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facilitates critical and creative engagement
with what it means to be the church
and how the people of God participate
in God's mission in the world.
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A Mutual Conversion that Revolutionized the Nature and Mission of the Church

ASHLEY MANGRUM

Conversion in another view is understood not as the end goal but rather the beginning of one's journey with Christ. Though this is a more accurate understanding of conversion, it still misses the greater implications of this mystery called conversion.

The New Testament is rich with conversion accounts. These stories range from Zacchaeus to the Apostle Paul. With each new conversion narrative in the New Testament comes a deeper and sometimes more confusing depiction of conversion. It seems initially that no two conversions happen in exactly the same way. Though each conversion account is unique, just as each person and the situation through which he or she is converted is unique, every conversion account tells a similar story. William Willimon suggests that "whatever the Gospel is about, it is about change of mind and life."[1]

Too often this change of mind and life is understood as a one-time event in the life of an individual. According to this view, once the convert encounters Jesus and is transformed, the Spirit is then free to work in the convert's life. This implies that the Spirit has not already been working in the mind and life of that person in order to bring about his or her conversion. Furthermore, this understanding also implies that conversion is a decision made by an individual, which is also a problematic understanding, and that it is the individual's life that the Spirit transforms, once and for all, never to be transformed

or converted again.[2] Conversion, then, is reduced to one action, possibly even to one prayer prayed, neglecting among other things the person's part in the greater story of God. Yet this is not always the case. Conversion in another view is understood not as the end goal but rather the beginning of one's journey with Christ. Though this is a more accurate understanding of conversion, it still misses the greater implications of this mystery called conversion. The Spirit has been working in the convert's life long before any prayer that might have been prayed to bring about conversion, and the Spirit will continue working long after this point to bring about further transformation, or, in other words, to bring about continued conversion. It is after the point of conversion, if there is such a moment, that deeper transformation begins.

The conversion narrative of Acts 10:1-11:18 is a principal example of this deeper understanding. In this account, a Gentile, God-fearing soldier and his household hear the gospel message and receive the Holy Spirit. Also in this account, a leader of the Jerusalem church, Simon Peter, comes to understand the good news of Jesus and the Holy Spirit in a new, transformative way: he comes to believe that it is the person who fears God and does what is right who is acceptable in a salvific sense. Through this mutual conversion, the nature and mission of the church are revolutionized. The Christian community is no longer comprised solely of Jews or Jewish proselytes, and the mission of the church expands into carrying the gospel message to Jews and Gentiles alike. God unmistakably engineered the conversion of Cornelius and Peter, and because this transformation comes about through the Holy Spirit it carries crucial implications for the greater community of God. Indeed, the implications of this conversion are still being lived out today in the life and mission of the church.

Luke records several conversion accounts in the Acts of the Apostles: a crowd of approximately 3,000 Jewish men and women at Pentecost (2:14-41); the Ethiopian Eunuch who had been in Jerusalem (8:26-40); Saul, the Jewish persecutor and enemy of the Christian community (9:1-31); Cornelius, the God-fearer and Peter, a leader in the Jerusalem church (10:1-11:18); and groups of Gentiles who hear the gospel message, believe and repent (Acts 13:44-49).[3] These accounts "are not so much individual or typical examples of conversion as they are symbols for groups of converts, pieces in the larger narrative of the miraculous expansion of the church."[4] Luke uses each account to tell the greater story of God and the church—which is the same story in which every Christian conversion account participates.

Though the book of Acts is rich with conversion accounts, Luke spends a great deal of time telling the story of Cornelius and Peter.

The account comprises seventy-four verses in Acts (including its retellings) as compared to the forty-six verses given to narrate the first Pentecost.[5] Luke gives this story more coverage than any other conversion account, including Paul, and makes it the largest narrative in Acts.[6] Based solely on the length of this story, "we know that we are dealing with a crucial concern of Acts, a pivot for the entire book, a turning point in the long drama of redemption."[7] Yet length alone does not give this narrative value. The meeting and subsequent conversions of Peter and Cornelius have a profound impact on the mission of the church. Before this point in Acts, Peter's mission was to share the good news of the Messiah with Jews, and not with Gentiles. It takes a vision from God and the unprejudiced outpouring of the Holy Spirit for Peter, and the church, to understand the universal nature—that is the universal missions—of the Holy Spirit.

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Cornelius, the God-fearer

As narrated by Luke in Acts 10:1-11:18, Cornelius becomes the first Gentile Christian and his household the first Gentile congregation.[8] Before one can begin to understand the far-reaching implications of this Gentile conversion and consequent congregation, one must first understand the identity of Cornelius before he was given the title of Christ-follower. Cornelius held a prominent place in Roman society. His name, Cornelius, was the name of a famous Roman clan, and he was a centurion, an officer of military and administrative command (Acts 10:1).[9] Because he was in the military, Jews would consider Cornelius ritually unclean and unable to follow the teachings of the Torah, even if he had wanted to.[10] Despite these limitations, Luke calls Cornelius "a devout man and one who feared God with all his household" (Acts 10:2). As a result, Cornelius is not an ordinary Gentile—he is a God-fearer.

The Greek word used for 'devout' (*eusebes*) in Acts is a general religious term that could describe pagan worshipers, Gentile worship-

pers of Yahweh, and even Jewish worshippers. By pairing *eusebes* with "one who feared God" (*phoboumenos ton theon*) Luke "unambiguously defines Cornelius as a worshipper of the God of the Old Testament."[11] Luke uses the words *phoboumenos ton theon* ten other times in Acts to describe Gentiles who fear the God of Israel, those who stood somewhere in between paganism and Judaism.[12] Interpreters and scholars have defined the God-fearer in a variety of ways. God-fearers were not Jewish proselytes, and they were not circumcised. A God-fearer could be simply a non-Jew sympathetic to ethical monotheism who attended synagogue services.[13] In the case of Cornelius, who "gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually," a God-fearer is not one who merely sympathizes with Judaism but someone who actively participates in Jewish piety (Acts 10:2).[14] Martinus de Boer attributes the following activities to God-fearers: praying to the God of Israel, attending the synagogue, alms-giving, adhering to food laws, and observing the Sabbath.[15] Luke describes such a God-fearer in the person of Cornelius.

Though scholarship debates the historical existence of God-fearers, whether as isolated individuals or as a group of persons distinct from Judaism, Luke's consistent use of this term implies that God-fearers in some form did exist, even if this category was largely created in retrospect.[16] As one can see in the story of Cornelius, as well as in Paul's missionary encounters, God-fearers played an important role in the spread of Christianity. Finn goes so far as to name Cornelius as the "paradigmatic convert" who shows that "Christianity's route to the Gentiles is through the Jews and their synagogues, specifically, through the God-fearers who befriended the former and frequented the latter."[17] To draw this conclusion one must closely study each conversion account and interchange between Christ-followers and God-fearers in Acts, which cannot be done here. To be sure, Cornelius is a "paradigmatic convert," and his conversion account plays a monumental role in the life of the early church.

Cornelius is a devout man who prays, fears God, and who has already demonstrated a basic faith prior to an understanding of Jesus as the Messiah. An angel of God appears to Cornelius in a vision and tells him that his "prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God" (Acts 10:4). Cornelius' piety, his faith, prayers, and alms, are acceptable to God. Indeed, they represent a "sign of [Cornelius'] openness to divine grace, which is now about to reveal to him that his salvation comes through Jesus Christ."[18] This "memorial before God" recalls the memorial portions of sacrifices in the Old Testament in which the sacrifices, prayers and alms in this case, memorialize the worshiper in God's presence.[19] Once again, Luke makes it clear that

Cornelius is no ordinary Gentile—a position he further indicates by the fact that Cornelius has been "divinely directed by a holy angel" (Acts 10:22). The angel tells him to send for Simon Peter, and Cornelius obeys without question or hesitation (Acts 10:5-8). Although Luke does not tell the story of how Cornelius became a righteous God-fearer, the Holy Spirit worked in his mind and life to bring him to that point, and from the beginning of this narrative, God is in control of his conversion.

Peter, the Christ-follower

As the two servants and the devout soldier (who may also have been a God-fearer) are on their way to Joppa, Peter also receives a vision from God. In this vision a sheet filled with clean and unclean animals comes down from the sky. A voice tells Peter to kill and eat, but Peter responds, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." And the voice speaks to him saying, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy." This happens three times. While Peter is still trying to understand the vision, Cornelius' servants arrive. Speaking directly to Peter, the Spirit tells him to "accompany them without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself." Peter invites the Gentile servants into the Jewish home where he is staying and gives them lodging. Peter travels to Caesarea, the Gentile capitol of Judea, and to Cornelius' home on the following day (Acts 10:9-23).[20]

Luke uses the words phobomenos ton theon ten other times in Acts to describe Gentiles who fear the God of Israel, those who stood somewhere between paganism and Judaism

This episode in Acts is often mistakenly seen as focusing on Cornelius. Though it includes the story of Cornelius, this narrative is fundamentally about Peter because it is part of Luke's Peter-centered section told in Acts 9:32-12:24.[21] It is important to reflect upon Peter's journey to this point in order to understand the meaning of his meeting with Cornelius. Luke first mentions Simon Peter in chapter four when Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law. Peter witnesses countless miracles and exorcisms as he

travels with Jesus as one of the twelve disciples. When asked by Jesus, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter correctly responds, "the Christ of God." Peter is with Jesus at the Transfiguration, but confuses the point and God's voice rebukes him. Peter, along with the other disciples, falls asleep while Jesus prays in Gethsemane, and Peter denies Jesus three times on the eve of his crucifixion. He is also the first of the eleven disciples to see the empty tomb after Jesus' resurrection. Peter becomes a leader in the church, and the book of Acts basically opens with Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost.[22] Luke portrays Peter as a leader amongst the disciples but one who does not always understand fully. Thus, as Peter's story reveals, understanding and transformation are both a process. God has led Peter on a great journey, teaching and guiding him into truth at each point, using Peter to transform the lives of others while at the same time transforming his own life.

One might wonder at what point along this journey Peter actually becomes a Christ-follower, a Christian. Is Peter converted when he chooses to follow Christ as a disciple, perhaps before he understood the identity of Jesus as Messiah? Or is Peter later converted when he makes the claim that Jesus is the Christ? Peter did not yet have the Holy Spirit, so one could even argue that Peter was not truly converted until Pentecost. These questions may seem pedantic or irrelevant to the person who adheres to a one-time, instantaneous conversion model. Yet Peter's journey teaches that conversion, though it does have a beginning, is a process in which the Holy Spirit continually transforms him. God orchestrates the inception of the process and begins working to bring about conversion long before it occurs, and God continues to transform, to convert, the Christ-follower into a clearer understanding of his or her identity as such. Steinmetz notes, "only a lifetime of conversion can change us into the new creations God had in mind for us."[23] So it is with Peter–God is not finished transforming him. Peter's vision and subsequent trip to meet Cornelius brings about a much deeper conversion than he could have earlier imagined.

A Mutual Conversion

When Peter arrives in Caesarea, Cornelius awaits him with a group of close friends and family. Peter immediately begins to understand his vision and says upon entering the house that God has shown him that he should not call any man unclean. The significance of his vision, however, "becomes clear only as the narrative unfolds" (Acts 10:28).[24] Cornelius tells Peter about his vision, and Peter, in return, begins to share "the word of the Lord" with those gathered. He be-

gins by stating, "I most certainly understand *now* that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him" (Acts 10:34-5). While Peter is still speaking, the Holy Spirit falls upon all who are listening, just as the Spirit fell on the circumcised believers at Pentecost. The Gentiles in Cornelius' household begin to speak in tongues and exalt God, and Peter, recognizing that he cannot refuse baptism when God has given the Holy Spirit, orders their baptism. In doing so, he recognizes the implications of what has happened: "the Gentiles cannot be denied baptism because God has overtly and unmistakably included them."[25] With this meeting, Cornelius and his household become the first-fruits of the fulfillment of God's promise to the nations, and with this meeting Peter's understanding of God's promise and of his mission is transformed.

