

Religions in Relation: Theologies of Mission in a Pluralistic Age  
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Please note that my questions will not always reflect my own beliefs. Rather, I have tried to think of questions from the perspective of the position under critique in each paper.

Michelle Roberts: Rethinking Dualisms

Roberts begins her paper with some excellent insights. First, she says that “unfamiliar systems of thought can shed new light on one’s home tradition” (p. 1). Sometimes we do not appreciate what we have until we travel to another culture. Second, in opposition to those who reject all dualisms, Roberts observes that dualism is an inherently relational mode of thought. As the saying goes, it takes two to tango. She notes that spirit and matter can be related in a number of ways and so suggests that an examination of Samkhya philosophy, with its “permeable” dualism of purusha and prakrti, may help us develop a “non-oppositional reading of Western dualisms” (p. 2).

My primary question concerns just how beneficial Samkhya is in this matter. Roberts correctly notes that “it is not so easy to saddle Samkhya with the negative connotations customary in our discussions of dualism” (p. 4). However, have we not simply transferred the familiar dualisms into the realm of prakrti? She seems to acknowledge this when she says, “All such dualisms are included or comprehended on the side of the unconscious world” (p. 5). Roberts says that Samkhya is a relational theology but I fail to see any **reciprocal** relation between purusha and prakrti for there is no receptivity or change in purusha. Purusha is strongly immutable and impassible and seems to function more like Aristotle’s final cause. Since purusha is immutable, impassible and atemporal while

prakṛti is mutable, passible and temporal are we not back to the problems of the old ontological dualisms of Plato (forms versus matter) and the God of classical theism?

Donna Bowman: Reversing Mission

Turning now to Bowman's paper, there is much that is worthwhile in her approach: the call for humility, to listen, to learn, to accept the possibility that God is already at work in the lives of the other. It is a common experience for us to come away from an encounter having learned more than we anticipated. She believes that evangelical attempts at mission often contain far too much arrogance, forgetfulness of the noetic effects of sin, and far too little listening. In my view, many evangelicals, including theologians, only learn about other religions in order to do apologetics and show them to be wrong. There is seldom any appreciation that they might benefit from other religions.

However, I have some questions. First, is Bowman consistent with what she preaches? After all, is she not seeking to "evangelize" us to accept her approach to interreligious dialogue? Her paper implies that she "knows what we need." Why does she not just accept the evangelical approaches to evangelism and simply listen to them? When scientists debate with one another about the correct way to understand relativity physics, for instance, they seek to convert one another to their position. They are, in this sense, evangelizing. Should we just listen to the KKK or should we try to convert them? Should the Hebrew prophets have just listened to the other when those others sacrificed children to deities? If we seek to convert people to particular views in other fields of study, why should we not do so in the field of religion?

A student asked her: how do we know when we have been successful according to this theory? Bowman responds by criticizing a quantitative measurement of success. I agree that evangelicals have been captivated by numbers of converts as proof of success. Bowman says that successful evangelism occurs when “we ourselves are changed. Insofar as our perspective is altered, our understanding deepened, and our values enriched by the intensity that comes of contrast, our mission is fulfilled” (p. 9). Does this mean that any and all changes are okay? Is change itself the highest good? Could not someone claim he was enriched by the intensity of a KKK ceremony or that her understanding was deepened by watching child sacrifice? I suspect that Bowman has particular values in mind. What are they?

#### Jay McDaniel: Evangelism as Deep Listening

McDaniel’s paper is addressed primarily to evangelicals in the hopes of getting them to repent of the “sin of un-listening” (p. 1). There are signs of hope within evangelicalism on this point. For example, popular writer Brian McLaren’s books emphasize listening and learning from others. In his paper, Sherman suggested that one way of persuading evangelicals to be open to learning from others is to utilize a concept emphasized at evangelical colleges: “all truth is God’s truth.”

