboration," in *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, vol. 40, no. 4. (2016): 294-306.

7 Ibid., 294.

Their mutual reaction against each other in respect is a point of departure for this paper. I believe that good theology is always born out of an appreciative and critical reaction against each other. Having said this, I will first interact with their proposals and methodologies of an evangelical trinitarian theology of religions. In my interaction with Yong, I am confined myself to his particular works on the intersection between Pneumatology and a theology of religions from a Pentecostal perspective. It is impossible to interact with all of his massive works in this paper. Second, I will then show how Yong, Netland and McDermott converge and diverge with the strength and limitation of each. Finally I will conclude the paper by proposing a perichoretic trinitarian theology of religions and suggest an expansion of their ideas from a trinitarian ecclesiological perspective that is grounded in a perichoretic drama of the Father's sending of the Son and the Spirit as 'two hands' (Irenaeus) within a single economic mission of salvation.

## I. YONG'S PROPOSALS AND MCDERMOTT AND NETLAND'S REACTIONS

What are Yong's foundational Pneumatological proposals? From his first book *Discerning the Spirit (s)* (2000)<sup>8</sup> to his most recent book *The Hermeneutical Spirit* (2018),<sup>9</sup> Yong proposes the Spirit's universal ministry as the methodological and hermeneutical ground for a Pneumatological theology of religions in a pluralistic world. He takes up Acts 2 as a prime text for a Pneumatological approach, but he sees a larger picture of the Spirit's role

8 Yong, *Discerning the Spirit (s)*.

9 Amos Yong, *The Hermeneutical Spirit: Theological Interpretations and Scriptural Reasoning for the 21st Century* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stocks, 2018).

in creation, recreation and eschatological vision of final creation.<sup>10</sup> He reads Genesis’ narrative of creation and John’s eschatological vision of final creation (Rev. 5:9; 14:6; 21:22-26) through the lens of Luke’s Pentecostalism.<sup>11</sup> In his book *The Missiological Spirit*, he argues that reading in this broader way “Not only helps us to ground a pneumatological reflection in the doctrine of the Trinity, but also establishes the cosmic and creational scope of the work of the Spirit.”<sup>12</sup> He calls this cosmic and global mission work of the Spirit “*Missio Spiritus*,”<sup>13</sup> in lieu of *Missio Dei*. I would like to call the former either ‘Pneumatocentric Trinitarianism’ or ‘Cosmo-centric Trinitarianism.’<sup>14</sup>

Second, Yong proposes a Pneumatological approach as a better way than that of a Christological approach for an interreligious dialogue. In the context of interreligious dialogue, he is dissatisfied with two methodologies. One is a methodology of proceeding from Christology, which ends up with an exclusive soteriology. In this regard, he even accuses Karl Barth of a “Christomonistic exclusivist.”<sup>15</sup> I will evaluate Yong’s critique of Barth’s Christology later. At this point, I would like to point out another methodology that makes Yong unhappy. In his review article, Yong is unhappy with the evangelical Christians’ negative approach to other faiths in terms of soteriological categories on the basis

of rejecting religious salvation (exclusivism).<sup>16</sup> He calls for the need of going beyond these two unhealthy methodologies. For the latter, he proposes an anthropological approach, which recognizes divine providence and the beauty of human cultures as reflecting the image of God.<sup>17</sup> For the former, he proposes a Pneumatological approach, which invites Christians to discern and affirm the universal presence and work of the Spirit in other religious cultures as creation of God. For Yong, the goal of such twofold approach is to achieve an inclusive Pneumatological theology of religions.<sup>18</sup>

While affirming that a “Christological question plays a role in formulating a Trinitarian theology of religions, he proposes that a Pneumatological question could provide a way to move beyond the almost irreconcilable axioms of God’s salvific will and the historical particularity of Jesus Christ of Nazareth as savior for all people.”<sup>19</sup> For Yong, Christology is helpful in certain contexts, but it is not helpful outside the church.<sup>20</sup> In order to evaluate the cultures of other faiths positively, Yong argues that “We must deploy Pneumatological categories rather than impose Christological ones.”<sup>21</sup> This raises a critical question. Does Yong divorce the work of the Spirit from the work of Christ?<sup>22</sup>

Netland and McDermott think that Yong does separate the Spirit from the Son.<sup>23</sup> In

10 Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003). 36-42.

11 Amos Yong, *The Missiological Spirit: Christian Mission Theology in the Third Millennium Global Context* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 185.

12 Ibid., 185.

13 Ibid., 185.

14 For the latter, see Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation To World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2010), 66.

15 Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 23.

16 Yong, “Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Religions,” 295.

17 Ibid., 295.

18 Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*. 27.

19 Yong, *Discerning the Spirit* (s), 94.

20 Ibid., 137.

21 Yong, “Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Religions,” 297.

22 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 56.

23 Ibid., 56. See also Keith E. Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity: An Augustinian Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011), 193. Johnson criticizes that “Yong’s Pneumatological

my view, their assessment of Yong's position on separating the Spirit from the Son is overstatement. I would rather argue that Yong as a Pentecostal theologian, does prioritize the Spirit (inclusivism or universality) over the Son (exclusivism or particularity). In his prioritizing the Spirit over the Son, Yong does not necessarily replace Christology with Pneumatology.<sup>24</sup> In his book *Hospitality and the Other*,<sup>25</sup> he explores the ethics of Christ's hospitality and His embrace of the religious other in love (Jn. 4) as the mission models for the church's hospitable engagement with the religious other.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, McDermott and Netland do not mention Yong's missiology of hospitality in their discussion of his position on the Spirit and the Son. In their reading of Yong, they are too selective. To argue that Yong does not replace Christ with the Spirit, we should consult with his book *Spirit-Word-Community*,<sup>27</sup> in which he develops the need of holding what he calls the "trialectic of the Spirit, Word and Church."<sup>28</sup> Also in his book *Beyond the Impasse*, Yong notes that "the turn to a Pneumatological approach does not eliminate Christological issues," but it transcends the Christological categories of exclusivism.<sup>29</sup>

However, it is true that Yong does prioritize the Spirit over Christ for proposing a more inclusive attitude to other faiths in the name of discerning the presence and work of the Spirit in

approach severs the work of the Spirit from the work of the Son and the Father resulting in a kind of bitheism."

24 In our meeting at his office at Fuller Theology Seminary on December 22, 2016, I asked Dr. Yong if he replaced Christology with Pneumatology. His response was 'No.'

25 Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices and Neighbor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).

26 Ibid., 126-128.

27 Amos Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002).

28 Ibid., 230.

29 Ibid., 35.

their cultures. He outlines a three-tiered process for discerning the work of the Spirit among other faiths. The first is "pneumatological-experiential one" which compares the religious experiences of other religions with Pentecostals looking for spiritual analogy of primal religion. The second is "moral-ethical one," which looks for the ethics of other faiths.<sup>30</sup> This one is convergent to McDermott and Netland's proposal of moral convergence between Christianity and other faiths.<sup>31</sup> The third is "theological-soteriological one," which recognizes the religious symbols of other faiths as medias of transformation. Yong recognizes the tension of Spiritual presence and absence in other faiths. While the Spirit is present in other faiths, the Spirit can also be absent in terms of His confrontation against demonic powers.<sup>32</sup> This relates to Jesus' ministry of exorcism, but Yong does not explicitly develop the role of the Spirit in Jesus' ministry.

