

The Holy Spirit in the world

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According to the biblical witness, the Holy Spirit is at work within the church, and the Holy Spirit is at work in the world. But for the contemporary church, to ask whether or how the Holy Spirit is at work in the world is to pose a potentially loaded question. This question is especially troubling if it is specifically about the Spirit's work outside the church, or even about the Spirit's work over against the church. To ask this question is to remind the church that the Spirit is not under our control and that it may even challenge us to repent and reform.

Partly because of the elusive character of the Holy Spirit, anxiety often accompanies pneumatology (what we say about the Holy Spirit). We confront the danger that we will judge the presence of the Spirit by our own human standards or declare our own work to be that of the Spirit. When a security guard stopped a gunman at a megachurch in Colorado by shooting him, she credited God for guiding her response.¹ She seemed to imply that

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the "good result" was proof that the Spirit had guided her hand. Some Christians have interpreted significant world events, such as the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 or the 9/11 attacks, as means by which the Spirit was exacting God's judgment on particular peoples.

Is the cultural and legal recognition and affirmation in Canada and the United States of homosexual persons and same-sex unions/marriage a movement of the Spirit which the

church ought to recognize? Or are same-sex marriages, for example, the work of a spirit other than the Holy Spirit of God? Is the Spirit saying one thing to the world and another to the church? How do we discern?

Of course, discernment of what the Spirit is doing *within* the church may also be controversial. We might generally agree that the Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of individuals, transforming them into disciples of Christ and members of Christ's body. The Spirit is working in the common proclamation and ministry of the church, in practices such as baptism and the Lord's Supper, and in

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the interpretation of scripture, which was written and compiled under the guidance of the Spirit. We might agree *that* the Spirit is active in all these spheres but disagree about exactly *what* the Spirit is doing or saying in any one of them. Recent apologies for what churches once believed was right are reminders that the actions of the church do not automatically reflect the leading of the Spirit.

As I examine three notable ways Christians have recently understood the Spirit to be active outside the church, I do so from the perspective of Christian theology, which I take to be ultimately a practical discipline that aims to help Christian communities be faithful in their contexts. In putting the matter this way, I assume that whether and how the Spirit is at work outside the church remains a question *for the church*. The world may be interested in trends, prognostications, unseen forces, or the “invisible hand” of the market, but only the Christian church inquires about the activity of the Holy Spirit of the triune God.

My thesis is that where and how we perceive the Spirit's presence outside the church tells us something about the state of our churches. It tells us more than this, certainly. But it also identifies some gaps in the church's practice. The theologians I discuss below are trying to get the church's attention. They are arguing that “the Spirit is here” or “the Spirit is there”—in places and ways Christians have often not noticed. And truly attending to what has often been missed demands some change, adaptation, or reform in the faith and life of the church.

The Spirit in creation

The ancient prayer “Come, Creator Spirit” is a reminder that the Holy Spirit is an agent of creation. The Christian doctrine of

creation affirms that God didn't just create in the past, at the point of origin, but is continuously creating. God is always creating and recreating. If God ceased to be creator at any moment, all of creation would in that instant cease to be. Early Christian bishop and theologian Irenaeus wrote about God creating through his Word and Wisdom, which he identified with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, respectively. These, he said, are God's two hands.

Denis Edwards, an Australian theologian, is representative of renewed attention to the Spirit's role in creation. The juxtaposition of the first two chapters of his *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* exemplifies his approach to and his vision for the kinds of conversations he urges the churches to have. In the first chapter Edwards relates a story that science tells of the universe, starting with the first microseconds after the Big Bang and continuing through the formation of atoms, the development of galaxies and stars and planets, and the emergence of life on earth through the biological evolution of which we are products. The Spirit of God does not arrive on the scene only at Pentecost but must be understood as the presence of God and the power of life in this whole process. The interconnectedness of all things, perhaps a central conclusion of a scientific account of the world, is the Spirit in action.

In the second chapter, Edwards draws from Basil of Caesarea, fourth-century bishop and theologian, whose writings helped settle the debate about whether the Holy Spirit was truly and fully God. Basil's vocabulary is not that of an expanding universe or evolution but that of relation and communion. The triune God is, for Basil, persons-in-communion, and the Holy Spirit as breath of God (never apart from the Word of God) gives life and holds all things together in God.

Weaving together these theological and scientific accounts of the world, Edwards makes a case that the Spirit always creates relationally. As breath, the Spirit is God is going out to what is not God. As breath, the Spirit is the life-giving presence of God in all creation, "uniting creatures in communion with the trinitarian God, saving them from nonexistence, sustaining, renewing, and directing them toward their fulfillment."²

This dynamic and life-giving Spirit is evident in what the physical and life sciences call "emergence." In emergence, some-

thing new arises that is greater than its constituent parts and not reducible to them. For example, molecules come together to form cells, and organisms come together to form ecosystems. Emergence exemplifies reality as thoroughly relational, and this relationality as the field through which the Spirit creates.