However, evangelical theologians are deeply shaped by an apologetic culture. So, when it comes to other religions, one studies them only to show where they are wrong in the hope that the audience will replace their religion with Christianity. There is some movement

towards the desire to genuinely understand what other religions actually teach and practice but even here, the apologetic motivation is noticeable. Winifried Corduan's *A Tapestry of Faiths: The Common Threads Between Christianity and World Religions* usually gives the least favorable reading of the religions so as to accentuate the differences with Christianity. Timothy Tennent's *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam* is much better than Corduan, but he also tends to interpret, for instance, *lila* and *maya* in ways that evangelicals will find unfavorable. Also, he ignores bhakti Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism which have more in common with evangelical piety. Gerald McDermott's *Can Evangelicals Learn From World Religions?* says they certainly can and he affirms that there is genuine revelation in the other religions.

One approach is that of John Goldingay and Christopher Wright, evangelicals who examine ancient Israel's response to other religions.<sup>1</sup> In my terms, what did Israel adopt, adapt and abort in relation to the surrounding religions? They accepted some aspects of other religions wholesale, modified others and rejected still others.

McDaniel criticizes proponents of the replacement model for their "holy competition" (24). Is "holy competition" inherently wrong? We disagree and seek to convert others in the fields of science and psychology so why not in religion? McDaniel says it is

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<sup>1</sup> John E. Goldingay and Christopher J. H. Wright "Yahweh Our God Yahweh is One: the Oneness of God in the Old Testament," in Andrew D. Clarke and Bruce W. Winter eds., *One God, One Lord: Christianity in a World of Religious Pluralism*, second ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1992), pp. 43-62. See also G. Herbert Livingston, *The Pentateuch in its Cultural Environment* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1974); Gerald McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn From World Religions?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), pp. 77-90; and Jack Finnegan, *Myth and Mystery: An Introduction to Pagan Religions of the Biblical World*

legitimate to convert to another religion so what is wrong with seeking to make converts while we are genuinely listening? After all, he seems to be engaging us in “holy competition” by seeking to convert us to his mutuality model. For process theologians, why cannot one religion be more correct and helpful than others? According to process thought, God has initial aims for particular cells and, presumably, these aims do not involve the formation of breast cancer. Nonetheless, some cells do not follow God’s aim and such cancers arise. What if God’s initial aim for humanity was one particular religion? Since not all humans followed this aim a less than optimal multitude of religions developed. God now has to adjust his aims, all the while trying to restore religion to his overarching desire. If so, then God may want us to deeply listen to others and also to gently persuade them to convert. Is there anything inherent in process thought that rules out such an approach?

#### Steven Sherman: Newbigin’s Approach

Evangelicalism is pervaded with the anxiety for absolute certainty. For example, they commonly ask, “If you were to die tonight, do you know where you would spend eternity?” The answer, “Yes, I think so,” simply is not good enough. One of my Pentecostal friends says evangelicals are possessed by a “demon of rightness.” The postfoundationalist epistemology of Newbigin faces enormous challenges from conservative evangelicals. At the 2004 Evangelical Theological Society meeting several plenary speakers denounced evangelical postfoundationalists as “cowards” and “relativists” who had sacrificed their commitment to truth.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In Western thought, “truth” has typically been connected to propositions rather than to a way of life. Evangelicals emphasize correct doctrine over correct living. This even affects biblical translation. For

Sherman calls for a “Willingness to listen to [Christian] voices beyond the evangelical community” (20) such as Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. A growing number of evangelical theologians are doing this. However, this entails significant risk if you work in an evangelical institution. Conservative evangelical theologian Millard Erickson has criticized me for drawing heavily upon non evangelical biblical scholars and feminist theologians.<sup>3</sup> He says my view of God contains “feminine characteristics.” Apparently, it is better to have a deity full of testosterone. Erickson’s point is that you cannot trust people who actually learn from non evangelical sources. Consequently, as Roger Olson says, creative and constructive evangelical theology does not, and for the foreseeable future will not, take place in evangelical institutions.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, Sherman has called for evangelicals to learn from other Christian communities but what about learning from other religions? Should evangelicals appropriate beliefs and practices from them?

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example, Ephesians 4:15 is translated “speak the truth in love” when there is no verb “to speak” in the Greek. Though *alathenontes* is a verb, most English translations treat it as a noun and so miss the point that “truing” is to be a way of life. This could be relevant for interreligious dialogue.

<sup>3</sup> Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, 161 and *What Does God Know?* 228.

<sup>4</sup> Olson, *Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology*, 65.