Third, Yong rejects the idea of subordinating the Spirit to the Son. In arguing against the subordination of the Spirit to the Son, Yong adopts George Khodr's idea of the distinctions between the economies of the Spirit and the Son.<sup>33</sup> Though there is reciprocity between the Son and the Spirit, Khodr stresses their hypostatic independence and distinguishes the twofold economy of the two hands, thus allows him to look for a dependently work of the Spirit in other religions.<sup>34</sup> In his review article, Yong

30 Yong, *Discerning the Spirit* (s), 251

31 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 193-196.

32 Ibid., 131.

33 Amos Yong, "A P(new)matological Paradigm for Christian Mission," in *Missiology: An International Review*, vol. 33, no. 2 (April 2005): 173-191 (at 174). See also Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity*, 95.

34 George Khodr, "An Orthodox Perspective on Inter-religious Dialogue," in *Current Dialogue*, 19 (1991): 25-27 (at 25). See also George Khodr, "Christianity in a Pluralist World: The Economy of the Holy Spirit," in Stanley J. Samartha, ed, *Living Faiths and the Ecumenical Movement*

argues that the “Economies of the Spirit and the Son are related as two hands, yet distinct, so that pneumatological considerations could be autonomously foregrounded before engaging Christological norms.”<sup>35</sup> Yet Yong feels that McDermott and Netland misinterpret his prioritizing of Pneumatology over Christology on the basis of his “wanting Christians to discern sympathetically to other faiths as separating the Son from the Spirit.”<sup>36</sup>

Yong observes that McDermott and Netland are reluctant to think Pneumatology theologically about what might be beautiful and good in the human cultures of other faiths.<sup>37</sup> This echoes what I mentioned a combination of Yong’s anthropological and pneumatological approaches in reaction to Christians’ exclusive view of Christology. While I agree with Yong on his insistence on discerning the Spirit in other cultures as a positive Christian attitude, I wonder if the Son could also be present in human cultures as the incarnate Word (Jn. 1:14). While Yong finds Ireneaus’ analogy of two hands,<sup>38</sup> helpful for overcoming the subordination of the Spirit to the Son, he does not develop a Trinitarian concept of how the Spirit and Son should be seen as two hands. Rather he develops a one hand and says, “Pneumatological theology is a robustly Trinitarian theology. This is because Pneumatology completes and fills out the doctrine of Trinity.”<sup>39</sup> For Yong, Pneumatocentrism is Trinitarianism. This is what leads McDermott and Netland to react

against Yong by proposing a fourfold Trinitarian criteria.<sup>40</sup>

(1) The indivision of the Trinity (three Persons in one God); (2) The indivision of the Son from the Spirit; (3) the indivision of the incarnate Jesus (humanity) from the eternal Logos (divinity); (4) the indivision of the Father from the Son.<sup>41</sup>

The first criteria sees three Persons in one substance of divinity as the ground for the Trinity. They are indivisible from their eternity. “Just as the Father, the Son and the Spirit are interpersonally united, they are involved in one economic mission of salvation inseparably.”<sup>42</sup> Second there is an undivided relationship between the Son and the Spirit as two hands of the Father. Dividing the Son from the Spirit is betraying the dialectical tension of the universality and particularity of the Father. If Jesus represents the particularity of God, the Spirit represents the universal presence and activity of God. One needs to hold this tension. Third, one needs to hold the tension between the incarnate Jesus and the pre-incarnate Christ as fully human and fully divine. Dividing the incarnate Jesus from the pre-incarnate Christ has tendency toward equalizing Jesus with other religious teachers. Four, an undivided union between the sending Father and the sent Jesus by the Spirit is the ground for the mission of the sent church into the world.<sup>43</sup>

Having established this fourfold framework,

(Geneva: WCC, 1971): 131-142 (esp. at 136-140).

35 Yong, “Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Religions,” 297. Yong, *Discerning the Spirit* (s), 57, 69.

36 Yong, “Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Religions,” 297.

37 Ibid., 298.

38 Yong, *Discerning the Spirit* (s), 70. Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 43

39 Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 20.

40 This does not mean that the main purpose of McDermott and Netland’s book is to react against Yong’s pneumatology. Rather their purpose is to propose an evangelical Trinitarian theology of religions.

41 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 53-72. See also Yong, “Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Religions,” 295.

42 Ibid., 53. Italics mine.

43 For a full account of interpretation of a trinitarian concept, see McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, especially pp. 53-72.



McDermott and Netland propose some central themes of evangelical trinitarian theology of religions. They include revelation and religions, salvation and conversion, Christian life and moral teachings of other religions, religions and cultures and the ethics of Christian witness in a multireligious world.<sup>44</sup> First, in exploring the relationship between revelation and religions, they propose that Christians must use the Trinity in what Kairkkainen calls ‘its narrative fullness’<sup>45</sup> of the inseparable and non-hierarchical relationship between the Son and the Spirit as the framework for Christians’ witness to the salvation of Christ and the general revelation of the Spirit. Second, they propose an evangelical concept of the relationship between salvation and conversion. They argue that salvation and conversion should not be seen as synonyms, though the two are related. Salvation is a divine gift to everyone, but human’s response to that gift with repentance is necessary for conversion.<sup>46</sup>

Third, they propose the moral convergences and theological divergences between Christianity and other faiths. Theologically, Christianity is divergent from Islam in the doctrines of the Trinity and incarnation, and from Buddhism in the doctrines of sin and God. But religions are morally convergent and so Christians should learn ethics from other religions for cultivating faith and for a common good of shalom.<sup>47</sup> Finally, they propose the Christ-patterned mission of incarnation as

the Christian mission model of dialogical and apologetic witness to the truth, life and work of Christ in a multireligious world.<sup>48</sup> As non-Pentecostal Christians, McDermott and Netland’s approach is too strong in Christology. What they missed is a twofold role of the Spirit in the incarnational and the crucified ministry of Christ and in the cross-cultural mission of the church.

## II. MCDERMOTT AND NETLAND’S PROPOSALS AND YONG’S REACTIONS AND ELABORATIONS

Yong’s first reaction is that McDermott and Netland’s approach is grounded in the traditional Chalcedonian fences. He feels that such approach with the emphasis on Christology is not relevant for a Trinitarian theology of religions.<sup>49</sup> Second, when considering general revelation and religions, evangelicals often use *Logos spermatikos* as a way of seeing Jesus as the incarnated One who enlightens minds of people. According to Yong, what they missed is the role of the Spirit. He argues that “such Logos centric approach is binitarian rather than trinitarian.”<sup>50</sup> Third, Yong’s reaction comes from the ideas of salvation and conversion. He is dissatisfied with the traditional evangelical claim of Jesus as the only Savior without considering the role of the Spirit in the religious world.<sup>51</sup> For Yong, it is the Spirit who brings other faiths to Christ’s salvation.<sup>52</sup>

Yong thinks that Netland and McDermott are not Trinitarian enough due to their insufficient

44 Ibid., 86-294.

45 Veli-Matti Kairkkainen, “The Uniqueness of Christ and the Trinitarian Faith,” in Sung Wook Chung, ed, *Christ the One and the Only: A Global Affirmation of the Uniqueness of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005): 115-125.

46 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, especially pp. 53-72.

47 Ibid., 193-205. See also Gerald R. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? Jesus, Revelation and Religious Traditions* (Downer Groves, IL: IVP, 2000).

48 Ibid., 277-193.

49 Yong, “Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Religions,” 295-296.  
Ibid., 295.

50 Ibid., 296

51 Ibid., 296.

52 Ibid., 297.

emphasis on the significance of Pneumatology for an evangelical theology of religions. In order to elaborate a more dynamic Trinitarian praxis of mission in a pluralistic world, Yong proposes a "more Pneumatologically informed Trinitarian theology of holistic Christian mission."<sup>53</sup> Yong provides three Pneumatological theses.

