



Does the Spirit Blow Where It Wills?:

Pentecostals and the Struggle of Discerning the Holy Spirit Among Religions

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INTRODUCTION

The title of this presentation¹ may seem strange in light of the fact that Pentecostalism is known for its love and appreciation of the Holy Spirit's power and freedom. (In fact, wouldn't the title be much more fitting for my own Lutheran tradition?) Yet, I propose that despite Pentecostalism's openness to and hunger for the Spirit's work, global Pentecostalism stands at a crossroads in developing a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of the work of the Divine Spirit. With this in mind, my goal is to explore the work of the Holy Spirit beyond the church—particularly among other religions—and to examine the challenges Pentecostals face in discerning the Spirit of God in relation to other spirits.

As a framework for this investigation, I aim to develop what I call a “world-embracing, multilayered” account of the work of the Spirit of God in the world. I propose that this account can help Pentecostals broaden the scope of their pneumatology. My key biblical passage is Psalm 139:7–12:²

⁷Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
⁸If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
⁹If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
¹⁰even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.
¹¹If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,”
¹²even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

Can you see in this passage how boundless and “universal” the presence of the Spirit of God is in God's world? There is no place where the Spirit cannot be found, no dimension of the universe absent of the Spirit's presence. The Holy Spirit is active and present

¹ For a careful editorial work and double-checking the references, I am indebted to my Research Assistant, Dr. Nick Scott-Blakely, the Center for Advanced Theological Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary.

² Unless otherwise noted, biblical citations come from the New International Version (NIV).

everywhere—not only within the church or in personal salvation and charismatic empowerment, as necessary and appreciated as those aspects of the Spirit’s work are. The Spirit is also actively at work in creation, the workings of the world, and in society and culture, including politics, economy, the arts, friendship, and more. Furthermore, the Spirit dwells among spiritual powers and beings (such as angels and demons), and is present in other religions and their visions of the spirit(s).

Without succumbing to theological pluralism and universalism, and without undermining the urgency of evangelistic and holistic mission work, I challenge Pentecostals to reconsider their somewhat limited and restricted understanding of the sovereign work of the Divine Spirit. If anywhere in Global Pentecostalism, this careful, Spirit-guided openness is badly needed all over in Asia. “The wind blows where it wills” (John 3:8 RSV).

The outline of the presentation is as follows: First, I will briefly remind us of the ways Pentecostals perceive the value of other religions—or the lack thereof. Second, to support my main argument briefly stated above, I will present a broader and more comprehensive, multilayered picture of the many ways the Spirit is at work in the world God has created. In the third section, I ask whether Pentecostal theology and spirituality are both able and willing to embrace such a world-embracing vision of the Divine Spirit: Is the Spirit truly allowed to blow where it wills among Pentecostals? This leads naturally, in the fourth section, to an investigation of some of the emerging Pentecostal inquiries into the work of the Spirit among other religions and faiths. This brings me to the ultimate goal of my presentation: scrutinizing the complex and complicated work of discerning the Spirit(s) across religions, as well as Pentecostal resources and motivations for that work. I end with tasks and opportunities for the future of Pentecostal pneumatology and missiology.

OTHER RELIGIONS IN PENTECOSTAL ESTIMATION³

For most Pentecostals, it seems that the issue of religious plurality is not an urgent concern. They may ignore it or, if confronted, likely minimize its importance. Others might even consider it a dangerous and unhelpful topic altogether.

Typically, Pentecostals view other religions as erroneous and mistaken ways of searching for God. Their default response when encountering adherents of other faith traditions is to share the gospel and seek to persuade them of the necessity of salvation through Christ. A conservative-fundamentalistic exclusivism is taken for granted.

It is also common for Pentecostals to have serious doubts about the saving role of the Holy Spirit apart from the proclamation of the gospel. They have tended either to limit the Spirit's saving work to the church (except for the work of the Spirit preparing for receiving the gospel) or to overlook the question of the Spirit's work apart from the preaching of the gospel.⁴

There are additional reasons why Pentecostals are hesitant about interfaith engagement:

- The danger of compromising Christology: that Christ's uniqueness is compromised for the sake of interfaith hospitality.

³ Throughout I am borrowing from my "Theology of Religions: Divine Hospitality and Spiritual Discernment," in *Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology*, ed. Wolfgang Vondey (London/New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 443–53.