This episode indicates that a type of conversion has taken place. Cornelius and his household receive the Holy Spirit, but at no point does Peter request repentance. Neither is a response of repentance to Peter's message recorded by Luke, unlike later conversion accounts in which Gentiles hear the gospel of Jesus, believe, and repent.[26] Luke calls Cornelius a devout and righteous God-fearer on three occasions, a man whose prayer has become a memorial to God. There is no particular sin or lifestyle recorded by Luke that is unpleasing to God from which Cornelius must repent. The opening words of Peter's sermon in 10:34 are already true of Cornelius "by virtue of his faith in the God who had promised that a Messiah would come."[27] Peter's message identifies Jesus as the Messiah, the one whom the prophets foretold and the one through whom forgiveness of sins is accomplished (Acts 10:43). Peter invites Cornelius to acknowledge and believe. Cornelius' previous relationship with God had been "governed by his belief in the promise of salvation, as testified by the prophets, now his relationship with God was governed by his belief in the fulfillment of that promise as it had been accomplished in Jesus."[28] Cornelius experiences a conversion. There is a definitive change in the nature of Cornelius' relationship with God as he receives the Holy Spirit.

Cornelius is converted, but scholarship debates the nature of this conversion. Gaventa suggests that this account is more of an alternation than a conversion.[29] According to Davis, Cornelius could be considered as the person described in Romans 2:7, "to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immorality, eternal life."[30] Paired with this understanding, Davis notes that Peter's message does not bring news of salvation but rather news that the promised salvation has been fulfilled through Jesus. This suggests

that Cornelius had already obtained salvation prior to Peter's visit.[31] Kilgallen, however, insists that Cornelius could not have obtained salvation prior to Peter's visit according to Acts 11:14.[32] To continue along this line, a study of salvation and what it means for a person to be 'saved' is necessary.[33] The current discussion does not seek to answer these questions, as Luke does not seek to answer them in this conversion account. Postmortem salvation, in this case, is not the focus.

Regardless of Cornelius' salvation status prior to Peter's message, Cornelius clearly experiences a transformation when he receives the Holy Spirit. Peter preaches the forgiveness of sins, but he cannot offer the Holy Spirit. The Spirit comes before any response can be made to Peter's message, making this "the only instance in which the Holy Spirit precedes baptism" in the New Testament.[34] The Christ-followers with Peter respond with amazement, as if they have just witnessed a miracle.[35] Everything that the Spirit imparts at Pentecost –power, the identity of witness, and the indwelling presence of God –now characterizes the first Gentile congregation. Peter's message ushers Cornelius into the new age of the Spirit.[36] Acts 10:1-11:18 centers around this climactic moment, which becomes the "hermeneutical, theological, and missiological key to the eventual acceptance by the Jewish Christians of the Gentile Christians in their midst."[37] God has deemed the believing Gentiles worthy of the same Spirit given to believing Jews. Furthermore, Matson states, "the story of Cornelius narrates two conversions, not one," and it is the conversion of Peter that can be properly termed as such.[38] Radical transformation and conversion are ascribed to Peter, not to Cornelius. Cornelius immediately obeys the word of the Lord, while Peter initially refuses.[39] There are at least five references to Peter's change in perspective, and even "Peter presents himself as the one who needs changing."[40]

Much of the discussion surrounding Peter's change in perspective is attributed to a renewed understanding of Jewish purity laws. Peter sees clean and unclean animals together in a vision, and God instructs him to kill and eat with no regards to cleanliness. This vision teaches Peter a proper understanding of Gentiles, "as no food that God has provided for his created people can be called unclean, so no human beings can be considered unclean."[41] If no human being is unclean, Peter, then, can enter the home of a Gentile, remain there, and eat even as he could in the home of a Jew. This blurs the distinction between clean and unclean, Jew and Gentile.[42] Simply to enter the home of a Gentile was an "anathema to any self-respecting Jew," but Peter stays in Cornelius' home for several days (Acts 10:48).[43] It

seems that this violation of purity codes is the problem for the Jerusalem council and not the fact that Peter baptizes uncircumcised Gentiles.

The inclusion of Gentiles into the baptized church and eating, associating, and fellowshipping with Gentiles are inseparably linked. The question of why Peter has eaten with Gentiles essentially asks why Peter has received Gentiles into the Christian community. Willimon suggests the reason for the Jewish-Christian community's concern is that the church saw no difference between religious and non-religious meals.[44] Jewish believers, the insiders, can share intimacy and acceptance through table fellowship while the outsider, the Gentile, is excluded. Hence, "beneath the façade of sharing the meal lies the deeper level of symbolization of exclusion or inclusion, acceptance or rejection, love or indifference."[45] By eating with Cornelius, the outsider, Peter accepts him into the most intimate circle of Christian fellowship. According to Luke, "the theological implications of Gentiles becoming Christians are much greater for the Jewish Christians than for the Gentile God-fearers."[46] This conversion narrative makes clear that the "theological challenge of the Gentile mission is not the reluctance of the Gentiles to respond to the gospel, but the reluctance of the Jews to preach to them."[47] God has included the Gentile, the outsider, in the promises made to Israel and through the outpouring of his Spirit has made the promised salvation a reality.

Peter preaches the forgiveness of sins, but he cannot offer the Holy Spirit.

God's choosing the Gentiles and sending his Spirit is unmistakable. Peter and the Jerusalem council cannot deny what God has done. This constitutes a major paradigm shift, for "if the gospel of Jesus Christ was for everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, then the nature of the church and its mission were something radically new. From this episode the entire Gentile mission flows."[48] God does not convert the church's mission into a task that simply tolerates the Gentiles because a non-Jew can now receive the Spirit. The significance of Peter's vision and meeting with Cornelius is that "complete fellowship between Jew and Gentile in the Christian community" has occurred.[49] The nature of the church, a community that now consists of Jews and

Gentiles alike, and the mission of the church, a mission that carries the gospel to all people, is revolutionized.

Missiological Implications

The vision to spread the gospel to the Gentiles, the nations, is not original with Peter or even Paul, who God calls to be a missionary to both Jews and Gentiles. Jesus shared this vision, but some would say that this vision begins long before when God first began creating.[50] Though this account tells the story of the first Gentile convert and congregation, as well as the beginning of the church's mission to the Gentiles, it is not the story of the beginning of the mission of God. The mission belongs to God and not to the church, as evidenced by the fact that God initiated the mission to the Gentiles before the church recognizes that salvation is for those outside of Israel. Peter does not convert Cornelius; instead, God leads Cornelius into new life through the Spirit. The mutual conversion of Cornelius and Peter serves as a pivotal moment in the book of Acts and the life and mission of the church. In one sense, therefore, this mutual conversion is the most influential event in the history of the post-Pentecost community, for the vast majority of Christ-followers in the world today are Gentiles whose history lies, at least in part, with the conversion narrative of Acts 10.

The present-day Christian has much to learn from this conversion narrative. Not every person the cross-cultural witness meets will be a God-fearer, one who understands and fears God their Creator, but the Christians would do well to recognize and appreciate the contemporary God-fearers. Just as God works in Cornelius' life long before he meets Peter, so, too, is God working in people's lives around the world prior to their hearing and believing the gospel of Jesus. Christians living missionally should expect and be open to personal transformation, as it is an inevitable part of discipleship.[51] The conversion of Cornelius and Peter are both necessary if the mission of God is to move forward.

The mission of God continues today. Though the identity of the messenger and the God-fearer are ever changing, the gospel message and the transformative power of the Spirit persist. Despite the Jewish-Christian community's initial resistance, it was "dragged kicking and screaming into the movements of God,"[52] and God continues to move his mission forward in and through the church, regardless of the occasional "fit" from his people, who are still being converted. As Dollar states, "one thing that seems to be clear, both from the Bible and from the history of missions, is that those who are called to preach

the message of conversion to others must inevitably also experience a radical reorientation themselves. And this conversion is a process that will involve struggle, and failure, but will eventually liberate the messenger and the message."[53]

Acts 10:1-11:18 is the story of a God-fearer who receives the promise of his faith in God, a Christ-follower who receives a new perspective of the gospel, and a church that begins to understand the universal nature and mission of the Spirit. Although "it apparently took an act of God for the first Jewish Christians to be willing to accept the Gentile converts,"[54] God was faithful to his promise that all people share in the blessing of his salvation. Luke narrates a continual conversion of the mind and life, undoubtedly orchestrated by God and brought about by the Spirit through an encounter with Jesus Christ.

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Notes

1 William H. Willimon, *Acts* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 101.

2 For study on the nature of corporate conversions see David Lertis Matson, *Household Conversion Narratives in Acts: Pattern and Interpretation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

3 This is not an exhaustive list of conversion accounts in Acts.

4 Willimon, *Acts*, 102.

5 Charles E. Van Engen, "Peter's Conversion: A Culinary Disaster Launches the Gentile Mission" *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 135.

6 Ernest Best, "The Revelation to Evangelize the Gentiles," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 35 (1984): 11; Willimon, *Acts*, 95.

7 Willimon, *Acts*, 95.

8 There is some debate over this claim as it could be thought that the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40) is the first Gentile convert. Luke, however, does not directly refer to the Ethiopian eunuch as a Gentile. It is possible that the eunuch

is a proselyte. Because Luke refers to Cornelius and his household as Gentiles (Acts 10:28, 45, 11:1, 18) and because it is with this meeting that the Gentile mission begins, Cornelius is considered by most scholars to be the first Gentile Christian.

9 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Anchor Bible Commentary: The Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 448-9.

10 Taken from Josephus' *Antiquities* in Beverly Roberts Gaventa, From *Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 112.

11 Glenn N. Davis, "When was Cornelius Saved?" *Reformed Theological Review* 2 (1987): 44.

12 For a listing of these references, see Thomas M. Finn, "The God-fearers Reconsidered," *The Catholic Biblical Quaterly* 47(1985): 76.

13 Fitzmyer, *Anchor Bible Commentary*, 449-50.

14 Ibid.

15 Martinus C. de Boer, "God-Fearers in Luke-Acts" *Luke's Literary Achievement*, ed. C.M. Tuckett. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic P, 1995), 50.

16 For further study on this debate, see de Boer, A. Thomas Kraabel, J. Andrew Overman, Kirsopp Lake, and Louis H. Feldman.

17 Finn, "The God-fearers Reconsidered," 76.

18 Fitmyer, *Anchor Bible Commentary*, 448.

19 Fitmyer, *Anchor Bible Commentary*, 448; Leviticus 2:2, 9, 16; 5:12; 6:15

20 Matson, *Household Conversion Narratives in Acts*, 107.

21 Van Engen, "Peter's Conversion: A Culinary Disaster Launches the Gentile Mission," 136.

22 References listed in order: Luke 4:38, 5:5-11, 8:51, 9:20, 22:45, 55-61, 24:21; Acts 1:15, 2:14.

23 Quoted in Willimon, *Acts*, 103.

24 Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament*, 109.

25 Ibid., 120.

26 Davis, "When was Cornelius Saved?" 45.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 46.

29 Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light*, 122.

30 Davis, "When was Cornelius Saved?" 43.

31 Davis, "When was Cornelius Saved?" 43.

32 John J. Kilgallen, "Clean, Acceptable, Saved: Acts 10" *The Expository Times* 109 (1998): 301; Acts 11:14, "he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household."

33 For an interesting take on Cornelius' salvation see Glenn Davis, and for a more traditional view see John Kilgallen.

34 Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light*, 119.

35 Ibid.

36 Davis, "When was Cornelius Saved?" 44.

37 Van Engen, "Peter's Conversion: A Culinary Disaster Launches the Gentile Mission," 138.

38 Ibid., 135; Matson, *Household Conversion Narratives in Acts*, 106.

39 Acts 10:15-6, 11:8

40 Van Engen, "Peter's Conversion: A Culinary Disaster Launches the Gentile Mission," 137.

41 Fitzmyer, *Anchor Bible Commentary*, 454.

42 Matson, *Household Conversion Narratives in Acts*, 107.

43 Ibid.

44 Willimon, *Acts*, 99.

45 Van Engen, "Peter's Conversion: A Culinary Disaster Launches the Gentile Mission," 130.

46 Harold Dollar, "The Conversion of the Messenger" *Missiology* 21 (1993): 14.

47 Ibid., 17.

48 Van Engen, "Peter's Conversion: A Culinary Disaster Launches the Gentile Mission," 136.

49 Matson, *Household Conversion Narratives in Acts*, 115.

50 This is the primary thesis for Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity P, 2006).

51 Dollar, "The Conversion of the Messenger," 13.

52 Willimon, *Acts,* 103.

53 Dollar, "The Conversion of the Messenger," 18.

54 Van Engen, "Peter's Conversion: A Culinary Disaster Launches the Gentile Mission," 135.

"Cornelius the God-fearer and Peter the Christ-follower" . . . So What?