Thesis I: the many tongues of Pentecost invite consideration of God's redemptive work among and through not only the many languages, but also the many cultures and perhaps and even the many religions of the world.<sup>54</sup>

Thesis one takes its roots in Luke's narrative of Pentecostalism (Acts 2) and envisions John's eschatological vision of God's redemption of people from many tribes (Rev. 5:9; 14:6; 21:22-26).<sup>55</sup> Yong sees the Pentecostal narrative as the ground<sup>56</sup> for endorsing the many tongues and cultures of world religions. He argues that Luke's use of 'all flesh' (Acts 2:17) implies a universal application of Spirit-led mission.<sup>57</sup> What is most significant about Luke's narrative of Pentecostalism is the way the Spirit speaks to people in their native languages (Acts 2:8). Yong takes up this as a contextual paradigm for Christian witness of the Spirit in people's native terms, not in Christian terms.<sup>58</sup> Yong insists that we must find human commonalities and understand them in their own terms.<sup>59</sup>

Thesis 2: "The many tongues of Pentecost

suggest many missional and evangelistic practices vis-à-vis those in other faiths."<sup>60</sup> Thesis 2 indicates the importance of missional and kerygmatic witness of the Good News of Christ shalomically in resistance to the principalities of the world. Yong adds the Pentecostal idea of orthopathy (missional feeling) to orthopraxis (missional practice) and orthodoxy (missional belief). For Yong, "the missional practice and belief must be attentive to the affective levels of interreligious engagement for a common goal of shalom."<sup>61</sup> I agree with Yong that a Trinitarian mission must be rooted in the threefold missional nature of 'orthodoxy, orthopraxy and orthopathy.' Yong is right when he criticizes McDermott and Netland for their division of orthodoxy and orthopraxy from orthopathy.<sup>62</sup> In line with Yong, I would further argue that the weakness of liberation theology is its reduction of methodology to orthodoxy and orthopraxy without embracing orthopathy. From the perspective of God's relationship with the world, orthopathy (compassion) is foundation for the other two. As John records, God so loved the world that He sent His Son to redeem the world by the power of the Spirit (Jn. 3:16). God's pathos precedes saving praxis. Yong does not develop the idea of orthopathy as being rooted in both the Spirit and Christ. Affectionate love is the motivating power of Jesus' economic mission.

Thesis 3: "The many tongues of Pentecost encourage transformative spaces and pathways for Christian mission in a world of many faiths."<sup>63</sup> Thesis 3 is grounded in Yong's understanding of salvation as a transformative aspect of Spirit's work. In reaction to Christ's

53 Ibid., 294.

54 Ibid., 299.

55 Ibid., 299.

56 Amos Yong, "A P(new)matological Paradigm for Christian Mission," in *Missiology: An International Review*, vol. 33, no. 2. (April 2005): 173-191 (at 176-181).

57 Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out On All Flesh: World Pentecostalism and the Reconstruction of Christian theology in the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 4.3.3.

58 Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 36.

59 Yong, "Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Religions," 298.

60 Ibid., 300.

61 Ibid., 302.

62 Ibid., 298.

63 Ibid., 302.

exclusive category of historic salvation, which involves the question of who will be saved, Yong emphasizes a dynamic process of salvation as transformation by the power of the Spirit. This means that the Spirit continues to transform the mind of Christians (Rom. 12:2) and call other faiths to Christ in their own cultures. Building on the work of the Spirit for mutual transformation of Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10), Yong proposes that the goal of interreligious dialogue must be mutually transformed.<sup>64</sup>

### III. THEIR CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES WITH THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

McDermott, Netland and Yong have some convergences in their confession of God as Trinity. As evangelicals, they reject a pluralist concept of God as the ultimate reality or impersonal deity,<sup>65</sup> and see Him as a personal creator, redeemer and sustainer of the world. Their view of God as Trinity is grounded in the Bible and apostolic testimony (Gen1; Matt. 11:12; Jn. 10:30; 3:8; Acts 2).<sup>66</sup> This is their first strength in common. Second, they have convergent motivations in overcoming the impasse of a classic threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.<sup>67</sup> They agree that this typology is misleading as it focuses on a narrow sense of soteriology, while neglecting other important missiological issues.<sup>68</sup> Yet they are divergent in their

64 Ibid., 203.

65 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 49. Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 27. Yong acknowledges that he is neither an exclusivist nor a pluralist.

66 Ibid., 49-52; Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 18, 32.

67 This threefold typology was first coined by Alan Race, see Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (London: SCM, 1983).

68 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of*

approaches to it.

For Yong, the Spirit and His healing presence in other religions as a way, while McDermott and Netland propose a renewed Trinity as a framework for broadening the concept of salvation.<sup>69</sup> They do not question who will be saved and who will not be. Such soteriological question is one of the weaknesses of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.<sup>70</sup> A soteriological question of who will be saved is God's business. Instead our Christian business is to witness to God's multidimensional salvation as the gospel of holistic transformation in word and work. While I appreciate Yong's proposal of Pneumatology as a way to overcoming a classic threefold typology, I am dissatisfied with his neglect of Christology instead of holding them as two hands of the Father in the historical and present drama of God's salvation and revelation. Another limitation is the failure to take seriously the role of the Spirit in the incarnational ministry of Christ. We may certainly emphasize the Pentecostal narrative in Acts 2, but we cannot ignore the Lukan Gospel's record of the role of the Spirit in the ministry of Christ (Lk. 4:18-19). The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is also possible by the power of the Spirit. In short, the Spirit and the Son are two hands of the Father mean that the whole ministry of Jesus—from the incarnation through the death and resurrection—is possible by the Spirit.

Third, they are convergent in the mission ethics of positive approaches to other faiths. Yet they are divergent in their emphases. Yong's positive approach to other faiths depends on

*Religions*, 13. See Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 26-29. See also Amos Yong, "Can We Get Beyond the Paradigm?—A Response to Terry Muck's Proposal in Theology of Religions," in *Interpretation*, vol. 61, no. 1. (January 2007): 28-32.

69 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 122-181.

70 Yong, "Can We Get Beyond the Paradigm?," 29.



the universal presence of the Spirit in other religions, while McDermott and Netland’s positive approach to other faiths depends on God’s general revelation without limiting God’s special revelation in Christ.<sup>71</sup> The strength of Yong’s approach is discerning the Spirit in other religions and witnessing to the Spirit from the inside of their own cultures. Yong has another strength in seeing the Pentecostal narrative as a ground for endorsing the many cultures as God’s gifts. This advances mission as both contextualization and globalizing in people’s native tongues. McDermott and Netland do not question why we are culturally diverse. But three of them have another convergences in their view of God as a merciful Being who is interceding in healing the groaning world and is inviting us to join in His healing mission (Rom. 8:27).<sup>72</sup> This advances the scope of mission and the scope of salvation as healing, forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice.

McDermott and Netland are more passionate than Yong about the evangelistic task of converting other faiths and are more apologetic on the question of religious truths as they believe that God calls us from the satanic influences of religions (2Cor. 4:4; Eph. 4:17-18).<sup>73</sup> For McDermott and Netland, the ultimate goal of interreligious dialogue is to convince other faiths. Adopting Karl Barth’s concept of divine revelation as a dialectical act, they argue that God’s revelation in Christ not only discloses His reconciling love, but it also exposes and

transforms our religious idolatries.<sup>74</sup> Barth’s concept of divine revelation and human religion is rooted in a German term *Ufhebung*. *Ufhebung* has dialectical meanings—negation and elevation.<sup>75</sup> Barth sees God’s revelation as a dialectical act in a way that it not only discloses God’s love and holiness, but it also exposes and negates our sinful and idolatrous nature of religion and elevates or transforms it into the likeness of Christ (Rom. 8:29). Barth does not treat divine revelation to destroy and replace religion, but to fulfill and transform it (Matt. 5:17).<sup>76</sup>

Yet there is a difference between Barth’s dialectical concept of divine revelation and human religion and Netland and McDermott’s interpretation of Barth’s. While Barth’s use of divine revelation as a negation and as an elevation of religion includes Christian religion itself because for Barth the category of ‘religion’ is a human seeking God and revelation is a divine seeking and transforming human religion,<sup>77</sup> Netland and McDermott see God’s revelation as a way of exposing and exalting other religions only.