⁴ A quick survey of Pentecostal manuals shows this clearly: Ernest S. Williams, *Systematic Theology* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1953), 3n15; Ned D. Sauls, *Pentecostal Doctrines: A Wesleyan Approach* (Dun, NC: The Heritage Press, 1979), 54; Guy P. Duffield and Nathaniel M. Van Cleave, *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology* (Los Angeles: L.I.F.E. Bible College, 1983), 268–70; Aaron M. Wilson, *Basic Bible Truth: A Doctrinal Study of the Pentecostal Church of God* (Joplin, MO: Messenger Publishing House, 1987), 115; Mark D. McLean, "The Holy Spirit," in *Systematic Theology: A Pentecostal Perspective*, ed. Stanley M. Horton (Springfield, MO: Logion Press, 1994), 392. For this bibliographical note I am indebted to Cecil M. Robeck, "A Pentecostal Assessment of 'Towards a Common Understanding and Vision' of the WCC," *Mid-Stream* 37, no. 1 (1998): 31n40.

- The fear of going beyond or against the Bible: that biblical teachings about the sinful and erroneous nature of other religions are dismissed for a premature embrace of any religious position.
- A distorted soteriology: the belief that salvation can be found among other religions as well.
- The neglect of mission and evangelization: the concern that the Christian Church should only dialogue and have conversations with the Religious Other instead of making an appeal to non-Christians to convert to Christ.⁵

A case in point is the warning from a Pentecostal official in the USA: a religiously pluralistic approach (1) is contrary to Scripture, (2) replaces the obligation for world evangelism, and (3) fails the Great Commission.⁶ Even when Roman Catholics challenged the Pentecostal stance on other religions during their mutual conversations that started in 1972, Pentecostals insisted that there cannot be salvation outside the church and through the acceptance of the Gospel.⁷ Most Pentecostals wanted to limit the saving work of the Spirit to the church and its proclamation of the gospel, although they were willing to acknowledge the work of the Holy Spirit in the world convicting people of their sin.⁸ The rationale for this more exclusivist attitude was rooted in the fallen state of humankind, which, for Pentecostals, leaves little hope for non-Christians:

There was no unanimity whether non-Christians may receive the life of the Holy Spirit . . . The classical Pentecostal participants do not accept . . . [the Roman Catholic Church's inclusivist stance according to which non-Christians may be saved under certain conditions] but retain their interpretation of the Scripture that non-Christians

⁵ Tony Richie, *Speaking by the Spirit: A Pentecostal Model for Interreligious Dialogue* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2011), 26 (and more widely, chapter 6).

⁶ Harold Carpenter, "Tolerance or Irresponsibility: The Problem of Pluralism in Missions," *Advance* 31, no. 2 (1995): 19.

⁷ "Evangelization, Proselytism, and Common Witness: Report from the Fifth Phase of the International Dialogue Between the Roman Catholic Church and Some Classical Pentecostal Churches and Leaders (1990–1997)," Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, accessed March 26, 2025, <https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/pentecostali/dialogo/documenti-di-dialogo/testo-in-inglese.html>, para. 14.

⁸ "Evangelization, Proselytism, and Common Witness," para. 20.

are excluded from the life of the Spirit: “Truly, truly I say unto you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God” (John 3:3).⁹

Furthermore, Pentecostals, like many of the early Christians, pointed out demonic elements in other religions.¹⁰

Before looking at the emerging Pentecostal attempts to reconsider their stance on engaging with other religions and the Spirit’s role therein, let us first outline what I call a “world-embracing, multilayered” vision of the Spirit in the world. As noted above, this broader pneumatological vision serves as my general framework.

A “WORLD-EMBRACING MULTILAYERED” VISION OF THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The reimagined pneumatology I propose enables us to discern the presence and work of the Spirit of God in creation, the cosmos, the secular and religiously pluralistic world and society, and in Christian life at both at the ecclesial and personal levels. Building on the rich and variegated pneumatological traditions in Christian history, this new account also sympathetically critiques, challenges, and expands the traditional understandings—including those within Pentecostalism.¹¹

By expanding the sphere of the work of the Spirit, I neither seek nor desire to blur the distinction between the Spirit of God—the Holy Spirit—and other spirits, nor to compromise

⁹ “Final Report of the Dialogue Between the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity of the Roman Catholic Church and Some Classical Pentecostals (1977-1982),” accessed March 26, 2025, <https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/pentecostali/dialogo/documenti-di-dialogo/testo-in-inglese2.html>, para. 14.

¹⁰ “Final Report of the Dialogue,” para. 21.