Questions for Consideration:

1. Does this understanding of conversion necessitate a change in church practices? If true conversion is a process of the Holy Spirit, does it make sense to use Baptism (an outward sign of joining the church) as a sign of inward conversion if conversion is not a singular act?

2. What implications arise from the melding of two culturally different groups have on contemporary integration of culturally different churches? Is there a point when it is better to keep groups (especially groups in tension) apart?

3. The author notes that in the conversion of Cornelius there is not mention of his seeking a change in behavior or seeking forgiveness of sins, but rather an acceptance of belief. How do we adapt this aspect of the story to modern missiology? Should the emphasis in discussions be on forgiveness of sins or benevolence of God?

4. Does the existence of "God-fearers" indicate the work of the Holy Spirit outside of the church?

Prepared by Claire Hein

From Xenophobia to Xenophilia: On Pilgrimage with Simon Peter

A Response to Ashley Mangrum

TODD STILL

In contrast to commentators who regard Cornelius as the central figure in Acts 10, Mangrum contends that Peter is the prominent character.

If the Jesus-movement began as a reform group within Judaism, not too long after its inception, adherents to this movement, themselves Jews, were confronted with what was for them both a critical and complex question: Under what conditions would non-Jews be welcomed into their fold? It appears that a goodly majority of the earliest Jesus-followers were wary of Gentile inclusion into their ever-burgeoning band of believers and were insistent that Gentile converts to Jesus embrace Jewish practices, especially circumcision, dietary laws, and calendric observances. Simply and anachronistically put, the nascent church was grappling and debating over whether Gentiles needed to become Jews in order to become Christians.

This matter is front and center in the Peter-Cornelius episode recorded in Acts 10:1–11:18 (cf. 15:6-11, 14) and in Ashley Mangrum's treatment of that text. Moreover, as Mangrum rightly recognizes in her essay, Acts devotes significant space to the Peter-Cornelius account "because it signals the opening of the mission to the Gentiles."[1] Romans 3:29a-b asks: "Is God the God of Jews only? Is God not God of the Gentiles also?" Romans 3:29c answers: "Yes, of the Gentiles also…." The Peter-Cornelius narrative raises the same questions and responds in the same way.

In contrast to commentators who regard Cornelius as the cen-

tral figure in Acts 10, Mangrum contends that Peter is the prominent character. Furthermore, she maintains that even though the narrative recounts the conversion of Cornelius and his household in ways clearly reminiscent of Pentecost (cf. Acts 2) it actually centers upon Peter's conversion. One may quibble with Mangrum's contention the Peter eclipses Cornelius in this episode and with her depiction of Peter's new-found understanding that "God shows no partiality" and accepts "anyone who fears him and does what is right" irrespective of nationality (Acts 10:34-35) as "conversion."[2] Be that as it may, her essay does invite us to ponder the figure of Peter, the nature of conversion, and the source and scope of Christian mission.

The canonical Gospels depict Peter as faithful and insightful on the one hand and as divided and misguided on the other.[3] In Acts, however, Peter emerges as a courageous leader, powerful preacher, miracle worker, change agent, and persuasive advocate. Indeed, before Peter is ushered off of the narrative stage in Acts 15 never to return, he is credited as being the one chosen by God "through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers" (v. 7). Acts also has Peter instructing "the apostles and elders" in Jerusalem that God "has made no distinction between them [i.e., Gentiles] and us [i.e., Jews]," for "we believe that we [i.e., Jews] will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they [i.e., Gentiles] will" (15:9, 11).

Given Acts' portrayal of Peter as a Christian paragon, especially in his defense of Gentile believers, Paul's account of his interaction with Peter in Galatians 2 comes as a disappointing surprise. In what appears to be Paul's rendition of the so-called Jerusalem Council (cf. Acts 15:1-29), Peter (also known as Cephas) is described, along with James and John, as a "pillar apostle" who "had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised" (Galatians 2:7-9). Although Paul and "the pillars" had different apostolic remits with the former going to the Gentiles and the latter to the circumcised, they

> Scripture characterizes God as impartial and hospitable. Contrariwise, God's people have frequently shown partiality and shunned hospitality.

"recognized the grace that had been given to [Paul]" and gave to him (and Barnabas) "the right hand of fellowship" (2:9).

Although Peter had affirmed Paul's ministry to the Gentiles in principle at the Jerusalem Council, Paul thought that he had violated this agreement in practice when he withdrew from table fellowship with Gentile believers in Antioch after certain individuals from James arrived on the scene. As Paul recounts it, Peter had been eating with Gentile believers before Jewish believers associated with James came to town. Their arrival, Paul reports, prompted Peter to draw back and keep himself separate "for fear of the ones of the circumcision [group]" (Galatians 2:12). The identity of the "circumcision faction" and why Paul thought Peter fearful of them cannot detain us here.[4] We would note, however, that Peter's tactical adjustment at table during meal times drew Paul's ire. Paul publicly denounced Cephas for hypocrisy and accused him of acting inconsistently "with the truth of the gospel," namely, that in Christ there is "no longer Jew or Greek" (Galatians 2:13-14; 3:28). To erect barriers between believers over matters of food and drink, Paul propounds, is tantamount to transgression (Galatians 2:18; cf. Romans 14:17).

Although Peter purportedly embraced Gentile hospitality and imbibed Gentile foodstuffs at his earlier "conversion" (see again Acts 10:48; 11:3),[5] he now seemingly stood in need of being "born again" again.[6] It may be that there was at least some degree of *rapproachement* between Peter and Paul after the Antioch incident (even as there was between Peter and Jesus after Peter's denial of Jesus according to John 21:15-19) and that they were able to cooperate for the greater cause of the gospel (note, e.g., 1 Corinthians 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; 15:5; cf. 2 Peter 3:15).[7]

Furthermore, if one may appeal to 1 Peter as evidence,[8] the "first apostle" does appear to have (finally) loosened his "provincial shackles." In a letter addressed primarily, if not exclusively, to Gentile believers living in Asia Minor (see 1 Peter 1:14, 18; 4:2-3), Peter lavishes Old Testament epithets, originally directed to Israel, upon them as he singles them out as "the people of God" (so 2:9-10). Additionally, Peter calls upon the Gentile recipients of the epistle to "Be hospitable (*philoxenoi*) to one another without complaining" (4:9). We have arguably come full circle with Peter advocating hospitality and eschewing partiality.

Scripture characterizes God as impartial and hospitable.[9] Contrariwise, God's people have frequently shown partiality and shunned hospitality. We have looked askance on the "other" and have refused to welcome one another, not to mention outsiders (cf. Matthew 25:31-46). If contemporary believers have been able to relate readily

to the Peter of the canonical Gospels, we should be able to identify no less well with the Peter of Acts and the Epistles. In both instances a person who believed deeply and sinned grievously emerges from the pages. Even as God used Peter to extend the gospel, he was also at times an impediment to the growth of the kingdom of God. Peter, then, exemplifies the need for continual transformation in the life of the Christian.

Simon's encounter with Cornelius should also prompt us to think afresh about strangers and neighbors in our midst. They are those who are in need and with whom we differ decidedly. Instead of responding with indifference and scorn, we should offer hospitality and mercy, not fearing and despising the other (xenophobia) but loving and welcoming them (xenophilia). All the while, we would do well to ask with Peter, "Who [am] I that I could hinder God?" (Acts 11:17; cf. Acts 5:39).

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Notes

1. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "Acts: Notes," in *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 2176.
2. Mangrum has been (unduly) influenced by David Lertis Matson, *Household Conversion Narratives in Acts: Pattern and Interpretation* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series 123; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).
3. On the figure of Peter in and beyond the canonical Gospels, see e.g., Pheme Perkins, *Peter: Apostle for the Whole Church* (Columbia: S. C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1994). Cf. Richard J. Cassidy, *Four Times Peter: Portrayals of Peter in the Four Gospels and at Philippi* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2007).

4 See, among others, J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians* (Anchor Bible 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 233-34.

5 See more fully Andrew E. Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in its Mediterranean Setting* (New Testament Monographs 8; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), esp. 153-81.

6 One is reminded of Simon's three-fold denunciation of Jesus subsequent to his confession of Jesus as the Christ.

7 On Peter as a possible "bridge figure" between Jesus and Paul, see Markus Bockmuehl, "Peter between Jesus and Paul: The 'Third Quest' and the 'New Perspective' on the First Disciple," in *Jesus and Paul Reconnected: Fresh Pathways into an Old Debate* (ed. Todd D. Still; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 67-102.

8 A majority of contemporary Petrine scholars doubt the authenticity of this letter. See further Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 718-19.

9 In addition to Acts 10:34, see also, e.g., Deuteronomy 10:17-18; Romans 2:11; 14:3; 15:7. Cf. Sirach 35:15-16.

The Conversion Narrative Continued: Dramatic accounts discovered in the literature of Flannery O'Connor

A Response to Ashley Mangrum

JO ANN SHARKEY

As the audience reads the story and participates in the conversion experience, the transformation becomes a shared congregation experience.

The mystery and beauty of conversion is Christ's gift to his church. One of the most alluring aspects of this mystery is that we are a willing participant and recipient of this gift but it is not in the receiving of the gift that our journey of conversion ends. The conversion is merely the beginning of the journey, as Mangrum expresses in her article. For a Christian, the conversion is expressed through the living out of a calling. For a writer, the calling is lived out in sharing his or her story.

Flannery O'Connor, the prolific Southern Gothic writer, plays out her conversion stories through the literary narrative. Her life, her essays, her novels, and her short stories all contain the dramatic elements of conversion. She is constantly working out her conversion and she does so through her literary expression.

The Holy Spirit moving within her enables her to create. O'Connor tells the gospel message because the gospel is in her and must be expressed. What begins as a stirring within her soul must become a movement outside of herself. Her literature actually becomes

the outward expression of her inward conversion. Conversion occurs in the audience as well because they read the stories and then participate in the literary experience, therefore sharing in the conversion experience.

As the audience reads the story and participates in the conversion experience, the transformation becomes a shared congregation experience. The writing is like the preaching, the reading is like the hearing or receiving of the word. What you do with the word is up to the recipient. If you trust that the Holy Spirit is moving through the preacher, then the Holy Spirit moves through the writer as well when she or he commits her writing to be a message or a proclamation from God. Therefore, the reader has the opportunity to hear from the Holy Sprit when reading the work of someone like Flannery O'Connor.

I mention two of O'Connor's short stories for this article on the subject of conversion. While her novels and essays have numerous accounts of and references to conversion, her short stories have the ability to represent the actual conversion in a brilliant, brief, and shocking manner. O'Connor's stories continue to scandalize, mystify and inspire readers. The two stories that are discussed in this article—"Parker's Back" and "The River"—all portray stories of conversion. The stories portray two versions of conversion. Yet both portray a violent and dramatic story—one where the Holy Spirit grabs hold of a sinner and burns or plunges that sinner until he is washed in the blood and a new life rises from the old, rotten one.

The narrative expression that is apparent throughout the New Testament is the continuous recounting of conversion stories.

"Parker's Back", which remains my favorite O'Connor short story, is the account of Parker, a lost and rebellious young man. He bears an incredible void that he struggles to fill by painting his body with tattoos. He marries Sarah Ruth, a woman who is "forever sniffing up sin. She did not smoke or dip, drink whiskey, use bad language or paint her face…" Parker supposes that she marries him "because she meant to save him." Yet Sarah Ruth is unable to save Parker or anyone, really. She does not even know the Jesus that she espouses as her reason for refraining from all the activities that she finds sinful. Sarah Ruth has been raised the daughter of a "Straight Gospel"

preacher; therefore she has never wondered about the void—she is raised with the answers and left without doubt or wonder. Parker, even with his ever-increasing tattoos, bears the incredible weight of the void—it follows him and he even finds himself "turning around abruptly as if someone were trailing him." Parker attempts to fill his void with drinking, marriage, and even more tattoos but of course all of these leave him even emptier.