While Netland and McDermott tend to see more of negative values of other religions as

71 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 277.

72 Yong, “Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Religions,” 302.

73 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 254-255. See also Harold A. Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 181-192, 335. See also Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 112-150.

74 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 228-229.

75 Garrett Green, *Karl Barth on Religion* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 13-27.

76 For a critical reading of Barth’s dialectical theology of divine revelation and human religion and his treatment of religion as faithlessness and Christianity as true religion, see my article David Thang Moe, “Karl Barth against Religion, not Religions: Constructing Barth’s Dialectical Theology of Divine Revelation and Human Religion in Asia,” in *Asia Journal of Theology*, vol. 31, no. 1. (April 2017): 113-140 (esp. at. 113-122).

77 Barth’s concept of divine revelation is not without problem. It is ‘not wrong, but too one-sided.’ He focuses one-sidedly on how God objectively reveals to us without asking how humans might also have a subjective knowledge of God through cultures. In either way, God’s revelation is always initiated by God who creates us. For my critique of Barth, see Moe, “Barth against Religion, not Religions,” 122-126.

satanic influence without forgetting to learn morality from other religions,<sup>78</sup> Yong's strength is to see more of good values of other religious cultures as the economic and holy spaces of the Spirit's presences and as the medias for God's Spiritual revelation.

Emphasizing the economic presence of the Spirit in other religious cultures, Yong's Pneumatology is economically strong and ontologically weak. His Pneumatology will be more trinitarian if he could explicitly develop the ontological role of the Spirit in the ministry of Christ and the Spiritual gifts of the church. What we cannot deny the fact is that Christ's incarnation is trinitarianly Spirit-anointed and Christ's resurrection is Spirit-empowered. Without the Spirit, the whole ministry of Christ is impossible.

I agree with Yong when he proposes Pneumatology as a ground for witnessing to the universal presence of the Spirit "in their terms without our prejudgment." But I am dissatisfied when he prioritizes Pneumatology over Christology on the basis of "Christological criteria for assessing other faiths as scandalous."<sup>79</sup> In my view, such scandalous and exclusive attitude toward other faiths is not necessarily the problem of Christology. It is the problem of the church. Karkkainen is correct in saying that the idea of exclusivism is more related to the problem of ecclesiocentrism which either restricts the salvation of Christ to a redeemed community or imposes on the necessity of hearing the gospel through the proclamation of the church in Christian terms (Rom. 10:17),<sup>80</sup> without listening to the voices of other religions.

78 McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?* 80-90.

79 *Ibid.*, 298.

80 Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003). 342-345.

If Karkkainen is correct, I would argue that it is not the church, but Christ and the Spirit who must judge and transform not only the exclusive attitudes of the church, but also the idolatrous practices of religions.

In short, Yong's Trinitarianism is Pneumatocentric, while Netland and McDermott's Trinitarianism is Christocentric. As a result, Yong's Christology is trinitarianly weak,<sup>81</sup> whereas Netland and McDermott's Pneumatology is trinitarianly weak. I will argue that a contemporary trinitarian theology of religions need new hermeneutics and methodologies of holding the relationship between the Son and Spirit within their single economy of God's revelation in the world. If God is the triune Lord of the whole world, why are we to separate the incarnate Son who dwells in all human flesh (Jn. 1:14) from the poured-out Spirit who is at work in all people (Acts 2:17)? There must be a Trinitarian presence and work of the Spirit and the Son in other religions. Yong, McDermott and Netland do not explicitly explore how the relationship between the Son and Spirit could advance a Trinitarian theology and ecclesiology of religions.

#### IV. RETHINKING A PERICHORETIC TRINITY FOR AN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

An evangelical Trinitarian theology of religions must see the Son and the Spirit as 'two hands' of God the Father.' This is the thesis and proposal of my paper. On the other hand, I am fully aware of the challenge. The proposal of seeing the Son and the Spirit as two hands of the Father raises two critical and challenging questions. When seeing the Son and the Spirit as two hands of

81 See Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 217.

the Father: (1) are we not forgetting the Father? (2) How can two hands of the Son and the Spirit be Trinitarian (it seems like more of binitarian)?

In answer to these questions, I borrow Jürgen Moltmann's trinitarian methodology of *perichoresis*.<sup>82</sup> Of course, Moltmann is not the first theologian who introduces the perichoretic concept of the Trinity. He acknowledges that the "Greek father Gregory of Nazianus was the first to use the word *perichoresis*, but John Damascus made it the key word for his Christology and then also for the doctrine of the Trinity."<sup>83</sup> However, it is fair to note that Moltmann is one of the pioneers who develop and popularize a perichoretic concept of the Trinity in a contemporary world. To say that *perichoresis* is not a new term, Moltmann calls it "an old magic word for a new Trinitarian theology."<sup>84</sup> The Greek word, *perichoresis* means a movement of mutual abiding, mutual dancing, mutual rotation and mutual embracing one another.<sup>85</sup>

In Christology, *perichoresis* describes the mutual penetration of two natures of Christ without division. In the Trinity, *perichoresis* means the mutual abiding of three different Persons of the Father, Son and the Spirit by "making the three-fold divine space for the indwelling of the other."<sup>86</sup> I would add: in Pneumatology, *perichoresis* describes the mutual activity of the Spirit's particular presence in the

church and His universal presence in the world. In ecclesiology, *perichoresis* means a community of one faith with different gifts for a common ministry of the Trinity (1Cor. 12:1-13; Eph. 4:5-6). A perichoretic ecclesiology describes an ideal of a community without uniformity. *Perichoresis* describes the undivided community of the one divine *and* the three Persons without individualism (trinitarian monotheism) as well as the three *in* the one without the absolute subjectivism (tri-unity) (Jn. 14:10-11; 23).<sup>87</sup> According to *perichoresis*, it is impossible to divide the Father from the Son and the Spirit, and the Son from the Spirit.<sup>88</sup>

Since the perichoretic Trinity is a non-hierarchical and an undivided community of equals, we should not even number them and call the Father "the first person," the Son "the second person" and the Holy Spirit "the third person"<sup>89</sup> in a quantitative sense. On account of this perichoretic unity and reciprocal movement, the Father is reciprocally in the Son, reciprocally in the Holy Spirit. No one of them supervenes in hierarchical power.<sup>90</sup> Building on this perichoretic framework, I will develop three themes.

### 1. A Trinitarian Christology: The Son as a Supreme Revelation of God for All

The idea of Trinitarian Christ as a normative revelation of God is developed by Barth. Barth's famous remark on a Trinitarian revelation is: "God makes Himself known to us through Himself."<sup>91</sup> For Barth, the fundamental question

82 Jürgen Moltmann, "God in the World –the World in God: *Perichoresis* in Trinity and Eschatology," in Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser, eds, *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008): 369-381.

83 Ibid., 373.

84 Jürgen Moltmann, "Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word for a New Trinitarian Theology," in M. Douglas Meeks, ed, *Trinity, Community, and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingwood Books, 2000): 111-126.