¹¹ I have kept references to a minimum, but the interested reader can find meticulous documentation in the following: Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “Spirit(s) in Contemporary Christian Theology: An Interim Report of the Unbinding of Pneumatology,” in *Interdisciplinary and Religio-Cultural Discourses on a Spirit-Filled World*, ed. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Kirsteen Kim, and Amos Yong (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 29–40; Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “Part I: Spirit,” in *Spirit and Salvation: A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016); Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “Discerning the Holy Spirit in the World of Religious Pluralism(s), Secularism(s), and Science(s): A Multilayered Constructive Christian Vision of Pneumatology for the Third Millennium,” *Journal of World Christianity* 14:1 (2024): 1–24.

in any way the distinctive work of the Spirit in salvation and the church. On the contrary, driven by biblical passages such as Psalm 139 quoted above and influenced by the broader Christian tradition, I am eager to embrace to work of the Spirit as fully as possible!

What does the term, “world-embracing, multilayered” vision of the Spirit mean?

Unlike the traditional view of the Spirit that limits the work of the Spirit to the “spiritual,” the multilayered approach critically considers a multiplicity of layers, domains, or realms in which the Spirit is at work. In other words, while traditional Christian pneumatology has focused mainly (though not exclusively) on topics such as the Trinity, revelation, salvation, spirituality, and some aspects of the church, the multilayered account envisions the Spirit’s work in all aspects of the world and human life. This includes creation, the cosmos, other religious traditions, the sciences, society, politics, the economy, the arts, entertainment, and more. This world-embracing approach also seeks to discern the Spirit’s work in the church and in personal salvation in more comprehensive terms.

Allow me to briefly outline the various layers or domains in which the Spirit is at work, based on biblical teaching and highlighting examples of how some emerging Pentecostal scholarship is recognizing these pneumatological riches.

The Spirit in Creation: The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Life, bringing about, nourishing, and enlivening creation, enabling every breath of all creatures.¹² The Holy Spirit works in tandem with the Son, Jesus Christ, as, to borrow a phrase from Irenaeus, the “Two Hands of God.” The following biblical passages are telling:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit [*ruach*] of God was hovering over the waters (Genesis 1:2–3).

By the word [*dabar*] of the Lord the heavens were made,
their starry host by the breath [*ruach*] of his mouth (Psalm 33:6).

¹² A groundbreaking work is Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, transl. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992). See also Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity: A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

When you hide your face,
they [the creatures] are terrified;
when you take away their breath [*ruach*],
they die and return to the dust.
When you send your Spirit [*ruach*],
they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground (Psalm 104:29–30).

The Hebrew word *ruach* (whose equivalents are the Greek *pneuma* and Latin *spiritus*) is used in the Old Testament to refer both to the Creator Spirit and the creature, the former giving “life” to the latter. And the term “word” (in the middle passage) is the New Testament word *logos*, the Word, the Christ: “In the beginning was the Word [*logos*], and the Word [*logos*] was with God, and the Word [*logos*] was God . . . Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:1, 3).

The Spirit in the Cosmos: Recall the passage cited above from Psalm 139: the Spirit is everywhere in the cosmos, unlimited, present even in the highest heavens and the lowest abyss. This is what the Church firmly believed until the times of the Enlightenment in Europe and North America. Now things have changed. Through education, mass media, and social platforms, this skepticism is rapidly spreading to Asia in the form of secularism and atheism. According to these perspectives, the ontology—the nature and essence of the world—is flat, lacking a non-material, spiritual dimension. Pentecostalism and traditional Christianity firmly oppose this flattening of ontology, boldly announcing with the Bible that there is more to the world that can be seen and touched—a supernatural reality!

Angels, demons, spiritual powers, spiritual energies—the other-worldly reality is alive and well. Above all is the unique, distinctive, and omnipotent Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. Amos Yong’s concept of the “spirit-filled cosmos” is a prime example of a well-developed Pentecostal construction of a biblically informed worldview.¹³ Therein, the

¹³ See Amos Yong, “A Spirit-Filled Creation?: Toward a Pneumatological Cosmology,” in *The Spirit of Creation: Modern Science and Divine Action in the Pentecostal-Charismatic Imagination* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

spiritual, supernatural dimension of the world is highlighted alongside the visible world. Pentecostalism should never lose sight of this. However, as can sometimes happen with Pentecostalism—particularly among (neo-)Charismatic movements—there tends to be an over-emphasis on demonology and the “powers.” A biblically based and pastorally sound radical middle way should be sought.

