

Open and Relational Theologies Consultation
“Theologies of Mission in a Pluralistic Age”
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Response to Bowman, Sherman, Roberts, and McDaniel
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My response to the papers developed for the session keeps two self-imposed commitments. The first is to the topic of the session, “Theologies of Mission in a Pluralistic Age,” which calls for attention to issues of interreligious dialogue, mission, apologetics, and limits to openness. The second commitment is to the quality of the papers. I enter my response knowing that time prevents full discussion of each paper, but hoping that my comments inspire development of the presentations into publication. I respond as collaborator with each author and imagine how I, if invited to be co-author, might contribute to advancing the theological perspectives presented in the consultation.

Donna Bowman’s paper, “Reversing Mission: Relational Resources for Bearing Witness to the Other,” makes a number of important proposals. First, the paper advocates a relational theology of missions. Second, the proposed concept of mission rejects hierarchical, essentialist, and abstract approaches to Christianity and other traditions. Third, the proposal recasts the historical significance of the Great Commission and grounds a relational theology of mission in the Golden Rule. Finally, the proposal defines mission in terms of being disciples rather than making disciples. These and other strengths are typical of the creative and practical theological proposal for a new theology of mission.

My response focuses on three collaborative issues for Bowman’s theology of mission. First, to what do Christians witness in a relational missiology? Is witness reconceived in light of a revised missional standpoint? Second, how do we reinterpret the Great Commission and the Golden Rule to a Church already confident or certain of the meanings? Third, stated in a crude way, relational missiology is an enrichment of Christianity—more qualitative than quantitative in its goals. However, if we “meet the Other” for our sake, how do we avoid a continuation of self-absorbed, self-referential encounter with other traditions, which might be experienced as a new spiritual colonialism that plunders other traditions for the sake of Christian spiritual growth and discipleship? The essence of the third question has to do with how difficult the practice of the Golden Rule may be when the Other does not need the same kind of love that we find necessary.

Steve Sherman’s paper, “A Paragon for Relational Theological Apologetics in a Pluralist Society: Newbigin’s Approach as a Way Forward for Evangelical Theological Epistemology,” makes several contributions. First, the essay directs attention to and reflection on the esteemed work of Newbigin’s theological and missional knowledge of God revealed in Christ and embodied in the Trinity. Second, the paper describes a relational evangelical apologetic that is irenic in tone. Third, the theology achieves its relational character in several ways:

- From relational language derived from a Trinitarian and christic standpoint,
- From reference to story (including the universal story) and narratives serving as approaches to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue,
- From critical reflection on theology in light of biblical authority,
- From focus on community pointing toward commitment to participation in Christian community and service toward justice and mercy, and
- From expectation of knowledge of God encountered outside the Christian tradition (an inclusivist standpoint).

These and other contributions push toward a more open approach to apologetics.

In light of Sherman's thoughtful contributions and in light of the spirit of collaboration, I pose the following questions. First, what is the full significance for apologetics of Newbigin's primacy of Christian community (rather than primacy of the individual, which is noted on page four)? Second, is the relational character of apologetics compromised by knowledge of God presented missionally from the standpoint of the universal story if our ecumenical dialogue generates diverse (even irreconcilable) human stories rather than agreement about the whole human story (which is noted on pages three and four)? Third, because the missional approach concentrates on evangelical and Christian dialogue, how does Newbigin's inclusivism guide evangelical mission with non-Christian traditions (see page 16)? How might missions be different in light of the relational theological apologetics and evangelical theological epistemology?

Michelle Voss Roberts' paper, "Rethinking Dualisms: An Interreligious Approach," provides a third alternative to the consultation topic and accomplishes a four critical contributions. First, the alternative interpretation of the topic explores the particular case of multireligious/multicultural dialogue, engaging Whiteheadian metaphysics, Samkhya philosophy, and, to a lesser extent, Platonic/Neo-Platonic philosophy. Second, the paper draws attention to how we define *dualism*, which is an ideology criticized by process theology, as well as feminist and ecological theologies. Third, the paper observes that some ancient philosophical traditions were not as rigidly dualistic as their contemporary caricatures. Fourth, the argument makes the more central point that dualism is relational and comparative, which we can see more clearly and constructively in Western thought after consideration of the Samkhya principles of Prakrti and Purusha. Generally speaking, the paper challenges those who are comfortable with non-dualistic alternatives to look closely at dualism through historical and multireligious lenses.

In the spirit of collaboration with Robert's project, I pose two extended questions for discussion. First, are there not multiple issues at stake with dualism in Western philosophical and theological traditions? For example, at an abstract level, we concern ourselves with whether the better descriptor is *dualism*, *dichotomy*, *polarity*, or *complementarity*—but at another more concrete level, we are concerned with implications of the dualistic concepts for associated values (see Karen Warren) and social conventions. Hence, ambivalence in Plato softens dualism in the abstract, but prescribes concepts of appropriate friendships and of justifiable slavery in the concrete that harden dualism. Concrete historical contexts must be considered in the definition of *dualism* alongside the more abstract or theoretical formulations. Still Roberts' point is well taken that we should be careful exegetes of historical texts. Second is a consideration of

method: What methodological principles and criteria suggest how one tradition may appropriate thought and practice from another? At the heart of this question is a request for articulation of method for pluralistic philosophy or multireligious dialogue).

Jay McDaniel's paper, "Evangelism as Deep Listening: A Process Approach to Interreligious Dialogue," is a lengthy constructive proposal. In an abbreviated form that does not do justice to the whole paper, I want to name two central contributions of the paper. First, the essay constructs an elegant synthesis of listening (as receptive love), God (as deep listening), and Whiteheadian prehension (as feeling) to create a concept of evangelism in the context of interreligious dialogue. Second, the constructive essay claims that process thought may enable evangelical participation in interreligious dialogue, which "bears witness to the listening side of love." The far more detailed and complete argument promises significant contributions to Christian thought and practice.

With deep appreciation for the paper, I want to collaborate in its development by raising two central issues for discussion. First is one technical question: How is discernment, defined in terms of a Christian concept of God (and sounding a bit inclusivist on page fifteen) logically consistent with Knitter's mutuality model of Christianity and other religions? Second, what more familiar biblical and theological translations might make McDaniel's proposals more accessible to Christians and others? The paper develops a unique and specialized theology, which might not be recognized or accepted by evangelical or other Christians. For example, comments on the Trinity (page eleven) appear to be tritheism to the neglect of unity within the Trinity. How is deep listening reflected in God's unity (or even in the two natures of Christ)?

Finally, my response poses two questions to remind us that the Open and Relational Theologies Consultation challenges us to explore relationships within Christian thought. First, at many points, the papers refer to praxis, service, caring, and relationality, but the references really remain abstract theoretical proposals. How might the ideas become alive, concrete, and meaningful in a world where war and violence have strained interreligious understanding and where tsunamis, earthquakes, and hurricanes have made poverty more visible to the privileged? Second, how has the collection of papers presented today deepened the dialogue among open and relational theologians? Have advanced our understanding of relationality, or are we equivocating with definitions of *pluralism* that take our perspectives in different directions (e.g., toward ecumenical or multireligious dialogue)?