85 Moltmann, "God in he World—the World in God," 372, 375.

86 Ibid., 375.

87 Ibid., 372-373.

88 Ibid.,

89 Ibid., 373.

90 Ibid.

91 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, I.I. trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936), 296.

is not how do we know God (epistemologically), but how does God make Himself known to us (ontologically). From this follows, he talks about a Trinitarian revelation of the Father as a “revealer, the Son as the revelation and the Spirit as revealedness.”<sup>92</sup> In light of this drama of a Trinitarian revelation, I see no room for Christonomism in Barth’s theology, though he subordinates the Spirit to the Son. I must agree with Yong on his critique of Barth for the latter (subordinating the Spirit to the Son), but I disagree with him for his former critique of Barth as a Christonomistic exclusivist.<sup>93</sup> Barth is one of the pioneers of the renewed Trinity<sup>94</sup> with the emphasis on a Trinitarian Christology. I am convinced by his proposal that we know God the Father (revealer) through the revelation of Christ by the power [revealedness] of the Spirit. Barth’s trinitarian Christology is grounded in the Johannine and Pauline theologies. John said, “it is the incarnated Son who makes His Father known to us” (Jn. 1:18). Jesus Himself said, “whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9). Likewise, Paul said, “Jesus is the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15).<sup>95</sup> Pauline description of Jesus as the image of the invisible God means that God’s invisible being is known through the incarnated and crucified Christ by the power of the Spirit.

92 Ibid., 295.

93 It is true that Barth prioritized Christ over Spirit, but he did not entirely neglect the Spirit. In his *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.II, he explicitly developed the role of the Spirit in the ministry of Christ and the ministry and hope of the church. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, IV.3.II, trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), 681-942.

94 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 46.

95 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993). Moltmann’s interpretation of Pauline view of ‘Jesus as the image of the invisible God’ is worthy of mentioning. He said, “When the crucified Christ is called the image of the invisible God, the meaning is that this is God and God is like this.” 205.

While agreeing with Barth on his proposal of a Trinitarian Christology, I propose to go beyond him by seeing a Trinitarian Spirit as an equal partner to Christ in a Trinitarian revelation of the Father. To go beyond Barth’s Trinitarian Christology means to propose the Trinitarian Spirit and the Trinitarian Son as being proceeded from the Father as His two hands for an economic plan of salvation (Jn. 15:26; 17:5-6).<sup>96</sup> Moltmann, probably the leader of post-Barthianism suggests that “We need to talk about the relationship of the Spirit to the Son so that we are able to interpret the Spirit as being the Spirit of Christ” (Rom. 8:9).<sup>97</sup> Later I will develop the concept of Trinitarian Pneumatology. At this point, let me spend a little more time on exploring how Jesus plays a vital role in a Trinitarian revelation. Influenced by Barth’s Trinitarianism, McDermott, Netland and Kairkkainen argue that the “Trinity and Christology are interdependent.”<sup>98</sup>

On account of the interdependence between the Trinity and Christology, we must affirm that Christ is the embodiment of God’s special revelation. As an embodiment of the Father, Christ not only reveals the loving heart of the Father (Jn. 1:18), but He also fulfills the redeeming purpose of the Trinity (Jn. 3:16; 17:4-5).<sup>99</sup> It is through the incarnation of Christ by the power of the Spirit that God reconciles us to Himself (Jn. 12:32; 2Cor. 5:18). Timothy Tennent rightly argues for the “incarnation of Christ as a means through which sinful

96 See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 154, 181-182.

97 Ibid., 181.

98 Ibid., 83. See also Kairkkainen, “The Uniqueness of Christ” 123.

99 See Andreas J. Kostenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples According to the Fourth Gospel: With Implications for the Fourth Gospel’s Purpose and the Mission of the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 107-111.

humanity gains access to the triune God.”<sup>100</sup> It is equally important to note that the incarnation of Christ serves as a continuation of God’s general revelation to all human cultures. The incarnation is the fulfillment of the Trinitarian process in creation. Colossians pronounces that in Christ, the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form (Col. 2:9). Since the Father, the Son and the Spirit are undividedly one in essence, so do they work mutually in one economic mission of creation (creation out of nothing: Gen. 1) and of new creation or redemption (creation out of the old: 2Cor. 5:17). God’s trinitarian revelation in Christ not only reveals His divine nature of love, but also fulfills His economic plan of cosmic redemption (Col. 1:19-20). Moltmann rightly states;

We interpret salvation history as the history of the Son of God. We understand this history as the trinitarian history of God in concurrent and joint workings of the three subjects –the Father, the Son and the Spirit, and we interpret it as the history of God’s trinitarian perichoretic relationships of fellowship.<sup>101</sup>

Since God’s revelation in Christ is a Trinitarian movement, the Father is not simply sitting in heaven without being involved in the incarnation, death and resurrection of God. Within a perichoretic fellowship, the Father is actively involved in the ministry of Jesus by the power of the Spirit. Gavin D’Costa rightly proposes that “A Trinitarian Christology guards against an exclusivist particularism (Christonomism) and a pluralist universalism (Theocentrism) by dialectically relating the particularity and the universality of God.”<sup>102</sup> Against an exclusive Christonomism,

100 Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 190.

101 Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 156.

102 Gavin D’Costa, “Christ, the Trinity and Religious Diversity,” in Gavin D’Costa, ed, *Christian Uniqueness*

we must stress that the Father is known not only through the Son, but also through the Spirit.<sup>103</sup> Precisely because of this, I stress that the Father is known through the undivided two hands of the Son and the Spirit.

Against a pluralist theocentrism, we must also argue that we cannot speak of the Father without the incarnational story of the Son. The Father without the incarnate Son must be the absolute Other who does not enter the world. Since the triune God is a relational being, He enters the human world through the incarnation of Christ by the power of the Spirit. We know God’s trinitarian nature of love and economic salvation through the story of Christ by the power of the Spirit. In this particular regard, the Son is normative in revelation of God.<sup>104</sup> McDermott and Netland are right to argue that we have a natural knowledge of God in creation (Rom. 1:19; Ps. 19:1), but our saving knowledge of God is possible through Christ.<sup>105</sup> His creation is a mediator of our natural knowledge of God, but such knowledge is not sufficient for salvation. Jesus is the only mediator for saving knowledge of God (1Tim. 2:5).<sup>106</sup> Likewise, Yong affirms that Jesus is the normative and final revelation, but not the *only* revelation of God.<sup>107</sup> God continually reveals Himself to us and other faiths. From this follows, Yong insists on the role of the Spirit in God general or natural revelation. This leads us to the next thesis.

*Reconsidered: Toward an Inclusive Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990): 16-29 (at 18).

103 *Ibid.*, 18.

104 *Ibid.*, 18.

105 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 91-94.

106 *Ibid.*, 91-94.

107 Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*, 77.



## 2. A Trinitarian Pneumatology: The Spirit as a Universal Presence in All Religions

To claim that the Father, Son and Spirit are present in all religious cultures, I would like to propose a Trinitarian Pneumatology rather than a Pneumatocentric Trinity, which tends to prioritize the Spirit over the Father and the Son. I find D'Costa's thesis of Pneumatology persuasive for developing a Trinitarian theology of religions. D'Costa argues that "Pneumatology enables the particularity of Christ to be related to the universal activity of the triune God in all cultures."<sup>108</sup> While Jesus is the particular cause of salvation, the Spirit enables salvific activity to be effective cosmically in other faiths. Yong develops a pneumatological doctrine of salvation into three categories of "was saved, am being saved," and "will be saved."<sup>109</sup> Salvation is to be defined as a dynamic process in which the Spirit plays a crucial role.<sup>110</sup> From the perspective of the relationship between salvation and conversion, Yong criticizes McDermott and Netland for their failure to consider the dynamic role of the Spirit in God's saving work.<sup>111</sup> For Yong, the Spirit continues to play a role in saving work, which was inaugurated by Christ.