Calling the church's attention to the Spirit in creation entails implicit and sometimes explicit challenges to the churches. First,

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Edwards and others³ are responding to the ecological crisis with theological resources that affirm the intrinsic value of each aspect of creation rather than seeing the world in terms of its usefulness for humans.

Furthermore, many authors advocate a new relationship between science and theology, which are sometimes seen to conflict but more often simply proceed in isolation from each other. Science and theology need each other in order to give a true account of the

world and our place in it. The agenda for the church (which also contains many scientists!) is not to be insular but to be engaged in many disciplines of human knowledge. As shown in the example of emergence, it may be that what we say about the Spirit provides a bridge to the way science describes the world God creates.

The Spirit in religions

If God is at work in the world, it follows that God must be, or at least might be, at work in non-Christian religions. US theologian Amos Yong proposes that “the religions of the world, like everything else that exists, are providentially sustained by the Spirit of God for divine purposes.”⁴ Yong is quick to emphasize that the Holy Spirit is always the Spirit of Christ, so Christology will eventually enter the discussion. In the categories Yong wants to get beyond, his position is generally inclusivist: salvation is through Jesus Christ, but the Spirit of Christ is active, perhaps even salvifically so, outside the church. Yet, the Spirit may be a more “neutral” point of departure that helps resist premature closure of dialogue.

Underlying Yong's approach is a conviction about the universality of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the source of grace available

to all, because it is the source of life itself. In the Spirit, God is present in a more expansive way than in Christ. Starting with the Spirit enables us to ask about the divine purposes that might be manifest in other religions, without immediately rushing to the christological question of salvation—that is, whether members of other religions are saved in the sense that Christians understand the term. It is not “all or nothing.”⁵ Rather, the task is the discernment of the Spirit, the Spirit of life, in particular religions.

Yong’s proposed criteria—divine presence, divine absence, divine activity—remain quite general. While his Pentecostal

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orientation inclines him to consider evidence of the Spirit’s presence, he rightly resists any single formula. Formation in Christian community by the Word of God cannot result in a definitive statement that the Spirit of God is absolutely this or that, so we are called to discern degrees and be open to revision.

Despite the title of his book, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions*, Yong hasn’t actually moved beyond the impasse of a Christian account of other religions. His plea for a disciplined search for the Spirit outside the church highlights the importance for Christians of going beyond

binary options and keeping the conversation going. He urges us to look at particular religions in all their concrete differences. Yong’s challenge to the churches is to be open, attentive, dialogical, and discerning together with a willingness to make sometimes difficult judgments about the spiritual realities we encounter.

At the 1991 Assembly of the World Council of Churches, two keynote speakers developed the theme “Come, Holy Spirit—Renew the Whole Creation.” The first, Patriarch Parthenios of Alexandria, echoed traditional themes. For him, as for many Orthodox, attention to the Spirit counters a perceived Western overemphasis on Christology, and thus points to the mission of the Holy Trinity in all of creation. “All of this is familiar to all,” he insisted, “having been said a thousand times over.”⁶

By contrast, the address of South Korean Professor Chung Hyun Kyung was both new and controversial. She spoke about

listening to the “cries of creation and the cries of the Spirit within creation,” especially the *han*-ridden spirits.⁷ The Korean concept of *han* names anger, resentment, bitterness, and grief, as well as energy for liberation. According to Chung, the Holy Spirit’s compassion and wisdom is spoken through many *han*-ridden spirits; the Spirit’s presence is discerned over against a culture of death. The Spirit is life-centred and sustains the interconnection of all beings.

Some delegates charged that Chung failed to distinguish between private spirits, even evil spirits, and the Holy Spirit. Some participants called her approach syncretistic, especially in her suggestion that Kwan In, the goddess of compassion and wisdom in popular East Asian religion, is a kind of image of the Spirit. Yet she proposed one concrete way that the Spirit of God works through the spirits of other religions.

While her claim about the Spirit in indigenous cultures and religions generated the most controversy, her address was primarily

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a call to the church to attune itself to justice and liberation, wherever these are needed. To the extent that the spirits of many peoples, cultures, and religions are crying out for wholeness, healing, and justice, we may hear in those spirits the Holy Spirit. Significantly, the Holy Spirit is discerned at the margins of society and church, rather than identified with church authority. For Chung, the reality of the Holy Spirit in the world demands a more egalitarian ecclesiology, fully attentive to the excluded. At least part of the negative reaction to her address was surely a

result of her claim that those elites who have claimed to be speaking for their churches were not necessarily speaking with the authority of the Spirit.