Despite Parker's feeble attempts to find God, God finds Parker instead. There is a burning bush, a consuming fire—and Parker knew "that there had been a great change in his life, a leap forward into a worse unknown, and there was nothing he could do about it." Parker stumbles away from his encounter with God and searches for the only meaningful response that he knows—an all-consuming tattoo of Christ that covers his back.

In "The River," a conversion story is told about a young boy who has previously known only rejection. This boy, Harry, who names himself Bevel after a traveling evangelist, is taken to hear the gospel preached at a riverside service. The preacher Bevel invites the audience to be baptized but promises that the journey doesn't end in the river. "If it's the River of Life you want to lay your pain in, then come up and lay your sorrow here. But don't be thinking this is the last of it because this old red river don't end here. This old red river goes on, you people, slow to the Kingdom of Christ. This old red river is good to Baptize in, good to lay your faith in, good to lay your pain in, but it ain't this muddy water here that saves you…"

Mrs. Connin, Harry's caregiver, knows that Harry has never been baptized and asks the preacher to baptize him. Bevel asks him his name and the boy claims that he is named Bevel, the same as the preacher. But a situation that begins as mockery for the child becomes grave. The boy "had the sudden feeling that this was not a joke. From the preacher's face, he knew immediately that nothing the preacher said or did was a joke." As Bevel prepares to plunge the young boy under the water, he tells him, "You won't be the same again… You'll count." And when the preacher jerks him out of the water, he declares, "You count now… You didn't even count before."

The baptism startles and confuses him but the little boy knows that something is different. He cannot go back to the meaningless existence that he lived before. Even at five years old, he knows that life must be filled with more than the old cigarette butts, half-empty drinks, and hangovers that consume his parents' lives. Therefore, the next morning he returns to the river to baptize himself again.

What "The River" captures so aptly is that conversion is not only about salvation but also about transformation. Mangrum reminds us

of how Simon Peter "comes to understand the good news of Jesus and the Holy Spirit in a new and transformative way, he comes to believe that it is the person who fears God and does what is right who is acceptable in a salvific sense." Just as Simon Peter is transformed when he encounters God, so is Bevel. He cannot be baptized in that red river of salvation and arise from the water without being transformed.

The narrative expression that is apparent throughout the New Testament is the continuous recounting of conversion stories. This tradition is continued in good literature, such as the stories of Flannery O'Connor. These two short stories, "Parker's Back" and "The River" are dramatic narratives that demonstrate how conversion becomes an all-consuming event. Those who are converted must be transformed. Literature has the power to enable its readers to encounter the beautiful mystery of salvation because it portrays the stories we want to read as well as the stories we cannot bear to face. In this sense, literature reflects our own tales of conversion and transformation.

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Notes

All notes taken from: O'Connor, Flannery, "Parker's Back" and "The River," in *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor* (Farrar,Straus and Giroux: New York, 1971).

Cornelius

A Response to Ashley Mangrum

GLENN MICHAELS

One problem with this mentality is that we assume too much responsibility for the conversion of others and pay little heed to the work of the Spirit in the person's life. Simply put, salvation is not ours to grant.

The problem with religious terms like "conversion" is that they carry a lot of baggage. The records of Christian institutional history are wrought with stories of the Crusades, political conquests and colonial imperialism, all of which have only served to distort the true essence of what it means to be a believer in Jesus Christ... the original meaning of the word "Christian." We need to evaluate why and what exactly we mean when we say the word "conversion" and perhaps come up with different language that better expresses its true meaning in these religiously cynical and highly pluralistic days.

In Protestant circles we tend to emphasize a definitive point in time when a personal decision to follow Christ is made. Oftentimes this point in time is referred to as one's "conversion", a particular definition which tends to downplay the events, conversations and processes that lead one to Christ in the first place. Furthermore, since we often define "conversion" as a decision, our weakness as evangelicals is that we might focus more on the convert's pronouncement of belief than focusing on discipleship and devotion to Jesus.

Take the example of Mother Theresa, who was raised as a Christian, yet described her conversion as a process of surrendering her will to God. To try and parse out exactly the point in time that she became "converted" is to miss the point entirely. At the end of the day, the spiritual fruit evidenced in one's life is the only way we have to know if someone has been called by God. Knowing when someone invited

Jesus into their heart helps to form a mental note, a milestone on the spiritual journey, but many people evolve into an exclusive and fulfilling relationship with Christ over time without necessarily noting a certain turning point or logging the decision in a registry. On the flip side, many people can point to a time that a decision was made, but there is little evidence of a changed life in them. In both situations, only God knows the heart. All we have to go by as second-party witnesses are the fruits that come about as evidence in another person's life. Maybe one of our problems as evangelicals is that we want to control what is uncontrollable and we want to know who is "in" and who is "out" of the fold of God for our own piece of mind. One problem with this mentality is that we assume too much responsibility for the conversion of others and pay little heed to the work of the Spirit in the person's life. Simply put, salvation is not ours to grant.

Although he is calld a righteous-God fearer, the text seems to imply that Cornelius still needed help in deciphering who it was that was calling him.

With this in mind, we are presented with the intriguing and parallel stories of Cornelius and Peter. The two accounts in Acts are pivotal in the life of these men, but the implications for the church of Christ and the fellowship of believers are profound.

It would be helpful to know how Cornelius was drawn to the God of the Jews and what made him think this was a god he could follow. What was in his background, experiences, or relationships that allowed him to think outside the box in this way when he was not a Jew himself? We don't know exactly how Cornelius interacted with the Jewish community and the synagogue except that he gave them alms. The rest that is said about him is that he was a man of piety, faith, and prayers, which pleased God.

Although he is called a righteous-God fearer, the text seems to imply that Cornelius still needed help in deciphering who it was that was calling him. He had gained favor from God, but Cornelius still needed to understand the person of Christ, whose very Spirit was evidently already beckoning him. However, if Peter is to carry the message of

Jesus to Cornelius, then Peter needs to undergo a transformation in his worldview.

Really, the problem is one of ethnocentrism. Throughout the long history of the Jewish people, we can see the pendulum swing back and forth as the Israelites attempted to understand their election. Time and time again God reminds Israel that they are specially elected, not for isolation or for their own exclusivity, but they are chosen to be God's messengers, God's light to the nations. Salvation was not theirs alone to possess. All too often, this special appointment was misunderstood and the people became inwardly and racially focused. So, it is no surprise that the first followers of Christ, who were Jewish, were merely interested in convincing other Jews that their Messiah had indeed come. It was simply not on anyone's radar to make converts outside of the fold.

Luke tells us that it took an act of God for Peter to realize the profundity of Christ's message as being "for all people." Interestingly enough, God also speaks to Cornelius in a vision even though his understanding of Jesus was probably minimal, if he knew anything at all. It seems that Cornelius needed Peter in order to understand Jesus and Peter needed Cornelius in order to see that God was not only at work among fellow Jews, but among the Gentiles as well. Both men needed a conversion to take place in their thinking, but one seems more ready than the other.

It's whimsical, really, that Cornelius the Gentile was desperately seeking to hear God while at the same time, Peter the Rock, was resisting God's persistent claim that nothing was to be considered "impure." Could it be that Peter second-guessed himself the first two times he saw the sheet with the animals? Was this a trick from Satan? Was he literally hungry enough to eat a horse? Peter knew that the Jews were chosen by God and it was God who had given them the guidelines for ritual purity as well. Why would God be throwing in a curveball at this time? There was a lot for Peter to process. Fortunately, Peter was obedient even though he did not understand God's intentions until he went to the house of Cornelius the next day.

Through Scripture, we know the rest of the story—not only that of Cornelius and his family, but that of the first church. A few chapters later, in Acts 15, Peter is the most vocal advocate for the Gentiles as he lobbies to acquit them from having to follow the Jewish cultural practice of circumcision.

The irony in all of this is that we still struggle with this issue today. Our present-day churches, consisting almost entirely of Gentiles, too

often behave as if they are God's new chosen race who holds the keys to God's Kingdom. "If you want to know about God, you're going to have to find out from us!" We expect converts to meet us where we are instead of us going to them. We have our ideas of what is meant by "conversion" and we often go about it as if it is our work and not that of the Spirit. We too often require that new converts observe our modern-day Christian equivalent of circumcision and dietary restrictions instead of reminding them of their freedom to follow Christ from their own cultural background. In some cases, as can still be seen in India, the requirement of meat-eating, name changing and disassociation from one's indigenous culture continue to be the requirement for acceptance in many Christian circles.

The questions we need to be asking as we engage in cross-cultural relationships today contain nuances that the story of Peter and Cornelius does not cover. The first Christians, being Jewish, needed to bring the Gospel to those who were considered ritually unclean according to Jewish law. However, what do we do when the roles are reversed? How do I adequately communicate the Gospel to people who think that I am the one who is ritually unclean, as is the case among high-caste Hindus? Is it a stumbling block to my Muslim friends that I do not follow Halal guidelines for food consumption? In both cases, as "liberated" Christians, we are the ritual outcasts because we participate in things that others deem to be unholy. How are we to act towards those who live by strict religious codes when our worldview says that there is no priority seating in the kingdom of God? Is it fair for us to try and subject those from other, stricter cultures to our sense of freedom? After all, what is wrong with being a Christ-follower and also a vegetarian? What is wrong with arranged marriages when more than half of American marriages end in divorce? What exactly does one convert from… convert to?

Cornelius pleased God and even heard from God before knowing anything about Christ. Does this shake the foundations of some who would otherwise think that non-believers can't possibly hear from God? What about our righteous Muslim neighbors? What about our dedicated Hindu mystics? Does God speak to them or must they first profess a saving (and exclusive!) faith in Christ?

The biggest lesson to learn from the story of Peter and Cornelius is that God's saving grace cannot be stopped. God is at work in the world among those in the dominant culture and among those who are the cultural and religious minorities. If we are willing, then we can take part in this amazing process that has already been initiated by

the Spirit among people who might not even recognize what it is that is shaping them. We can take part in explaining the message of Christ to those whom God is preparing if we are willing to hold things more lightly and come to the realization that it is God's work, not ours.

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The Trinitarian Religious Pluralism Acceptance Model

OF S. MARK HEIM

BILL WALKER

And now as the world grows consistently flatter because of globalization and the information revolution, a melting pot society of religious conglomerates makes the issue of the plurality of religions all the more pressing.

At the turn of the twentieth century, many Christians speculated that non-Christian religions would eventually die out. Instead what has occurred is a "powerful resurgence of the so-called world religions: Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism."[1] And now as the world grows consistently flatter[2] because of globalization and the information revolution, a melting pot society of religious conglomerates makes the issue of the plurality of religions all the more pressing. As a result, Christians are faced directly with the question of whether or not their faith "is indeed something essentially different, something special."[3] Hence the field of theologies of religious pluralism is burgeoning, and the work of S. Mark Heim reveals a thoughtful interaction with this pressing matter.

Old and New Categories

Traditionally, there have been three distinct paradigms through

which Christians view the religious other: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Paul Knitter calls exclusivism the *replacement model*, inclusivism the *fulfillment* model, and pluralism the *mutuality* model.[4] In general, exclusivists and inclusivists agree that salvation is obtained solely through the mediation of Jesus Christ. Exclusivists hold that professed faith is necessary for this salvation to be realized, whereas inclusivists do not. Pluralists, on the other hand, deny that Jesus Christ is the only means constituting the achievement of salvation. Despite the variety of choices presented here, many in the postmodern milieu determine these paradigmatic alternatives to be altogether unsatisfactory. None seem to adequately consider the vast array, depth, and beauty of the major world religions. Many object that exclusivism leaves God inaccessible to the greater majority of humanity.[5] Inclusivists find Christian bits and pieces in the plurality of other religions, thereby rendering them subservient or inferior, and ultimately obsolete. Lastly, though pluralists attempt to level the playing field by giving every religion the same starting place, they end up undermining the very aspects of these religions that make them unique and compulsory.

It is impossible for someone to step completely outside of his or her respective point of view and judge in an entirely fair or objective manner.