Going beyond McDermott and Netland who emphasize the historical salvation of Christ, Yong focuses on the Spirit's continued role in saving other faiths. For Yong, the salvation of other faiths is impossible without work of the Spirit. The universal presence of the Spirit implies that we not only witness to the salvation of Christ among other faiths, but we also prepare to be converted through a meeting with other faiths for a transformative and new

knowledge of Christ. This is because the "Spirit is not only the sanctifier, but also the one who brings about the new birth itself" (Titus 3:5).<sup>112</sup> The idea of mutual conversion and salvation in an interreligious dialogue echoes the encounter between Peter and Cornelius by the power of the Spirit (Acts 10). Cornelius as a religious other was converted to Christ, whereas Peter experienced Christ in a transformative way and affirmed that "God shows no partiality," that is God loves everyone regardless of religions (Acts 10:23). In the context of Peter's experiential conversion in a new way, Yong argues that a "Humble interreligious dialogue can change us to become different kinds of Christians without necessarily practicing what the religious other practice."<sup>113</sup>

This has some key missiological implications for a Trinitarian pneumatology. First, we must recognize the impartial grace of God and the prevenient presence of the Spirit. Especially the prevenient presence of the Spirit affirms the idea that the Spirit is already at work among people of other faiths before we proclaim the gospel of salvation and engage with them. Second, since the Trinitarian Spirit and the Trinitarian Christ are at work preveniently among other faiths, our mission task is not to bring the foreign God to them, but to bring the gospel and find a triune God as creator and sustainer through their cultures.<sup>114</sup> Paul is a good example for this. Paul acknowledges the prevenient presence of God among other faiths as an "unknown God" (Acts 17:23). Third, because the Spirit

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>113</sup> Amos Yong, *Pneumatology and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue: Does the Spirit Blow through the Middle Way?* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 250.

<sup>114</sup> No missionaries bring God to other religions, rather they bring the gospel to them. See my article David Thang Moe, "Adoniram Judson: A Dialectical Missionary who Brought the Gospel (not God) and Gave the Bible to the Burmese," in *Missiology: An International Review*, vol. 45, no. 3. (July 2017): 265-282.

<sup>108</sup> D'Costa, "Christ, the Trinity and Religious Diversity," 19.

<sup>109</sup> Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 47.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 47. See also Yong, "Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Religions," 296.

and the incarnate Word are present in other faiths, we must recognize people’s cultures as the medias for the gospel of the triune God’s general revelation. In this particular regard, Yong is right in affirming that the Spirit as a cosmic Breath (Jn. 3:8) could certainly blow the gospel of Christ through the Middle Way of Buddhism.<sup>115</sup>

In short, evangelicals must hold a relationship between a Trinitarian Christology and a Trinitarian Pneumatology. If we know *who* God the Father is through the incarnate Son (Jn. 1:18; Col. 1:15); we know *where* God is through the Spirit who blows cosmically (Jn. 3:8). I warn against the danger of an exclusive Christonomism, which states that the Father is known *only* through the Son. I argue that the incarnation of Jesus is incomplete without the Spirit. The Son and the Spirit play a mutual role in a drama of trinitarian revelation and salvation. Thus, a perichoretic Trinitarianism must hold the two hands work of the Son and the Spirit for one mission of salvation and revelation. This sort of thinking makes a contextual implication for the Trinitarian mission of the church.

### 3. A Trinitarian Ecclesiology: Christ-liked and Spirit-led Community

While Yong’s pneumatological approach has a significant contribution to recognizing the universal work and presence of the Spirit among other faiths, I still question how can other faiths understand explicitly the Spirit’s presence and activity without the church? I will argue that the church plays a crucial role in making sense of the Spirit’s universal presence in people of other religions by listening to them with cultural sensitivity. But this does not mean I am proposing to see the church as the third hand of the Trinity. Rather I am proposing to

see the church as the Christ-liked and Spirit-led embodiment of the Trinity in terms of its apostolic witness to what the two hands have done and are doing in an intra-religious community of faith and in an inter-religious community of faiths. When it comes to the Trinity, we focus only on the significance of the economic Trinity for the sent or the scattered mission of the church (Matt. 28:16-20; Acts 1:8). While this is missiologically right, what is missing is the significance of the immanent Trinity. I suggest that we should re-consider the equal importance of the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity for the gathered and the scattered mission of the church.

First, the church is not just the agent of the Trinity to witness an economic plan of salvation; the church is what Miroslav Volf calls “the image of the Trinity.”<sup>116</sup> Volf’s proposal focuses on a Christian inner communion without rejecting its external communion with the world. Volf argues that as “three Persons in one divinity exist so perichoretically with, for and in one another by the power of love, also is the church as a community of one faith with different gifts (1Cor. 12:1-11; Eph. 4:1-5) to be communal by the power of love.”<sup>117</sup> Evangelicals have a high view of the evangelistic commission and personal conversion,<sup>118</sup> yet they have a low view of the church’s inner communion or unity (Jn. 17:21). Evangelicals must take the Trinitarian nature of threefold Personal differences and their communion as the model for a Christian communion of one faith with different gifts. In order to demonstrate a perichoretic relationship between a Trinitarian life of communion and the church as a community, we need to develop

<sup>116</sup> Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.,

<sup>118</sup> McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 160.

<sup>115</sup> Yong, *Pneumatology and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue*, 249-255.

what I call a ‘communitarian Trinity.’ I find a communitarian Trinity relevant for Asian Christians whose cultures are grounded in the communal practices of social relationality.

Second, evangelicals must recognize religio-cultural diversity as ‘God’s gift to the world.’ I propose that a Trinitarian theology of religions provides two central methodological themes: the different characteristics of the Trinity in one Godhead and their external and humble relationship with the world through Christ by the Spirit. If the former recognizes the diversities of human cultures and religions, the latter provides Christians with the trinitarian mission model of the right hermeneutics of the religious other and the right approaches to their religio-cultural otherness. I argue that the right hermeneutics of the religious other precedes the right approaches to their otherness.<sup>119</sup>

I concur with Kevin Vanhoozer when he observes that the other is a hermeneutical problem in a pluralistic world and suggests the right hermeneutics of the identity of the Trinity serves as the Christian’s right view of the self and the other. He argues a proper focus on both the One and Three (one God with three Persons) provides the model for addressing the oneness of humanity with cultural otherness.<sup>120</sup> Humans with otherness have the same root in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Our common relationality (not relativism) of human race is rooted in God (Acts 17:26-28). I am not talking about a pluralistic concept of religious relativism that

sees all religions as different pointers to the same ultimate reality. This kind of relativism rejects the uniqueness of Christ and equalizes Christ with other religious teachers. By contrast, I am talking about an anthropos relationality, which is grounded in the image of God. This is because a relational hermeneutics of the religious other as God’s image precedes our right approaches to their otherness. In other words, the right approaches to other religions depend on our right hermeneutics of the religious other as the image of God.<sup>121</sup>

Third, I suggest that the ‘kenotic Christ’ is the model for Christians’ right approaches to other faiths who are the image of God.<sup>122</sup> Kenosis has several meanings. For some, kenotic Christ means Christ’s becoming human by giving up divine attributes. I do not follow this. In this paper, I see kenosis as “exemplary humiliation of Christ”<sup>123</sup> (Phil. 2:6-11) without ceasing to be divine. It is rooted in two dimensions of the cross: *self-giving love*, which overcomes the hostility of God and the world (Eph. 2:13-22), and *other-receiving love*, which invites the other to come in.<sup>124</sup> The kenotic model of Christ’s mission must be operated in these two movements of reaching out to the religious other in love and inviting the other in our hospitable community with a generous open heart. In the context of these two movements, Yong encourages us to see Jesus both as the model of the welcoming

119 For full account of discussion on these issues, see my forthcoming article David Thang Moe, “Identity and Otherness: A Trinitarian Theological Exploration of Engaging the Other and Embracing the Otherness in a Pluralistic World,” in *Ecclesiology: The Journal for Ministry, Mission and Unity*, vol. 14, no. 3. (October 2018).