The point for this presentation is that, without in any way compromising the absolute uniqueness of the Spirit of God—whose presence fills even the smallest atoms and quarks—we may call the Holy Spirit the only true Spirit of Cosmos.

The Spirit in the Society: Following the Dutch Reformed theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper, I wholeheartedly affirm that the Spirit of God leaves “not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence” untouched.¹⁴ Unlike in the past, Pentecostals and other Christians are invited to consider the role of the Spirit—the creative and sustaining Spirit—in all areas of society and culture, including history, the arts, politics, social justice, environmental care, and the economy.¹⁵

The Spirit in the Church and in Personal Salvation: this is a cherished and crucial topic for Pentecostals but will not be developed in this presentation. Pentecostals would lose their identity and calling in the world if they became soft on evangelism and outreach, conversion and holiness, healing and deliverance, or any of the charismatic gifts. I repeat: the attempt to broaden the scope of the Spirit of God for Pentecostals is not intended to diminish or fundamentally alter the defining characteristics of Pentecostals; rather, it seeks to create a surplus—for the sake of our suffering and needy world, and in faithfulness to the biblical record and Christian tradition.

¹⁴ Abraham Kuyper, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

¹⁵ A wonderful resource to inspire Pentecostal thinking is the diverse and interdisciplinary collection of essays in Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Kirsteen Kim, and Amos Yong, eds., *Interdisciplinary and Religio-Cultural Discourses on a Spirit-Filled World*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

The Spirit Among Religions: This is the main focus of this presentation and will be further developed in what follows.

With this world-embracing, multilayered pneumatological vision in mind, let us now return to Pentecostalism and consider both its promise and its struggles with discerning the Spirit(s) among different religions. Let us begin by considering whether there is anything in the theological and spiritual structure of Global Pentecostalism that might be resisting—perhaps anonymously or unknowingly—the project of broadening the scope of pneumatology. Following that, we will be prepared to highlight the emerging efforts to engage other religions from a robust and comprehensive Pentecostal pneumatology.

WHETHER THE SPIRIT IS REALLY ALLOWED TO BLOW WHERE IT WILLS AMONG PENTECOSTALS?

A quick look at Global Pentecostalism, characterized by its Christo-centric charismatic spirituality, reveals that, in principle, the movement could easily be at the forefront of the world-embracing, multilayered pneumatological framework with which I am concerned. This could help further the original calling of Pentecostals to help other churches “catch the fire.” That said, there might be theological and spiritual reasons for wanting to limit the Spirit’s freedom—reasons that require elaborating on complex theological concepts. I propose that a potential dualism lies behind many of the perceived liabilities of Pentecostal pneumatology, especially when it comes to the goal of broadening the vision of the work of the Spirit.¹⁶

In short, I refer to this dualism as the “continuity-versus-discontinuity” dynamic in the conception of the Spirit’s work. Pentecostal theology and imagination face a profound

¹⁶ True, this dualism is not unique to Pentecostalism, as it can be diagnosed in many conservative and fundamentalist traditions. However, any spirit-oriented movement such as Pentecostalism is particularly liable to this dualism.

difficulty in finding a dynamic mutuality and balance between the *continuity* of the Divine Spirit's work in all of its various layers in the world (in creation, the cosmos, religions, and society) and the *discontinuity* between that and God's unique, salvific, and charismatic work in personal salvation and the believing community.

In other words, Pentecostals may suspect that any attempt to widen the scope of the Spirit's work beyond one's own salvation and the church may lead to compromising the unique, distinctive work of the Spirit. That is a legitimate fear. We have to be clear that not every spirit is the Spirit of God and not every "salvation" promised comes from the God of the Bible. At the same time, we should listen to the growing number of Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and other Bible-believing theologians who are arguing that it is not either-or. We do not have to decide between limiting the ministry of the Spirit to personal salvation and the church or adopting universalistic, heretical views that the Spirit brings salvation to every adherent or non-Christian religions. No, we can take the radical middle road. We can uphold the biblical teaching that every man and woman, fallen and hopeless apart from Christ, must put their hope in Christ. This is our missionary mandate. At the same time, we can *also* affirm, in line with the biblical teaching and Christian witness, that the Spirit of God is sovereign and operates in the world in ways that are unknown to us. This is our pneumatological mandate.