By either claiming that one religion is absolutely true, or by arguing that all will be consummated by "The Real" or unknown ultimate reality in the *eschaton*,[6] inclusivists and pluralists effectively "deemphasize both the integral unity of other traditions . . . and the possibility of finding significant *separate* religious truths there."[7] The mistaken approach by both groups that "blurs the distinctive features of the religious landscape" has been to assume other religions are seeking salvation.[8] Indeed, "no longer does it suffice to ask whether and what religious traditions have to do with the mystery of salvation of their adherents in Jesus Christ. More positively and profoundly, the question is what positive meaning the religious traditions themselves have in God's single overall plan of salvation."[9] What then is the proper way to address this issue?

An "Acceptance" Proposal

All Heim's first rule of engagement is to start from the position that "such theories stand among and not above religious accounts of the world."[10] In other words, no one has a bird's eye view. In this regard, Heim is influenced by post-liberal theologian George Lindbeck. Everyone works from a specific context and worldview that has been conditioned by his or her environment, language, culture, upbringing, and so on. It is impossible for someone to step *completely* outside of his or her respective point of view and judge in an entirely fair or objective manner. Even the pluralists are forced to develop a value orientation which is usually derived from existing religious criteria (ironically enough). Thus, Heim says the pluralists' point of view is not the most generous hypothesis.

To make sense of the fact that God was as decisively in Christ as Christians believe, it is also necessary to hold that God was elsewhere than Christ. This is perhaps the pivot point of Heim's Christian theology of religions.[11] Following his own rule mentioned above, Heim submits that the "'finality of Christ' and the 'independent validity of other ways' are not mutually exclusive."[12] Heim suggests that from a Christian perspective, a scenario where other religions actually achieve the fulfillments they seek is permissible. How he imagines this is somewhat complicated, and admittedly a speculative venture. Heim strives to grant other traditions the maximum amount of legitimacy without diminishing his own Christian commitment or negating the confessions therein. For instance, he says, "Nirvana and Christian communion with God are contradictory only if we assume that one or the other must be the *sole fate* of all human beings."[13] Furthermore, while a single person cannot realize both ends simultaneously, there is no reason to think that the two ends could not be realized by different people at different times or even the same person at different times.

Distinction Within and Among the Religions

One key advantage to Heim's view is that other religions can adopt the same model from their own perspective – that is, a Buddhist could still hold that his or her faith tradition is the fullest revelation of truth and reality, but permit that Christians might also realize some form of the end they seek. Another important factor in this model for Heim is that while there is an effort on the part of the Christian to optimize the integrity of truth claims in other religions, it remains acceptable and even necessary for the Christian to believe there are some errors in these other religions, and likewise for other

religions to believe this about Christians. There might come a point when two faiths' religious ends appear incommensurable, in which case the question of supersession becomes less applicable.

At the same time, Heim wants to emphasize the role that diversity *within* individual faith traditions plays and thereby recognize, for example, that an especially devout Advaita Vedantan might very well be closer to the truth and to experiencing or relating to God than some Christians. Not only that, but he or she would be encountering "the depth of the riches" of the Trinity in *Vedantan* terms. There is no need then to understand this person's experience as "anonymously" Christian. Insofar as it does not directly contradict Christian teaching, Heim insists, the Vedantan religious quest is an authentic pursuit with a real end.

An Imaginative Eschatology

Heim, among many others, notes that the New Testament lacks a "definitive statement on the fate of the unevagelized."[14] Because of this, Heim must "practice a kind of triangulation in which various texts on related issues are coordinated."[15] In doing so, Heim aims to "tread with humility."[16] To be sure, Heim is not postulating yet another pluralistic approach that acknowledges a more fundamental reality behind both the Christian understanding of ultimate truth and those of other religions. Rather, Heim envisions a Christian eschatological structure that is much akin to that of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in principle and the Thomistic theology that influenced Dante's "prose skeleton" within that allegory.[17]

Fully aware that the Bible typically lacks reference to gradations with respect to eschatology (though there are exceptions, e.g. – Luke 12:47-48) and that when discussed it is primarily done so in dualistic terms, Heim does not say that this is in fact how the afterlife will be; But he nonetheless wants to draw heavily from Dante's schema. First of all, in doing so, Heim is convinced he does what has been acceptable in the Christian tradition for centuries. Citing the Church

Heim notices that early Christians began to recognize the logical inconsistency of a simple, two-fold division between heaven and hell

Fathers and other ancient Christian writings, Heim notices that early Christians began to recognize the logical inconsistency of a simple, two-fold division between heaven and hell. For these early believers it did not make sense that all who fell short of being spiritually "reborn" would endure everlasting torment, nor that the most mildly committed Christian would be transported immediately into eternal communion with God. We then find traces unfolding of a third or "middle way" for purification and purging that would prepare people for fuller exposure to God's presence. The purpose of purgatory is to make God's creatures strong enough for the joy they cannot yet bear. "It is about getting used to glory," as Heim says.[18] Consistent throughout all levels in *The Divine Comedy* is the absence of suffering as brute or meaningless pain. Nevertheless, purgatory is only reached if preceded by contrition.

The operative standard for Dante's literary analogy of the afterlife is one centered on upholding human freedom at any cost. God does not force Himself on anyone, and while there is recognition of sin before entry, the choices made by individuals largely determine their fate. In this sense, nothing about hell is so much *punitive* as it is experienced as *loss*. God is not the cause of the suffering: "Sounds of anguish echo from some circles of hell. But whenever Dante stops to talk with its inhabitants, he finds that God is not afflicting them. Rather it is in the sin, to which they resolutely cling, that torments. There is bitter complaint, but not the slightest interest in change."[19]

If a state is determined final, it has become so only because of a creature's autonomous decision.

What is more, mobility exists between levels of hell, paradise, purgatory, and heaven. This component is crucial to the overall concept and is all the more important within the discussion of various religious ends. Somehow it is supposed that almost any place on Heim's eschatological map is potentially *pen*ultimate. If a state is deemed final, it has become so only because of a creature's autonomous decision. This feature of Heim's eschatology is what allows him to believe that "honest mistakes" and "place of birth" will not ultimately privilege any one religion. He wants desperately to preserve equal access to salvation for all, whatever the religious starting point.

How exactly he can do this while also pushing against the idea of "it will all get sorted out later"[20] is not entirely clear. He simply gives this synopsis: "Since each dimension of relation with God is rooted in the Trinitarian nature, any particular connection with triune life can flow increasingly and ultimately into that communion with all the dimensions of the triune God which constitute salvation."[21]

Each prospective end for Heim has its own internal coherence, and governing this logic in many ways is the extent to which the individual chooses to maintain a relationship with God and others. The degree to which the relationship is retained depends on the individual's pursuit of justice, truth, and love and the remnants discovered of theological virtues like faith, hope, and charity. Faith, for example, is characterized by "acknowledgement of the need and gratitude for divine grace."[22] This is one way in which Heim is able to account for how sin and judgment fit into Dante's illustration, but somehow "God's presence and aim in every circle of hell, purgatory or paradise is a gracious one."[23]

If there is a decisive factor by which one's destiny is governed, it is determined by the degree to which a person wishes to function independently and exist self-sufficiently.

A final trait of significance for Dante's allegory is that "from heaven there is no delight at pain."[24] It is not as if those in "higher" levels are unaware of the loss in lower levels, but it is the "knowledge of the consonance of God's will with the wills of all creatures that gives them peace."[25] So, like God, saints in heaven honor the freedom of all creatures and the perfect fulfillment of their desires. In addition to freedom, Heim highlights the importance of continuity between this life and the next. "In this sense the afterlife is not an addendum to this one but unveiling and ratification of its actual character . . . what was covering up the real identity of a person is stripped away."[26] Concurrently, the two-dimensional division between redemption and loss as portrayed in the New Testament remains. If there is a decisive factor by which one's destiny is governed, it is determined by the degree to which a person wishes to function independently and ex-

ist self-sufficiently. The key is openness for communion through the whole range of the divine dimensions.[27] Refusal to rely upon God for one's life is essentially the rejection that ensures greater loss in hell. Basically, it is the act of striving to be like God by renouncing him as the source of all life that will eventually lead to destruction. This might be caused by "an unbalanced obsession for a limited good that God has given."[28] Either way, Heim trusts that "God's saving will does not reach a limit or a point at which it changes to condemnation."[29]

The Trinitarian Perspective on Other Major World Religions

As discussed above, at the core of Heim's post-mortem arrangement is also a thoroughly Trinitarian understanding of religions in *this* life. He states, "The Trinity represents the Christian context for interpreting religious pluralism."[30] Likened to the nature of salvation, according to Heim the Trinity is understood most clearly and simply as communion-in-difference. He follows Gavin D'Costa by crediting the Trinity with providing the grammar for relating the particularity of Christ and God's universal activity and presence in the world through the Holy Spirit.[31] This effectively sets the parameters for safeguarding against equating exclusive identity with God in Jesus Christ, as well as against creating other saviors. The question of "What counts as salvation?" becomes more crucial though than "Which one saves?", because the world religions are not all after the same thing.[32] How comprehensively a Christian theology of religions can take into account the widest possible range of information and elements distinct to other religions in Christian terms is a good indicator of its own universal validity. The plenitude and diversity of the Trinity enables Christianity to do this in an all-encompassing way, acknowledging God's impersonal identity (Hinduism and Buddhism), iconographic encounter (Islam), and personal communion (the distinctively Christian attribute). These categories need not be observed hierarchically though, but rather are best pictured as a triangle.

In the case of Islam, adherents seek "a profound relation with God, characterized by obedience, devotion, love, and awe."[33] Outward personal obedience and conformity to God's will is at the center of Islamic theology.[34] Submission and surrender are common concepts, but Christian ideals like reconciliation, communion, justification, and regeneration are not.[35] Muslims would interpret the Christian view of God as incarnational and the process of deification or divinization to be extremely misguided at best and outright heresy at worst. Stressing the unity and oneness of God, it is also clear why Muslims would reject any notion of the Trinity. All the while both

traditions recognize God as *personal* and wholly other, so a Christian could see how most Islamic views of God are true in their concentrated but limited sense, and because of this intensified obedience to the law and external conformity, a Christian can also learn from the Muslim. Muslims and Christians alike believe themselves to be made in God's image, instructed to imitate and express loving gratitude to God. One of the difficulties here, though, might come with the close integration Islam has with an ethnic, cultural, or political unity.[36] Christianity, on the other hand, has historically been more translatable into new ethical, cultural, and political environments, although many Muslims would be quick to assert that this is a weakness in the faith. Heim would agree with Lamin Sanneh who says that Christianity has uniquely enabled "the birth of new communities of faith and new forms of social life, independent of official endorsement and without the necessity of a promised land or the advantage of cultural privilege."[37]

A Hindu tradition like Advaita Vedanta on the other hand perceives Brahman, the ultimate reality, not to be personal in the way Christians perceive God, but instead recognizes the vast and intricate interconnectedness of everything with the supreme reality that is Brahman, and therefore embrace what many Christians have experienced as "oneness" with God, nature, or universe. As Heim observes, "In Hinduism there is no clear dividing line between human and divine."[38] Again, the Trinitarian approach includes this understanding of God but once more would see it as both restricted and intensified. Many Hindus claim that "Brahman, the one unshakable reality, sustains all things by pervading all things, by identity with all things."[39] It is not difficult to notice the overlap this idea has with Christianity, and so Heim would say that their "religious claim is substantively true, and true in the very categories that it is advanced."[40] Christians, however, while understanding God as one who identifies with creation, also emphasize the transcendence and otherness of God. A challenge with Hinduism will be the issue of social change and progression. The world does not need to change and neither do individuals. Theirs is a cyclical understanding of the world, which explains why they can be comfortable with the caste system. One can escape it with good karma.