120 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Does the Trinity Belong in a Theology of Religions? One Angling in the Rubicon and the Identity of God,” in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed, *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997): 41-71

121 For full account of discussion on these issues, see my forthcoming Moe, “Identity and Otherness.”

122 For a good discussion of kenosis as a model of interreligious dialogue, see Martha Th. Frederiks, “Kenosis as a Model of Interreligious Dialogue,” in *Missiology: An International Review*, vol. 33, no. 2. (April 2005): 211-222.

123 Hans Kung, “God’s Self-Reduction and Buddhist Emptiness,” in Roger Corless and Paul F. Knitter, eds, *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity: Essays and Explorations* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990): 26-43 (at 32-34).

124 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 125-126.

host of God’s hospitality and as the model guest of people’s hospitality (Lk. 9:58).<sup>125</sup> In reaching out to the other, we become the guests in their strange cultures and crossing and learning their new cultures are imperative. Lalsangkima Pachuau rightly suggests: “We must cross, not crush peoples’ cultural boundaries.”<sup>126</sup> Likewise, Kosuke Koyama suggests that our approaches to other faiths must be operated by the *crucified mind* (Phil. 2:5), not by the *crusading mind* against others.<sup>127</sup> Engaging the religious other in love and embracing their otherness in respect are the ethics of kenotic mission.<sup>128</sup>

In inviting other faiths, we become the hosts (Lk. 14:15-24). Making a hospitable space for the other [guests] is needed. As we gather at a hospitable space, “We share different stories of sorrows for mutual healing and different resources for mutual nourishment.”<sup>129</sup> A kenotic mission of hospitality demands the practice of giving and receiving. “We must see other faiths not as the mere objects for conversion, but as neighbors to whom giving and receiving must be extended for mutual conversion.”<sup>130</sup> As Jesus reaches out to us in love without destroying our human identities, but by becoming human and dwelling among us (Jn. 1:14), so does the Spirit reach out to people and speak to them

in their native language (Acts 2:8) on the Day of Pentecost. I would argue that the undivided relationship between the Son and the Spirit’s kenotic and incarnational embrace of people of other faiths implies at least three goals of an interreligious dialogue.

First, evangelicals must see mission as “transmitting faith and translating the gospel.”<sup>131</sup> While McDermott and Netland focus on the former on the basis that other faiths are living in a satanic influence (2Cor. 4:4),<sup>132</sup> Yong focuses on the latter because the Spirit speaks to people in their own term.<sup>133</sup> Yong is right in seeing Pentecostal narrative as the model for translating the gospel, but we cannot neglect the incarnation narrative of Christ as a companion to the Pentecostal narrative for translating the gospel. Two champions in the study of world Christianity, Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls argue that Christianity is a translatable religion in all cultures.<sup>134</sup> Yet they are divergent in their methodological emphases despite their common goals. Like Yong, Sanneh sees the Spirit’s speaking to people in their native language (Acts 2:8) as the model for his view of Christianity as a locally and globally translatable religion and he believes that the success of Christianity as a non-western religion depends more on the reception of the locals in their language,<sup>135</sup> whereas Walls sees the incarnation of Christ (Jn. 1:14) as the ground for his view of Christianity as a locally and globally translatable religion.

125 Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*, 101-103.

126 Lalsangkima Pachuau, “Engaging the Other in a Pluralistic World: Toward a Subaltern Hermeneutics of Christian Mission,” in *Studies in World Christianity*, vol. 8, no. 1. (2002): 63-80 (at 73).

127 Kosuke Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1980). 54. For a contemporary implication of Koyama’s missiology of the crucified mind, see also my essay David Thang Moe, “The Crucified Mind: Kosuke Koyama’s Missiology of Theology of the Cross,” in *Exchange. Journal of Contemporary Christianities in Context*, vol. 46, no. 1. (2017): 5-28.

128 Frederiks, “Kenosis as a Model of Interreligious Dialogue,” 211.

129 Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Garden City, Doubleday, 1971), 89-96.

130 Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*, see the back cover.

131 Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 3-78

132 Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 335.

133 Yong, *The Missiological Spirit*, 56.

134 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 219-220.

135 Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, revised and expanded (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 53-55, 33-42.

For Walls, “translating the gospel and Christianity is deeply rooted in Jesus’ translation of divinity into humanity.”<sup>136</sup> The goal of interreligious dialogue is not simply to transmit Christian faith into other faiths (evangelism),<sup>137</sup> but to adopt their religious terms for translation of the gospel by adapting to their indigenous cultures (inculturation). A twofold idea of evangelism and inculturation is evident in Paul’s mission practice. In his cross-cultural mission and evangelism among the Athenians, Paul calls Athenians to Christ by a dialectical way of “corrective and constructive dialogue”<sup>138</sup> (Acts 17:31-34) and uses their worldview as the locus for his writings. Paul was dialectically impressed with the Athenians’ religious practices by saying “you are religious” (Acts 17:22) and was distressed by their idolatrous practices (17:16). On the basis of his dialectical approach to them, Paul called the religious Athenians by correcting what is displeasing to God (17:23-24) and adopted their Greek terms for constructing his theological writings.

If Paul’s cross-cultural mission of proclaiming the gospel of God’s providence, hidden presence and resurrection from the inside of the Athenian cultures, Christians are to interact with and learn from the religious other in the process of transmitting faith and translating the gospel. As we interact with the religious other, we must affirm that we do not bring the gospel as the judging *liberator* of cultures, but rather as the joyful news of humble

*prisoner*.<sup>139</sup> To liberate or appropriate local cultures is not our work. Our work is to witness to the prevenient presence of the trinitarian Spirit who would liberate cultures through the locals. I find Kwame Bediako’s insights helpful for a Trinitarian missiology.

According to Bediako, there are three movements of Trinitarian mission. First, it is the triune God who takes the initiative of His incarnational mission through the pre-Christian cultures. The second is the missionary cross-cultural movement of transmitting faith and translating the gospel of Christ through the local cultures by the Spirit. The third is the converted Christians’ ‘indigenous assimilation’ of the gospel and liberating their cultures.<sup>140</sup> Since the triune God is already active in the pre-Christian cultures, both the missionaries (the gospel bringers) and the converted local Christians (the gospel receivers) are called to participate in joining a trinitarian mission of God. In short, local religious terms and symbols play a crucial role in translating the gospel and localizing Christianity in the age of world Christianity. I observe that many theologians of religions do not pay a serious attention to this issue, whereas anthropologists do. However, the challenge we have in Asia is: what should we do when the local or majority religious groups ban us from using their religious terms? Muslims in Malaysia ban Christians from using *Allah* for expressing God<sup>141</sup> and some Buddhists in Myanmar ban Christians from using some of their religious terms for expressing the certain

136 Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 27. While I agree with Walls’ notion of Jesus’ translation of divinity into humanity, I must also note that it does not mean that Jesus is transformed into humanity by giving up His divinity.