Theologically speaking, we may put it like this: Without conflating the divine and the human, we must be able to hold together the deep and complex continuity between these mutually conditioning poles: on the one hand, the work of the Spirit of God in creation, history, society, religions, and cultures; and, on the other hand, the same Spirit's presence as a special, unique gift of salvation in believers, shown in Christian growth and sanctification, the celebration of the sacraments, in prayer, and in charismatic gifts and endowments. Here, the late Lutheran Wolfhart Pannenberg is our guide:

God's Spirit is not only active in human redemption as he teaches us to know the eternal Son of the Father in Jesus of Nazareth and moves our hearts to praise of God by faith, love, and hope. The Spirit is at work already in creation as God's breath, the origin of all movement and all life, and only against this background of his activity as the Creator of all life can we rightly understand on the one hand his work in the ecstasies of human conscious life, and on the other hand his role in the bringing forth of the new life of the resurrection of the dead.¹⁷

The late South African charismatic theologian Henry I. Lederle says the same:

For too long the Spirit and his work has been conceived of in too limited a sense. There was a capitulation at the beginning of the modern era in which faith became restricted to the private devotional life and the latter was then described as "spiritual". The Spirit should not be limited to spiritual experiences and charisms—even though it needs to be recognized that this element still awaits acknowledgment in much of Christianity. We need, however, to set our sights much higher. Not only the reality discovered by Pentecostalism needs to be reclaimed but also the cosmic dimensions of the Spirit's work. The Spirit is at work in the world and should not be degraded to an ornament of piety.¹⁸

This important theological clarification helps us move to considering emerging Pentecostal voices towards inquiring into the work of the Spirit of God among religions.

EMERGING PENTECOSTAL INQUIRIES INTO THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT AMONG RELIGIONS

Over against those who issue a warning against any Pentecostal attempt to understand and engage different religions—as they see it as a way of compromising the Great Commission—there is a growing number of Pentecostal theologians to whom the engagement of other religions is important and vital. Amos Yong lists the following reasons as to why Pentecostals should engage religions:

- their international roots and global presence

¹⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 1.

¹⁸ Henry I. Lederle, *Treasures Old and New: Interpretations of Spirit-Baptism in the Charismatic Renewal Movement* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 338. See also Nigel Wright, "A Pilgrimage in Renewal," in *Charismatic Renewal: The Search for a Theology*, eds. Thomas Smail, Andrew Walker, and Nigel Wright (London: SPCK, 1993), 31.

- the presence of urgent missiological issues such as syncretism
- the difficulty with dealing with questions regarding the gospel and culture relationship
- the quest for Pentecostal identity and theological truth.

According to Yong, the truth question of any religion cannot be answered without the challenge of competing (or complementary) truth claims.¹⁹ I interpret his reasoning as a way of encouraging Pentecostals to boldly venture into the investigation of both the positive and the negative aspects of religions.

The late sympathetic observer of Pentecostalism, the Canadian Baptist Clark Pinnock, similarly urges Pentecostals to get involved:

One might expect the Pentecostals to develop a Spirit-oriented theology of mission and world religions, because of their openness to religious experience, their sensitivity to the oppressed of the Third World where they have experienced much of their growth, and their awareness of the ways of the Spirit as well as dogma.²⁰

Yong and others took a lesson from Pinnock. In his first contribution, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* and its sequel, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions*,²¹ Yong argues for a uniquely Pentecostal pneumatology that, while holding to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and trinitarian faith, also remains open to acknowledging the ministry of the Spirit outside the Christian church and among other religions. His first goal was to develop criteria for discerning the Spirit of God. For Yong, a Pentecostal theology of religions can be best defined “as the effort to understand both the immensely differentiated experiences of

¹⁹ See Amos Yong, “On the Way to a Pentecostal-Charismatic Theology of Religions,” in *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

²⁰ Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 274.

²¹ Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003).

faith and the multifaceted phenomena of religious traditions and systems that is informed by experiences of the Spirit in the light of Scripture, and vice versa.”²²

This brings us to the important task of carefully considering the nature and function of religions. Why are there so many religions? Why has God allowed more than one to appear? Is everything about religions only bad or evil? The question is, to say the least, complicated. In his *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology*, Yong helpfully notes that “religions are neither accidents of history nor encroachments on divine providence but are, in various ways, instruments of the Holy Spirit working out the divine purposes in the world.” At the same time, in keeping with Pentecostal “restrictivism,” he reminds us that “the unevangelized, if saved at all, are saved through the work of Christ by the Spirit (even if mediated through the religious beliefs and practices available to them).”²³ In other words, Pentecostalism is open to acknowledging the hidden and mysterious work of God’s Spirit among religions—the all-present Spirit—without in any way compromising the belief that salvation is found in Christ alone.