Upon consideration of Theravada Buddhism, a heightened awareness of "emptiness" or "nothingness" like much of Hinduism shies away from concepts of knowledge about any personal nature of the divine. Escape from suffering and Nirvana are achieved basically at the point of greatest depersonalization. It is here that true compassion can be born, and the "other" served, because the rela-

tive unimportance of and detachment from "self" has been realized. Interestingly enough, some correlation can be found here with the Eastern and more apophatic traditions of Christianity, especially in mystical practices like centering prayer and meditation. In this regard, even the Buddhist's narrow focus on one true aspect of and relationship with the Divine can be appreciated by Christians. A strength for Buddhism is its compatibility with "reductionistic science – the more we understand, the less sense it makes, in terms of having any transcendent or substantial meaning – ergo, intellectual or causal emptiness."[41] But for the Christian, a faith tuned entirely to the frequency of God's emptiness or withdrawal to leave creatures to their contingent freedom is less than full salvation as communion-in-difference.

The Apologetic Difference

This brief summary of the similarities and differences between Christianity and other world religions serves only to highlight a handful of general themes throughout the faiths that can be accounted for in a Trinitarian vision of God. It obviously fails to do justice to the complexity and breadth of these great traditions. However, Heim says that "this theory displaces the emphasis religious apologetics has tended to place on superior religious certainty about ultimate norms, and replaces it with an emphasis on the superlative goodness which these realities represent for the ideal believer."[42] In doing so, he successfully shifts the focus from arguments in favor or against specific truth claims to genuine questions about what is best for everyone and what is most articulately inclusive of other religions. Heim adds to the conversation a persuasive case for the Christian position's ability to offer both a more attractive salvation promise as well as a theology that can take seriously the broadest range of unique truth claims and religious ends present in other faith traditions. At the same time, there is room in Heim's analysis for much mutual education and transformation cross-religiously speaking.

Helpful too is Heim's recognition that while the distinct features of all the world religions should be honored, the exact lines of differentiation between them are not so easily drawn. But this should only be expected from a Trinitarian standpoint, as it corroborates strong support for the view of God's immanence and multiplicity. Can it be said though, as Heim suggests, that "discipleship entails working together with all creeds to overcome oppression"? Is it true that "Attentiveness to our neighbor's faith, in order to learn what the Spirit may be doing there, and praxis for justice are co-essential with Chris-

tological devotion in the Christian life"?[43] In the age of globalization, it seems these are critical questions for Christians to ask.

Quoting the thoughtful comments of George Lindbeck about Christians in the first century, Heim argues that today's Christ followers should have an "extraordinary combination of relaxation and urgency in their attitude toward those outside the church."[44] Theirs was a concern for passionately sharing the gospel while also trusting that God would be just to all people.

Further Questions

The following are some lingering concerns for further inquiry. How is this proposal, however elegant and perspicacious, any more inclusive or generous than traditional inclusivism if the result for so many is something less than Christian salvation? John G. Flett critically reflects on Heim's proposal and decides that his model requires a scale of access to God with too many layers, and therefore it discriminates. Flett even says it possesses an attitude of imperialism.[45] John Hick gives a similar criticism because one of his primary concerns is fairness to all faiths. Heim shares this concern, however, and these two men might be overlooking a critical variable in Heim's proposition. Heim has a working assumption that mobility between these layers or scales is completely possible, as was already mentioned above. He is a convinced inclusivist, and, as a result, the mosaic within each religion provides an equivalent occasion for every human being to respond accordingly to God's invitation, whether in this life or the next. Does it follow then that how a person lives or what she or he becomes or believes in this life lacks consequence? Not at all, Heim would say, because there is much continuity between life on earth and heaven or loss. It is also important to remember that this is still a speculative experiment for Heim. There is a significant difference between that of which we can be certain, and that for which we can hope. Insofar as Heim's idea is hopeful, the appropriate response for Christians and non-Christians

Heim's discussion of the Trinity, with respect to its complexity and diversity, is rooted predominantly in a dimensional difference more so than a functional one.

alike would be to continue on living out their faith with a moderated and trusting sense of urgency.

Secondly, is salvation best understood as communion?[46] Forgiveness of sin, liberation, and deification are somewhat neglected in Heim's description. Are these goals only means to the end of communion? Interaction is needed with a more developed trans-religious atonement theory, but Heim might have already started this conversation is his most recent book, *Saved from Sacrifice*.

Thirdly, others would challenge Heim's Trinitarian theology and accuse him of either tritheism or modalism. While Heim may appear to lean somewhat in this direction by underscoring the diversity of relationship within the Trinity, these accusations appear to be lacking and coming mainly from those who want to accentuate the unity of God's character and will. It is a matter of preference, as both views exist within the history of Christian theology. A balance and tension is needed between these two views to preserve the mysterious and inscrutable nature of the Divine. Not only that, but Heim's discussion of the Trinity, with respect to its complexity and diversity, is rooted predominately in a dimensional difference more so than a functional one. Heim identifies three types of dimensions: emptiness/immanence, personal, and communion, allowing for overlap between the three persons of the Trinity and which dimension each encompasses.

Two somewhat paradoxical trajectories emerge from Heim's development. First he declares there "should be no hesitancy in Christians taking those of other faiths as leaders, guides, and mentors, let alone neighbors."[47] He even so boldly avows that without truth and real ends in other religions, the Trinity and Christianity cannot be true. Then as if to swing the pendulum to the other side, he conversely assert that Jesus Christ is decisively and constitutively the Savior of the world. While this view is not necessarily inconsistent with Heim's claim that we stand to gain something from other religions on a *functional* level, how can he uphold that Christians benefit *fundamentally* from interfaith relationships? For it must be true from Heim's perspective that Christianity lacks nothing *in principle*. And if so, then all this language about "needing" other religions begins to sound superfluous. Pluralists like Paul Knitter, or 'mutualists" as he prefers to be called, will probably continue to accuse Heim and others like him of wanting to "have his traditional christological cake and eat it too."[48]

One more question from the Christian standpoint deserves attention: Where and when in Heim's eschatology would the verse, "every knee bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord?"[49] come into play? And similarly, is it honest to remove any trace of God hav-

ing a punitive will in light of the handful of New Testament texts suggesting otherwise, and the great injustices in the world that God has promised to rectify?

Concluding Remarks

Heim's work deserves to be challenged and responded to, read by Christians and non-Christians alike. The issue of Christian mission and soteriology with respect to religious pluralism is one of the foremost challenges confronting the church of the twenty-first century. Many questions remain unanswered despite Heim's lucid and elegant proposal, but it seems that his unique approach has unveiled a path to a more robust dialogue between the religions than most ecumenical efforts in the twentieth century. As Kathleen Gaffney comments, "This erudite and sensitive volume deeply rooted in Christian theological tradition stimulates religious insight. It offers an original agenda for interpreting religious pluralism."[50] Heim says it best when he describes his approach as a "refreshing vision for Christian witness, one in which the focus shifts away from acrimonious debates over whether such witness ought even to take place and instead focuses on the substance of religious aims, those of Christians and their neighbors."[51] Heim's model genuinely accepts religious pluralism, and yet he should not be quickly charged with undercutting the "final primacy" of Christ either.[52] Regardless of its plausibility, Heim's powerful, creative and coherent proposal has served the church by contributed significantly to the conversation about Christian missions, evangelism, apologetics, and interfaith dialogue. Church leaders, theologians, and lay people alike stand to benefit from interacting with it and should take notice.

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"The Trinitarian Religious Pluralism Acceptance Model" . . . So What?

Questions for Consideration:

1. Caputo mentioned, "Forgiveness is the ultimate release from all economies, from every economic tie." How does this explanation relate or differ from your own church's idea of forgiveness?

2. How does your church interpret the gift and the forgiveness that is God's offering of Jesus the Christ? How simple or complex is their reasoning, and how can you, as their spiritual guide, deepen the thought and action of the gift-forgiveness relationship in everyday life?

3. Does the power of God's forgiveness truly level the playing field between divided people or groups? Caputo sums this in "God's gracious mercy is so bountiful that the difference between the men is leveled; the good deeds of the Pharisee hold no real weight before God." How can this be relative to currently divided nations, faith groups and even next-door neighbors? How can your church connect this both to those seated in their pews and those outside of the church's four walls?

4. How do we as Christ followers look at the "madness of unconditional forgiveness?" Is pure forgiveness truly possible, one without debts or accolades?

5. What does forgiveness look like when viewing it through the lens of the Kingdom of God? How can you motivate your church to approach such a highly used term that seldom is discussed with deeper understanding?

Prepared by Laurel Cluthe

Jesus Mosques

An Examination of Contextualization

KRISTEN NIELSEN

As Christians enter into new cultures with existing paradigms of their own, they must hold in tension the experimental nature of theology.

A current divisive conversation within the missiological community concerns the concept of contextualized Jesus Mosques. A new conversation and one of considerable debate, respected scholars fall on both sides of the divide.[1] This paper seeks to address and propose a third way to address the issue outside the current perimeter of the debate. In ways similar to how professional missiology addresses Jesu Bhaktas within Hinduism, missiologists are attempting to codify an existing movement. As is the case in centuries of Christian thought and process, theology joins the attempts to explain particularities of the movement. With myriads of topics and nuances to address within the movement, the main conversation centers on biblical authority for Jesus Mosques. In professional journals and conferences, advocates and critics alike focus their argument around the precedent set in Acts, surrounding the conversion of Gentiles and the cultural expressions the early Church encountered. The missiological concept underlying much of the arguments focus on contextualization and the balance between indigenous expressions and perceived syncretism.

In David Bosch's magnum opus *Transforming Mission*, he acknowledges both contextualization and inculturation as cornerstones of an emerging mission paradigm. Christianity is an incarnational faith. The Christian faith "never exists without being 'translated' into a culture."[2] As such, it can never fully divorce itself from the culture in which it resides. The tension between being translated appropriately and becoming a controlling voice in the culture is one that exists since the inception of the faith system. In light of the history of how Christians handled this particular component, Bosch implores his readers to remember the incarnation of Christ demands the same

from his followers. As Christians enter into new cultures with existing paradigms of their own, they must hold in tension the experimental nature of theology. This tension and translation are center stage in the current conversation regarding Jesus Mosques.

The preeminent summary of Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) and their relationship with Christianity is known as the C1-C6 contextualization scale. Published by John Travis in 1988, the spectrum divides Christ-centered communities (represented by the letter "C" in the scale) based on their language of worship, the cultural and religious forms they use in their public and private lives, and their self-identity as a 'Muslim' or a 'Christian.'[3] The delineations between the six levels are demonstrated in the list below.[4]

C1	Traditional/Western church using outsider language
C2	Traditional/Western church using insider language
C3	Contextualized Christ-centered communities using insider language and religiously neutral cultural forms
C4	Contextualized Christ-centered communities using insider language and biblically permissible cultural and Islamic forms
C5	Christ-centered communities of Messianic Muslims who have accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior
C6	Small communities of secret or underground believers

While heated debate over the levels of this scale persists much of the criticism centers on C5 communities and their difference with C4 communities. In C4 communities persons remain embedded in the life of the culture, with the exception of religious life. They do not embrace religious forms of Islam forbidden in the Christian scriptures, such as reciting the shahada, while they do embrace ethical and outward signs of faith, for example abstaining from alcohol or fasting during Ramadan. Persons in C5 communities remain fully immersed within the rhythms of the cultural and religious aspects of Islam. They attend mosques, while often attending house churches. They claim Jesus as their Savior, while acknowledging Mohammed's role within their faith structure. They are "simply being better Muslims by submitting to the Messiah whom God sent to save them."[5] Their presence at the mosques is often what critics of the movement most fiercely attack.

As one transitions into the conversation about the perceived benefits and drawbacks of this movement, one notes this argument clearly exists primarily between professional, Western missiologists. With the exception of one article, the author found no participants in

this conversation who were from a C4 or C5 context. It is this absence the author wishes to address later on in regards to an alternative path of discussion.

The academic critique missiologists regard as supreme is by Timothy Tennent.". Drawing on other academic articles and an exhaustive exegesis, Tennent contends C5 movements are inappropriately included in the global Christian faith community. They should only be viewed as "transitional models," and members of these communities should be required to move towards C4 communities. The crucial difference between the two seems to be the issue of identity. Which faith do the members of each community feel they belong? The matter of self-identity is at stake and what Tennent and other critics feel missiologists should evaluate principally. Tennent uses three arguments to make the contention that a C5 member's self-identity as a Muslim is an inappropriate expression of faith. In his examination of the biblical and exegetical argument, he draws mostly on Acts 15 and two sections of 1 Corinthians. Concentrating on the issue of identity, Tennent makes the claim the conversation contained in Acts 15 provides a defense for the permissibility of C4 communities, but not for C5. The issue of religious self-identity is once again his basis for this claim. In his examination of the theological problems with C5 communities, he says the communities do not move people into the common faith of the Church. "We cannot," he exhorts, "have a Christ-centered theology of mission which does not place the church at the center of God's redemptive plan."[6] He argues that C5 believers are inherently unethical because "the retaining of one's religious identity within Islam after becoming a follower of Christ is… unethical."[7]

The crucial difference between the two seems to be the issue of identity. Which faith do the members of each community feel they belong?