The Spirit in social movements

The Holy Spirit as agent of justice and liberation is a third general way the Spirit may be understood as active outside the church. Using an approach deeply resonant with Chung’s, Canadian theologian Lee Cormie likens the recent proliferation of social

movements of resistance and hope to a new Pentecost. As in the Pentecost reported in Acts 2, these social movements represent the irruption of new voices from the margins of the church, and in sociopolitical realms. And, as in Acts 2, what might otherwise be sheer cacophony is rendered intelligible and purposive by the leading of the Spirit.

Cormie celebrates peace, feminist, eco-justice, and racial justice movements as calling into question previous assumptions about a single hegemonic perspective. The emergence of the World Social Forum—which imagines that “another world is possible,” one different from the world neoliberal globalization assumes—is a recognition that the flourishing of life on this planet requires many voices and many perspectives. These are signs of

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the “ongoing Divine mission of creation and redemption/liberation in history.”⁸ He might well add the Arab Spring (2011) and the Occupy movement to this list. For Cormie, the Spirit is present as the genuinely new and creative in history, working through, among other things, human agency at the margins of power.

Of course, some see in movements toward greater involvement of women in church leadership, and in the church blessing of same-sex unions or marriages, the work of the Spirit in the world finally being realized also in the church. Others see one or both of these developments as moving away from the

demands of the gospel. Neither novelty itself nor the presence of many voices is automatically a sign of the Spirit’s work. But Cormie, like Chung, quite rightly calls the churches to the hard work of discernment in social movements outside the church.

The Spirit challenges the church to work with non-Christians on initiatives the church does not control. Coalitions for social justice typically bring together around a common cause people who see the world in quite different ways. At times Christians may decide that participation entails too great a compromise, but at other times the mission of the church may be embodied by giving up control and seeking the Spirit outside church confines.

Anselm Min argues that the biblical account of how the Spirit relates to the Father and the Son provides the key for understanding the Spirit's work in social movements. In the Bible, the Spirit does not call attention to herself. She empowers and bears witness to another one—Jesus Christ (for example Matthew 1:20 and Luke 3:22)—and through him to the Father. Min argues, “The

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Holy Spirit is self-effacing, selfless God whose selfhood or personhood seems to lie precisely in transcending herself to empower others likewise to transcend themselves in communion with others.”⁹ Social movements seeking to overcome classism, sexism, racism, and ethnocentrism are not separate from God's mission but derive from the solidarity and reconciliation the Spirit effects between humans and Jesus Christ.

Like Cormie, Min pushes the church to be radically outward looking and open to the movements of Spirit in history. The church, like the Spirit, exists not to call attention to itself but to serve the other-oriented mission of God. Yet Min also reminds the church of the christological character of this God as the unsurpassable lens through which we see the shape of God's justice and God's liberation.

All the approaches described above are open to criticisms I do not have space to develop adequately. In all cases, there is a danger of turning the Spirit into a principle and thus a formula. The temptation to assume the identity of the human spirit with the Holy Spirit is a perennial one. The self-effacing character of the Spirit ought to lead us to be cautious about expecting that pneumatology will *finally* be the solution to inadequate beliefs or practices.

I have argued that *where* we turn to see the Holy Spirit at work, or to test for the presence of the Spirit of God, tells us something about what kind of church we think we have and what changes, reforms, or renewed emphases are needed for the increased faithfulness of the church. I don't intend for this focus on the church to reflect insularity. The effect of using this lens ought to be precisely the opposite. The church has a place in God's

mission but by no means exhausts that mission. By looking at the church through the lens of the Spirit's work outside the church, the church may well find itself more deeply in the Spirit's care.

Notes

¹ D. Brent Laytham, "Introduction," in *God Does Not . . . Entertain, Play Matchmaker, Hurry, Demand Blood, Cure Every Illness,* ed. D. Brent Laytham (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 9–10.

² Denis Edwards, *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 127.

³ The writings of Mark I. Wallace on the Spirit and ecotheology are particularly important.

⁴ Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 46.

⁵ Exclusivism holds that there is no salvation apart from explicit confession of Christ. Some versions of pluralism hold that many/all religious traditions are valid paths to salvation or "the real."

⁶ Parthenios, Patriarch of Alexandria and All Africa, "The Holy Spirit," in *Signs of the Spirit: Official Report, Seventh Assembly, Canberra, Australia*, ed. Michael Kinnamon (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991), 32.

⁷ Chung Hyun Kyung, "Come Holy Spirit—Renew the Whole Creation," in *Signs of the Spirit*, ed. Kinnamon, 38–39.

⁸ Lee Cormie, "Movements of the Spirit in History," in *Talitha Cum! The Grace of Solidarity in a Globalized World*, ed. Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare and Gabriela Miranda García (Geneva: WSCF Publications, 2004), 253.

⁹ Anselm Kyongsuk Min, *The Solidarity of Others in a Divided World* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 118.

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