Another significant recent contribution comes from the Bishop Tony Richie (Church of God, Cleveland, TN). In his 2011 monograph, *Speaking by the Spirit: A Pentecostal Model for Interreligious Dialogue*, Richie takes lessons from Pentecostal pioneers, seeing in their ethos seeds of openness to other religions while remaining faithful to their own religion.²⁴

Among the growing number of Pentecostal engagement in interfaith relations,²⁵ allow me to register the Hispanic Samuel Solivan’s principles for relating to religious plurality: (1)

²² Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s)*, 24.

²³ Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 235–36.

²⁴ Tony Richie, *Speaking by the Spirit: A Pentecostal Model for Interreligious Dialogue* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2011); see also Tony Richie, “Azusa-Era Optimism: Bishop J. H. King’s Pentecostal Theology of Religions as a Possible Paradigm for Today,” *Journal of Pentecostal Tradition* 14, no. 2 (April 2006): 247–60.

²⁵ For a collection of essays—several of which address interfaith issues—by Pentecostal theologians broadly representing global perspectives, see Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, ed., *The Spirit in the World: Emerging Pentecostal Theologies in Global Contexts*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009); Amos Yong and Clifton Clarke, eds., *Global Renewal, Religious Pluralism, and the Great Commission: Towards a Renewal Theology of Mission and Interreligious Encounter* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2011).

the fact that the Holy Spirit is the one who leads Christians to all truth; (2) the importance of identification with the poor of the world and the need to bring their distinctive voice into the dialogue; (3) the conviction of the prevenient workings of the Holy Spirit in every human being; (4) the empowerment of believers for witness by the Spirit; and (5) the diverse and pluralistic character of the Spirit's manifestations across racial, class, gender, language, and religious boundaries.²⁶ On this foundation, Solivan, a Pentecostal pastor and academic theologian, is led to "examine the diverse ways the Holy Spirit is at work among other people of faith."²⁷ However, he approaches this critically, acknowledging that there are always pitfalls—such as the relativization of truth—in an approach to mission where dialogue is the *main* vehicle.²⁸

My own work in the field of interfaith studies has focused on developing a Trinitarian understanding of the role of the Spirit in the world and among religions in the dialogue with Protestant and Catholic scholars.²⁹ In recent years, I have also engaged in comparative theology, including in pneumatology. On that project, I have engaged Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu views of the Spirit(s) and spirituality.³⁰

Having outlined emerging Pentecostal attempts to theologically engage with other religions and religious plurality, the last section of this presentation will address the ultimate

²⁶ Samuel Solivan, "Interreligious Dialogue: An Hispanic American Pentecostal Perspective," in *Grounds for Understanding: Ecumenical Responses to Religious Pluralism*, ed. S. Mark Heim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 37–45.

²⁷ Solivan, "Interreligious Dialogue," 43.

²⁸ Solivan, "Interreligious Dialogue," 44.

²⁹ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Theology of Religions* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004); Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "'How to Speak of the Spirit among Religions': Trinitarian 'Rules' for a Pneumatological Theology of Religions," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 30, no. 3 (July 2006): 121–27; Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "The Uniqueness of Christ and Trinitarian Faith," in *Christ the One and Only: A Global Affirmation of the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ*, ed. Sung Wook Chung (Exeter: Paternoster, 2005), 111–35; Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "Trinity and Religions: On the Way to a Trinitarian Theology of Religions for Evangelicals," *Missiology* 33, no. 2 (2005): 159–74; Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "Trinitarian Rules for a Pneumatological Theology of Religions," in *The Work of the Spirit: Pneumatology and Pentecostalism*, ed. Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 47–70.

³⁰ Kärkkäinen, *Spirit and Salvation*, chap. 5 particularly.

question of the conditions and promise for Pentecostal discernment of the Spirit of God among religions.

THE WORK OF THE DISCERNING OF THE SPIRIT(S)

Fortunately, Pentecostalism has helped the contemporary universal Church to rediscover the gift of the discernment of the Spirit. Unfortunately, the gift and capacity of discernment of the Spirit(s) in relation to other living faiths has not received significant attention among Pentecostals.