While multiple authors concede Tennent's exhaustive exegetical and theological work, advocates of C5 communities find fault with Tennent's conclusions and disagree with his deductions. John Travis emphatically asserts Tennent oversets his arguments with sweeping judgments, especially when one considers many of Tennent's points are an exaggerated literature review and based on no personal experiences.[8] Travis believes the

weaknesses in Tennent's argument must be taken into account. While other authors deconstruct Tennent's exegesis, Travis makes a concise statement summarizing the viewpoint of C5 enthusiasts. "[In] this early stage in Muslim ministry, there are not enough case studies published to definitively show that one approach is always better than another. When the Gospel has barely entered the Muslim world, it is far too early to dismiss particular efforts to reach Muslims."[9]

In line with this statement, Kevin Higgins addresses the conversation in Acts 15 with regard to all insider movements in the Muslim world. Instead of the issue of self-identity, Higgins claims the main issue is salvation. What is required of Muslims to be saved? Are Muslims in fact saved in insider movements?[10] The conclusion Higgins produces parallels the abovementioned statement by Travis. An average, modern, Western Christianity articulated in specific belief statements and codified movements of worship cannot determine the definition and measurement of salvation among insider movements such as C5 communities. The measurement of salvation is in regards to transformed lives of participants in the movement, the outpouring of the Spirit of God, and the grace of God through Christ as active in the lives of the people. This understanding would also include the need for a non-Western definition of ecclesiological reality within these communities.

One of the few Muslim voices in this academic argument, Brother Yusuf, concurs with the statements made by both Higgins and Travis. In response to critiques and questions posed by critics of the movement, Brother Yusuf offers this explanation for C5 communities.

> I don't really like the term "Messianic Muslim" because it is not a term that insiders can use with members of their own com munity… In fact, we do not use any labels at all. When we visit a mosque, we just talk and behave like insiders to the culture, which we are, and people accept us. After a few visits, when we have gotten to know some people, we begin to talk to them about the Messiah.We have jamats [house churches], where people meet for prayer, worship, Bible study and discussion. People participate frequently, sometimes every day. Holy Com munion is celebrated every month or two. Believers are bap tized. These practices are based on the Bible. As for the par ticipants, their identity is primarily that of disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, and secondarily as members of the Muslim com munity.[11]

The question of appropriate participation in mosques and other

aspects of Islamic culture is a question answered with profound discernment, allowing for prophetic voices to speak into the situation and the truth of the experiences of Brother Yusuf and others like him. The voices of indigenous C5 supporters cannot be lost amidst the debate.

In reaction to the existing literature, I feel the entire nature of the current argument is unfortunate. Codifying a complex faith system into categories and definitions seems premature and presumptuous on the part of Western missiologists. As Brother Yusuf says, "The real need, however, is for open-minded missiologists to visit with leaders of insider movements and find out what God is actually doing among them."[12] This addresses the central problem with the current conversation. Instead of the critiques coming from honest places of organic questioning within the community, persons without proper experience or knowledge hoist irrelevant concerns upon the community.[13]

I believe in the possibility of Jesus Mosques and feel as though it is not my place to determine if such a movement is "good" or "bad." Many scholars base the defenses both for and against this argument upon assumptions to which I cannot ascribe. Their high view of scripture (especially of Higgins and Tennent) and their Western, ecclesiocentric view of mission both run contrary to my understanding of the current paradigm.

I view scripture as a guide rather than a prescriptive entity and therefore become frustrated with numerous bibliocentric arguments. In Higgins' article, he bases his thesis around the activities present in Acts 15. While I believe this provides a model for how the conversation happens within one culture and within one context, I do not believe it is appropriate to assume the exact principles apply within another culture or context. Higgins is not alone in the use of this argument, but focuses on it more often than others. As stated above, the basic assumption is that the conversation about the admittance of Gentiles into the faith is the same as the conversation about the admittance of Muslims. While I concur some basic principles of overlap exist, there are also dramatic differences to be considered. The historical relationship between Christianity and Islam, for instance, cannot be ignored.[14]

Additionally, I cannot believe an exclusively ecclesiocentric view of mission, in the Western Church's definition. Tennent makes the claim "it is central to the task of discipleship to help new believers conform their faith to the faith of the church." I have several responses to this statement, chief of which is the issue of to which church are we asking them to conform? How are Western theologians and church practitioners so confident the Western model of church is

appropriate for the global society? I believe this supposition is regrettable.[15] There is a tone of general disdain in Tennent's article for C1 and C2 congregations, while his exultation of C4 congregations would lead one to believe he advocates "insider movements". However, his admiration seems to end when he is asked to allow MBBs to define the context of their faith themselves. He assumes that he, as an outsider to this movement, can accurately assess the suitability of their faith expression.

Many of the writers make arguments towards treating C5 as transitional communities into C4 environments. While I emphatically state it is not a Western decision to make, I can see how the concept might be appropriate. In conversation with a colleague who is significantly more versed in this movement than myself, she commented she did not know of any second generation MBBs who found themselves in a C5 community. The question of converts versus persons born into a converted faith family is a question worth discussion. Why is this a reality? How can second generation MBBs find faith expression that is both culturally appropriate and true to their familial experience? In what ways can the Western Church aid in this conversation without hindering progress?

What is new is often frightening. The idea of sacrificing our tried and true theological expressions often feels as though we are going to be forced to reverse our entire theological system. While there are facets of this movement that must be honestly discussed and critiqued, Western missiologists must be cautious to not overstep their boundaries. Regardless of missiologists' feelings towards them, C5 communities are providing vibrant and real faith experiences to MBBs. This fact cannot be lost in the discussion. In a global reality that involves the mixing and melding of cultures and faith systems previously separated, the Church cannot afford to ignore expressions of Christianity simply because those expressions look unlike those of the past. Further research is needed into the discussion, and other voices like Brother Yusef's

Codifying a complex faith system into categories and definitions seems premature and presumptuous on the part of Western missiologists.

must be consulted if the dialogue is to be truly conducted with holistic integrity. The Church must allow itself to be further shaped and molded by communities such as C5 communities and permit the faith of those believers to contribute to the understandings of the global Church. To omit their contributions is a grave error in judgment and one that I hope will not be committed in the future.

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Notes

1. Due to the relative timeframe of the debate, there are only a few academic voices involved in the conversation. For those seeking against the including of Jesus Mosques in the canonical understanding of the Kingdom, see Timothy C. Tennent's article, "Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques: A Closer Examination of C-5 'High-Spectrum' Contextualization." For those interested in a sympathetic view, see the response written by John Travis and others, "Four Responses to Timothy C..Tennent's Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques: A Closer Examination of C-5 'High Spectrum' Contextualization."
2. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991), 447.
3. Timothy C. Tennent, "Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques: A Closer Examination of C-5 "High Spectrum" Contextualization." *IJFM* 23:3 (2006): 104.
4. John Travis, "The C1-C6 Spectrum." *EMQ* 34:4 (1998) 407-408.
5. Rick Brown, "Biblical Muslims," *IJFM* 24:2 (2007): 65.
6. Tennent, "Followers," 111.
7. Ibid., 112.
8. Tennent himself admits that he has no personal experiences with C-5 MBBs and is examining the issue based on theory, existing literature and exegeting Scripture in response to that.
9. John Travis, et al. "Four Responses to Timothy C. Tennent's Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques: A Closer Examination of C-5 'High Spectrum' Contextualization". *IJFM* 23:3 (2006): 124.
10. Kevin Higgins, "Acts 15 and Insider Movements Among Muslims: Questions,

Process and Conclusions." *IJFM* 24:1 (2007): 34.

11. Gary Corwin, "A Humble Appeal to C5/Insider Movement Muslim Ministry Advocates to Consider Ten Questions." *IJFM* 24:1 (2007): 5.
12. Corwin, "Humble Appeal," 8.
13. Persons involved in the current conversation would argue they are educated and learned men who have spent many years living in countries where the conversation is now happening. Their point is well taken and I am not asking them to exit the conversation completely. I am simply asking for indigenous voices to be allowed and consulted.
14. For persons who hold a literal or prescriptive view of Scripture, this argument must still be addressed. The cultural differences between Gentile believers and MBBs demand nuance.
15. Tennent's point is not without historical precedent. The planting of churches has been the cornerstone of missiology for centuries. While many persons in missiology still advocate that church planting is the exclusive goal of mission, I do not.

"Jesus Mosques" . . . So What?

Questions for Consideration:

1. Which is more important: the object or the form of worship?

2. When we speak of contextualization, does that mean we should limit the degree to which we expect the Gospel also to transform whatever culture it imbeds itself in? When we speak of transformation, does that mean we should limit the degree to which we expect the Gospel to naturally imbed itself in different cultures?

3. To which culture do you feel like you best belong, America or the Church?

4. How does the contextualization of the Gospel to American cultural mores help or hinder the process of world-wide evangelism?

Prepared by Chris Dodson

The Call of the Impossible

JOHN GARZA

"In other words, forgiveness, when it occurs within this sort of economic exchange, no longer looks like unconditional forgiveness but conditional forgiveness."

Introduction

In many churches today, salvation is referred to strictly in terms of an exchange between God and humanity accomplished through the work of Jesus on the cross – otherwise referred to as the penal substitution theory of atonement. Terms such as "gift," "forgiveness," and "debt" are often used in describing the reconciliation achieved between God and humanity. While these terms can have a variety of usages within different contexts, this paper seeks to understand their meaning through the implementation of a philosophical and theological approach. The work of John Caputo - a continental philosopher who dabbles in theology - will be of primary consideration in defining and understanding these terms, with secondary reference given to the work of Jacques Derrida and his influence upon Caputo. This analysis will provide the church with a renewed way of thinking and speaking about the gift of forgiveness as found in the kingdom of God and exemplified in Jesus Christ.

The Economy of the Gift

What exactly is a "gift" and how does this idea progress into a deeper understanding of forgiveness? Directly stated, the "gift" is the primary element within an economy of exchange. Consider a hypothetical situation similar to the many day-to-day situations involving

birthdays, Christmas celebrations, or other social obligations: A gives *x* to B. This seems simple enough, but in giving *x* to B, A has set off a chain of events involving debt and gratitude. For now B feels both grateful for *x* as well as indebted to A. When it is time for A to receive a gift, B must ensure that B has as that gift an *x* or a *y*, of equal or slightly greater value than the gift given earlier by A, lest B be shamed by not fulfilling his obligation to return the gesture of generosity made by A. However, the economy does not simply move on B's obligation to repay A, because A, in giving *x* to B has surely been a bit self-congratulatory, giving herself a pat on the back for her exceeding generosity, simultaneously hoping her gift will be returned with equivalent generosity by B.