137 Ibid., 334-335.

138 Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downer Groves, IL: IVP, 2005), 77

139 Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 3-15

140 Quoted in Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 70. See Kwame Bediako, *Christianity and Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 121.

141 <https://www.cnn.com/2014/06/24/world/asia/malaysia-allah-ban/index.html> (accessed on April 14, 2018).



Christian categories.<sup>142</sup>

Second, the goal of an interreligious dialogue is cultivating faith for a deeper and thicker knowledge of God. Some evangelicals misunderstand God's special revelation in Christ as a basis for a full knowledge of God. Paul reminds us that we all have a "partial knowledge of God" (1Cor. 13:9) and every human has a moral knowledge of God (Rom. 2:14-15). For instance, Buddhists could have an implicit and general knowledge of the moral attributes of God through their eightfold path of a threefold principle (morality, wisdom and meditation), though they do not have an explicit and a saving knowledge of Christ. If so, Christians can learn about the moral attributes of God as justice and compassion from Buddhists. If Jesus' command to love the enemy is the model (Matt. 5:44), Christians can learn about the spiritual practice of forgiveness from a Buddhist social and spiritual activist Aung San Suu Kyi who forgives her enemies – the Burmese regimes—who put her in jail and under house arrest for 15 years. McDermott and Netland rightly say that Christians can learn about the act of forgiveness from Dalai Lama who forgives the Chinese communists who kill his fellow Tibetans.<sup>143</sup>

If religious terms and symbols play a crucial role in translating the gospel and localizing Christianity, the religious morality and spiritual practice play a crucial role in cultivating Christian faith as a transformative knowledge of God.<sup>144</sup> Since Christians are called to be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29), our apostolic faith must be cultivated and liberated morally by the ethical teaching of

the Bible (2Tim. 3:16-17) and by learning the ethical practices of the religious other through whom the Spirit may speak to us.<sup>145</sup> McDermott argues that three great Christian thinkers learned about God from other religious traditions. Saint Augustine learned from Neo-Platonism to better understand the gospel, Thomas Aquinas learned from Aristotle to better understand the Scriptures, John Calvin learned from Renaissance humanism to better comprehend the nature of God's revelation.<sup>146</sup> If these great Christian leaders learned from other religious traditions, we should also learn from other religions for a thicker understanding of the triune God.

Third, Christians must see mission as transforming cultures (cultural change) and society (social change). When other faiths are converted to Christ, they would transform their cultures from within their own cultures. I have said earlier that this is the third movement of the trinitarian mission of the church. "Our missionary task is simply to introduce them to Christ and the gospel of His salvation."<sup>147</sup> McDermott and Netland helpfully introduce multidimensional images of salvation as healing, forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration, justice, peace and shalom.<sup>148</sup> What is significant about their approach is the missiological connection between salvation and the Kingdom of the triune God. This allows us to see salvation not just in an individualistic term, but also in a holistic and broader term so that we work together with other faiths (*mission with other*

142 <https://www.rfa.org/burmese/news/mahana-statement-04142018084216.html> (accessed on April 14, 2018).

143 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 130.

144 Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 311-312.

145 McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 105-108.

146 See McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?* 121-132.

147 Dana L. Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (Chichester: Blackwell, 2009), 90.

148 McDermott and Netland, *Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 122-181.

*faiths*) for a common good of social and eco-justice and peace without ceasing to evangelize them (*mission to other faiths*).<sup>149</sup> In the Christian and Buddhist dialogue, I suggest that we should see suffering as a point of contact for discerning the Spirit's intercession in a groaning world (Rom. 8:28) and for transforming the world.<sup>150</sup> In this regard, our interreligious goal is not for mutual agreement on the divergent concepts of God and the problem of evil, but for mutual goal of social justice and peace against evils that cause socio-political suffering on the convergent concepts of justice and compassion.

Mission is not just about proclaiming the gospel of salvation in word; mission is also about embodying Jesus' transforming life and witnessing to the Spirit's healing providence of the groaning creation in work. Precisely because of this, I must stress that the trinitarian mission practice of the church must be shaped by Christ and led by the Spirit. If we divorce one from the other, we cannot truly participate in the mission of the Trinity. Lesslie Newbigin rightly reminds us that "The mission of Jesus is not only to proclaim the Kingdom of the Father, but to embody the presence of the Kingdom in His person"<sup>151</sup> by the power of the Spirit. I am convinced by Newbigin's Trinitarian concept of mission as "Proclaiming the kingdom of the Father (faith-centered), sharing the life of the Son (love-centered), and bearing the witness of the Spirit" (discernment-centered).<sup>152</sup>

149 Ibid., 126. The italic words in the parenthesis are mine.

150 See David Thang Moe, *Pyithu-Dukkha Theology: A Paradigm for Doing Dialectical Theology of Divine Suffering and Human Suffering in the Asian-Burmese Context* (Lexington, KY: Emeth, 2017).

151 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 40.

152 Ibid., 30-65.

## CONCLUSION

I am grateful to Yong, Netland and McDermott for proposing their innovative methodologies and contextual hermeneutics of a trinitarian theology of religions, but their proposals are not to be understood as the points of arrival for a normative theology of religions. Rather theirs are to be seen as the points of departure for developing a more robust Trinitarian theology of religions. To that goal, I have engaged with Yong, Netland and McDermott and have explored their different methodologies and have examined their strengths and limitations. McDermott and Netland approach to an evangelical Trinitarian theology of religions through the lens of Christ and His work of salvation, while Yong attempts to go beyond the Christological impasse and proposes a Pneumatological methodology as a better and a more inclusive way in a pluralistic world.

This paper does not take a stand with either side, instead this paper takes a middle ground by holding the Son and the Spirit as two hands of the Father within their single economy of salvation and revelation. I have proposed a perichoretic approach as a better way to foster a robust Trinitarian theology of religions in a pluralistic world. A perichoretic approach reconciles Netland and McDermott's Christocentric Trinity, and Yong's Pneumatocentric Trinity by introducing a new perspective on a 'Trinitarian Christology' and a 'Trinitarian Pneumatology' without prioritizing one over the other. It expands their ideas from a perspective that foregrounds two hands work of the Spirit and the Son within a single economic plan of salvation for the glory of the Father (Jn. 17:4).

Moreover, a perichoretic way of re-thinking the Trinity shapes the identity of the church as a

trinitarian community of love and faith and by extension the witness of salvation as a relational and transformative aspect of life in communion with other faiths for the glory of the Trinity. When Jesus came into the world by the power of the Spirit, He not only redeemed the world, but He also glorified the Father (Jn. 17:5). When Jesus ascended into heaven, the triune God—three Persons—equally receive glory from the church whose doxological and apostolic life is shaped by Christ and led by the Spirit (17:6-11).<sup>153</sup> Thus, we should not separate the work of Christ from the work of the Spirit.

It is true that Pneumatology has long been neglected or marginalized at the expense of overemphasizing Christology. Time has come to re-emphasize the Spirit and the Son as two hands of the Father. I have argued that without the Spirit, the incarnational mission of Christ is incomplete and the ongoing ministry of the church is impossible. It is equally important to note that without the incarnation of Christ we cannot know the Father (Jn. 1:18; 14:7) or the Father will remain as an absolute Other, withdrawing from the created world and the ongoing ministry of the church will be blind. Therefore, it is my proposal that instead of treating Christocentrism (Son), Pneumatocentrism (Spirit) and Theocentrism (Father) as three separate disciples for a divergent theology of religions, we should develop a perichoretic Trinitarian theology of religions that is grounded in the immanent communion and the economic act of the Trinity for the church and the world.

153 Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 152-153.

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