What is the discernment of the Spirit? The obvious place to begin is in Christian Scripture. Pentecostals³¹ routinely note that among several New Testament passages that speak of discernment, the key biblical passage is 1 Corinthians 12:10–11: “To one is given through the Spirit [v. 8], . . . prophecy, to another *the ability to distinguish between spirits* . . . All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.”³² The dilemma here is that the discernment of spirits in the biblical canon is set in a different context than the multifaith world within which we find ourselves. In Scripture, discernment pertains to encounters with false prophets and finding God’s will among competing claims. More importantly, it concerns issues of spirituality and morality, particularly in the post-biblical church. Relevant to our discussion is the New Testament

³¹ For a thoughtful essay on distinctively Pentecostal understanding, see Cecil M. Robeck Jr., “Discerning the Spirit in the Life of the Church,” in *The Church in the Movement of the Spirit*, ed. William R. Barr and Rena M. Yocom (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 29–50. A useful and accessible brief overview of biblical, historical, and contemporary global perspectives can be found in Amos Yong, “Discernment, Discerning the Spirits,” in *Global Dictionary of Theology*, ed. William Dyrness, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Juan Martinez, and Simon Chan (Downer Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 232–35. See also Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “The Discernment of the Spirit(s) in Pentecostal Practice and Theology,” in *The Pastor and the Kingdom: Essays Honoring Jack W. Hayford*, ed. John Huntzinger and S. David Moore (Louisville, KY: TKU/Gateway Press, 2018), 174–93; Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “The Challenge of Discerning between the Genuine and Counterfeit ‘Signs of the Spirit’: Toward a Pentecostal Theology of the Discernment of the Spirit(s),” *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association*, 39, no. 2 (2019): 165–183, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18124461.2019.1627510>.

³² Robeck, “Discerning the Spirit,” 32. Emphasis added.

reference to the charismatic gift of the “distinguish[ing] between spirits” (1 Corinthians 12:10).

Pentecostal theologians have rightly outlined important criteria for discernment, including:

- Alignment with Scripture, the hallmark among all criteria.
- The spiritual and moral quality of the person giving the utterance, making a decision, or doing the act.
- What can be called “transrational criterion,” that is, something that “may appear almost as an existential, intuitive sense that all is not as it may otherwise appear. It is a divinely given sense which enables the detection of the source from which the prophetic word arises.”³³

On the basis of an ethnographic study, Stephen E. Parker also confirms the intuition common among Pentecostals that “[o]ne criterion that Pentecostals used to discern the Spirit’s leading was retrospective judgment; if things worked out for the good, then it was the Lord’s leading, if they did not, it probably was not.”³⁴

These are all valuable and useful guidelines for the work of discernment. However, similar to the biblical criteria, these instructions were not developed for the sake of interfaith encounters but rather for distinguishing between an authentic and false utterance or act (such as healing or deliverance) by a teacher or a prophet. In this regard, they do not help us establish more specific criteria for discerning the Spirit of God among religions amidst other spirits.

³³ Cecil M. Robeck Jr., “Written Prophecies: A Question of Authority,” *Pneuma* 2, no. 2 (1980): 38. For the listing and discussion of the criteria mentioned above and some others, based on a comprehensive scrutiny of Pentecostal sources, see Parker, *Led by the Spirit*, 31–37.

³⁴ Stephen E. Parker, *Led by the Spirit: Toward a Practical Theology of Pentecostal Discernment and Decision Making* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 105.

Adding to the challenge of discernment is this important observation: since there are “no simple phenomenological criteria by which we can test the presence of the Holy Spirit,” ultimately, such discernment requires a theological and spiritual process of judgment and assessment.³⁵ For this, Christology is the most important criterion, for “every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God” (1 John 4:3). As Lesslie Newbigin, the missionary bishop to India, said, “The work of the Spirit does not lead past, or beyond, or away from Jesus.”³⁶ The christological criterion is key for interfaith discernment. Any appeal to the work of the Spirit that distances us further from Christ is most likely false. Any appeal to the work of the Spirit that points to Christ and his work is likely (more) trustworthy. Similarly, in any area of discernment, alongside Christ, the appeal to ethical and moral criteria is also important.

Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that our task is discerning and not controlling the Spirit of God. To ask whether or how the Holy Spirit is at work in the world “is to remind the church that the Spirit is not under our control and that it may even challenge us to repent and reform.”³⁷ In other words, the all-present, all-mighty, and all-knowing Spirit of God is sovereign to work His own agenda. The Spirit does not require our approval; the Spirit blows where it wills.

It is also essential to remember that, as a work in progress, discernment is always provisional. Let us not hasten too quickly to issue the final word on matters that are far too complex and complicated for our frail and limited human minds to fully comprehend. Let us wait patiently. Patience is necessary because the work of the discernment is not primarily individual but communal. It is the work of the church community—ultimately the whole

³⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, “Discerning the Work of God,” in *Charismatic Experiences in History*, ed. Cecil M. Robeck Jr. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985), 151.

³⁶ Leslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1982), 216–17.

³⁷ Jeremy M. Bergen, “The Holy Spirit in the World,” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 84.

Church of Christ—that is the platform and agency of this discernment. Communal decisions and deliberations always take time.

For our task, we may glean additional lessons from the International Dialogue between the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and Pentecostals, started in 1986.³⁸ Let us highlight the following three lessons: First, “sometimes discernment requires interpretation,” as can be seen in the biblical encounter between the prophet Agabus and Paul in Acts 21. While Agabus’s prophesy—claimed under the authority of the Holy Spirit—about Paul’s fate if went up to Jerusalem was interpreted by the audience as a warning against the trip, Paul, “bound by the Spirit” chose to make the journey (Acts 20:22; 21:13).³⁹ Second, “sometimes discernment takes time,” as evident in a number of biblical passages including the promise of God to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3). Even though Abraham died long before God’s promise came to fruition, in hindsight the promise can be discerned as authentic.⁴⁰ Third, and related, “a prophetic word is ultimately considered to be valid when it is fulfilled . . . This point of discernment is important to remember in light of recent claims by some that the Lord would return by a specific date (Matthew 24:36; 25:13).”⁴¹

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

³⁸ “Word and Spirit, Church and World: The Final Report of the International Dialogue between Representatives of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and Some Classical Pentecostal Churches and Leaders,” #22–35; available in *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 9–43. This document was also published in the *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 4, no. 1 (2001): 41–72; and as “Word and Spirit, Church and World: Final Report of the International Pentecostal-Reformed Dialogue,” *Reformed World* 50, no. 3 (September 2000): 128–56. An even more extensive discussion appears in the second report, which covered the first decade of the third millennium: “Experience in Christian Faith and Life: Worship, Discipleship, Discernment, Community, and Justice: The Report of the International Dialogue between Representatives of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and Some Classical Pentecostal Churches and Leaders 2001–2011,” *Cyberjournal for Pentecostal-Charismatic Research* 21, January 2012, accessed March 27, 2025, http://www.pctii.org/cyberj/cyberj21/WARC_2011d.html.

³⁹ “Experience in Christian Faith and Life,” para. 97.

⁴⁰ “Experience in Christian Faith and Life,” para. 98.

⁴¹ “Experience in Christian Faith and Life,” para. 99.

The existence of so many religions and ideologies, each with their own passionate claims for truth and salvation, continues to be a major challenge for the Church of the third millennium. The challenge is particularly acute for an enthusiastic missionary movement like the global Pentecostal movement. But what if religious plurality and religious pluralism were not necessarily seen as demonic or as enemies of Christ? This is the opinion of the British philosopher-theologian Keith Ward, who argues that ultimately “for a religious person, to *accept* disagreement is to see it as within the providence of God” — even disagreement stemming from the diversity of religious beliefs and convictions. Religions do not exist without God’s permission and allowance. The continuing challenge, particularly for the staunch monotheist, is to reconcile one’s own deeply held (God-given?) beliefs with different, often opposing, convictions.⁴² This is an undoubtedly complex and painful task, but it can also be taken as an opportunity.

Francis Clooney, the leading American comparative theologian, speaks to the same issue:

If we are attentive to the diversity around us, near us, we must deny ourselves the easy confidences that keep the other at a distance. But, as believers, we must also be able to defend the relevance of the faith of our community, deepening our commitments even alongside other faiths that are flourishing nearby. We need to learn from other religious possibilities, without slipping into relativist generalizations. The tension between open-mindedness and faith, diversity and traditional commitment, is a defining feature of our era, and neither secular society nor religious authorities can make simple choices before us.⁴³

The rapidly growing Pentecostal movement has the opportunity to take leadership in the vital Christian mission of addressing the complex issue of different religions and religious plurality, while continuing its faithful and enthusiastic work of evangelism and social service.

⁴² Keith Ward, *Religion and Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 25. Emphasis in original.

⁴³ Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 7.

Led by the power of the God's Spirit, Pentecostals might yet discover God's Spirit in places they have yet to explore, trusting that "the wind blows wherever it pleases" (John 3:8).

DRAFT