To summarize, in this circular economy of exchange, much more than a gift has been given. A, in giving *x* to B, has incurred a credit (not to mention a self-esteem boost) to her account, to be repaid by B, who in receiving x from A has incurred a debt to be repaid at a later, more appropriate date. Through this entire process, in "giving *x* to B, A has come out ahead and B has come out behind. That is the very opposite of what A set out to do."[1] Within this inescapable economy of reciprocation, there is no gift, no pure giving, for stowed away with the gift is an economy of exchange that hijacks the gift. As Caputo explains, "the result, in short, is that as soon as a gift is given it begins to annul itself, or that the conditions which make the gift possible also make it impossible."[2]

"the only thing that can be truly forgiven is the unforgivable; the only condition under which true forgiveness is possible is when forgiveness is impossible…""

So how does an individual, knowing that these economies of exchange and reciprocation occur, get out of such a situation? How does one *give*, pure and simple? For Caputo and Derrida, stepping outside of such a situation is an impossible task, for one "can never -¬¬ in principle - break out of the circle, never simply lay it aside or step outside the circle, which would be to expect too much of the subject, to expect the impossible. The subject is in an impossible fix, an aporia, a paralyzing bind."[3] Nothing can be done to get outside of this system of exchange, for how could

one do such a thing and who would have such power to do it? Even within the hypothetical situation above, suppose A were to give *x* to B anonymously in order to avoid incurring a credit. Instead of actually doing such, A has created an economy in which B has a debt but does not know where to pay it off, where to give back. To "pay it forward" would only enlarge the circle of economic exchange through displacement of the debt. Alternatively, suppose B, upon receiving *x* from A, promptly discusses the terms and conditions of the gift with A, such that both quickly agree that B need not discharge the debt by returning the gift. Such a situation would only mean that the debt has been discharged by A, who has now been given two gifts, leaving B doubly in debt and A feeling doubly good, for not only did they give *x*, they gave the gift of not having to return a compensatory *y*. It is an endless cycle of the giving and re-appropriation of "gifts" that only further displays the impossibility of giving a gift.

Should this impossibility result in hopelessness and resignation regarding the inability to ever purely give something or of escaping an economy of exchange? Not quite, for this is exactly the moment where things become energized, where the necessity of giving becomes all the more important. The impossibility of the gift is not grounds for resignation. Rather, as Caputo says,

> the gift is *the* impossible (it belongs to the vocative order), which is why we love it so and why we are mad about the gift with the madness of love itself, which dreams of the impossible. The aporia, *the* impossible, is never the end of action in deconstruction but the start, the condition of possibility of genuine action, one with teeth in it.[4]

All of this madness actually functions to impassion the desire for the "pure" gift, what Derrida and Caputo refer to as a "quasi-transcendental," which provides the movement of the economy of exchange that is always seeking after it. Individuals are to aspire to the pure gift, to the gift without an accompanying economy, all the while realizing that "the gift pure and simple does not make an appearance, never presents itself in the order of presence […]. The gift, if there is any, does not give itself to be seen […]. But that is why the gift impassions."[5]

The impossibility of the pure gift is both that an individual within an economy cannot give it and that it cannot ever come from outside the economy into the economy, for then it would lose its "giftedness" to the economy of exchange. In order to remain pure, a gift

> should not be contaminated by the necessity of indebted-

> ness, nor should it result in any self-reflexive movement. The pure gift requires anonymity with reference to each of its constituents; that is, in a pure gift the giver is not known, the gifted is not known, and the gift is not known. As a result, the giver receives nothing, and the gifted feels no necessity for response.[6]

Structurally speaking, the impossibility of the pure gift is what provides the impetus for the economy of exchange. It is the "quasi-transcendental" that the economy of exchange aspires toward; or, the pure gift, as something that precedes us and asks for our affirmation, calls (that is why Caputo refers to it as a "vocative") the economy of exchange outside of itself.

The question remains as to how one is to navigate the economy of exchange now knowing that it exists and that any so-called gift within it is not a pure gift. Caputo proposes a seemingly simple solution. Within economies, he asserts, "the idea never is to simply step outside them but rather, by virtue of the double injunction, to learn to move within and interrupt knowledge and economy, to loosen them up in order both to give beyond economy and to give economy its chance."[7] This is the deconstructive move of the project: to disrupt, disjoint, and throw off balance within the economy by acting within it to open it up to the pure gift that solicits such an action. An individual, unable to achieve any sort of exteriority from the circle, must instead work within it, both giving it a chance and working toward, or at least in light of the "quasi-transcendental" of the gift. Therefore, in order to navigate this paradoxical "double bind," Caputo and Derrida both suggest that the individual "first, *know* what the gift is and how the gift works. Know that the gift sets off the circle of return and appreciate the aporetic situation – but still give."[8] An individual should never stop attempting to give without return, never stop attempting to give without self-congratulation, but should also remember that there is always an economy of reciprocation at play. In doing so, the individual is accomplishing a second piece of advice in that she is giving economies a chance. For, "economies, after all, are all that exist, while the gift, if there even is such a thing, is *the* impossible."[9] Economies cannot be escaped and are the *de facto* way of being in the world. So, in order to achieve a desired result, an individual must push through the economies, all the while hearing the solicitation, the call, of the "gift" reminding them of its im/possibility. Succinctly put, ""the double bind, the double injunctive is this: give, but know that the gift,

alas, inevitably turns back into a circle, and give economy a break, for economies, thank God, turn on the gift."[10]

The Economy of Forgiveness

From his conceptualization of the economy of exchange and the role of the "gift," Caputo makes a logical transition to the significance of this understanding for forgiveness. In a play on the word *pardon*, French for "forgive," Caputo engineers a magnificent transition: "The gift is a give-away. *Le don* is inseparable from *le par-don*. As the gift must not be a secret calculation of a way to get a return for oneself, so it must not encumber the other with a debt. Whatever debts, whatever guilt, the other incurs must be forgiven."[11] The economy of forgiveness itself is a near perfect duplication of the economy of the gift, for the "logic" of forgiveness reproduces the paradox of the gift.

How is it that the economy of forgiveness duplicates the economy of the gift? The discussion of the economy of the gift above revealed the inability to give without economy, because any time something is given, the gift itself begins to be annulled, to be something different from a gift. An economy of forgiveness, in its similitude to the economy of the gift, typically takes this form: A offends B in some form or fashion which sparks off an economy wherein B, the offended party, is owed an apology or some other form of reparation by A, who is now in debt for having offended B. The onus is now upon A to make such reparations, especially if A desires forgiveness from B. When A finally does make such restitution accompanied with sorrow and regret over the offense, B then provides A with the customary forgiveness both deserved and obligated in light of such recompense . Forgiveness itself is something given in response to the reparations made in order to obtain it, and, as such, it too begins to annul itself, to become something different as it is given.

If the pure gift, when given in this sort of economy, no longer becomes a gift-as-such is the type of forgiveness that finds extension within this economy - wherein the offending party makes reparations as a condition of their forgiveness - pure forgiveness? Derrida, when posed a similar question, noted that "if I grant forgiveness on condition that the other confess, that the other begin to redeem himself, to transfigure his fault, to dissociate himself from it in order to ask me for forgiveness, then my forgiveness begins to let itself be contaminated by an economy, a calculation that corrupts it."[12] In other words, forgiveness, when it occurs within this sort of economic exchange, no longer looks like unconditional forgiveness but conditional forgiveness. Caputo echoes that,

> if the other is to be forgiven only after measuring up to certain conditions, if the other must earn or deserve forgiveness, then to forgive him is to give him just what he has earned, to give him his just wages. But that would not be to give a gift, but to give the other his due, to repay the labor of his repentance with the wages of forgiveness; it would be not a gift […].[13]

"When…the text sounds archaic, just plain awkward, or mismatches textual and musical accents…one wonders what part of the Christian message, if any, is being transmitted."

Forgiveness is itself something gifted, given away, extended to another individual. When this happens under the typical circumstance (e.g., in the economy of forgiveness as displayed above), that forgiveness creates an economy of exchange wherein debits and credits are accrued. If forgiveness is merely extended after certain conditions are met, then the offender no longer has a debt in need of forgiveness and "deserves forgiveness the way a person who has paid off a mortgage deserves the title to the property [...] that means that conditional forgiveness is not a gift but is offered in exchange for full repentance. That is the economy of *reconciliation*, and it makes sense, but it is not the event of forgiveness."[14] Therefore, the idea is to see the distinction between conditional and unconditional forgiveness and subsequently aspire toward the event of unconditional forgiveness, which would open up, widen, and disrupt an economy of forgiveness.

The revelation of the manner in which the economy of conditional forgiveness works shows that the very conditions that make forgiveness possible also make it impossible, which also reveals the necessity of the "quasi-transcendental" form of unconditional forgiveness. Again, this is another riddle, or aporia, that seeks resolution in the same manner as the economy of the gift, but how does one forgive outside of the economy? Echoing Derrida's earlier hermeneutical approach to this aporia, Caputo says that "the only thing that can be truly forgiven is the unforgivable; the only condition under

which true forgiveness is possible is when forgiveness is impossible. How is that so? Forgiveness ought to be a matter of the gift, not of an economy."[15] In the same vein as attempting to give as pure a gift as possible, extending unconditional forgiveness looks a little mad , but that is because it "belongs to the generalized economy of giving without getting back, without a payback, without a return on your investments. Forgiveness is more madness and bad economics."[16] That is why forgiveness perks up its ears and lifts its head when it hears of a situation involving an unrepentant person, a person who least deserves forgiveness because there is no sorrow or regret within them and no intent for reparation, because forgiveness has its closest approximation to being an event of pure forgiveness in the face of that which is unforgivable. Therefore, much like the pure gift, "Forgiveness is the ultimate release from all economies, from every economic tie, but not into a simple exteriority from the circle. Rather, forgiving loosens the circle of credit and debt, not only from the debt that chains the other with the tie of my calculated gift, but also from the debt that makes my relation to the other one of debt."[17]

Having established the boundaries of the economy of forgiveness and the necessity of unconditional forgiveness, Caputo turns to making overt theological statements in regard to the way the economy of forgiveness finds actualization in a conditional sense within the Jewish and Christian traditions. He notes that they

> have tended to behave like bankers when it comes to forgiveness. That is, they spell out the conditions under which forgiveness is possible, typically four in number. Forgiveness requires an expression of sorrow, the intention to make amends, a promise not to repeat the offense, and a willingness to do penance. If someone meets all four conditions then they have *earned* forgiveness. We *owe* it to them the way the bank owes us the deed once the mortgage is paid off.[18]

Primarily, the promulgation of such an economy of conditional forgiveness is problematic for Caputo because it is contradictory to the economy of unconditional forgiveness that Caputo finds in the New Testament, as exemplified through the ministry of Jesus. Specifically, Caputo points to two parables told by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke that display the sort of "mad" economics of unconditional forgiveness in the kingdom of God.

The Parable of the Tax Collector

Caputo employs the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector found in Luke 18:9-14 as his first example of the paradigm of unconditional forgiveness in the kingdom of God. The parable is a shorter one and follows a basic outline: Jesus juxtaposes a righteous Pharisee with a tax collector, as they are both on their knees praying at the temple. The Pharisee thanks God that he is righteous while the tax collector beats his breast and declares his unworthiness. The story ends with the declaration of the tax collector as the justified one because of his humility. Though this parable is consistent with the themes in Luke that emphasize the reversal of expectations, specifically in regard to the doublets of the rich and poor, the righteous and unrighteous, Caputo takes another avenue through the parable, following a suggested rendering by A. N. Wilson. In this rendering, Caputo suggests the removal of the Lukan introduction (v.9) and summarization (v. 14) primarily because they seem to advance an anti-Pharisaical polemic, so that what remains is an "older," perhaps pre-Lukan account.[19] This changes the frame of the story so that it is no longer about a humble tax collector and a prideful Pharisee, but instead about a forgiving God. Specifically, "it is a parable about God as the giver of an unconditional or radical forgiveness, about God as the father of forgiveness. God forgives us without regard to our merits, thereby radically leveling the difference between the Pharisee, who does well, and the tax collector, who does not."[20]

This story perhaps best exemplifies the madness of unconditional forgiveness through the actions of the father, who hastily and madly rushes to the youngest son with his offer of forgiveness.

The story remains a commentary on the Pharisee and tax collector, but the important aspect of the story is the forgiveness given rather than the humility displayed over and against pride. It is now a story about God in which "God's gracious mercy is so bountiful that the difference between the men is leveled; the good deeds of the Pharisee hold no real weight before God, the sun of whose love and forgiveness rises upon both the good and the bad. Indeed, the sin-

ful tax collector even has preferred access to God, while the Pharisee, having nothing to forgive, 'cannot get in touch with God.'"[21] In Caputo's reading, rather than focusing on the humility of the penitent tax collector and the boastfulness of the Pharisee, the unconditional forgiveness offered by God becomes the focus of the parable.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

Caputo then turns to the parable of the prodigal son as another example of unconditional forgiveness in the kingdom of God. In the parable, a father has two sons, the youngest of which comes to the father one day, asks for his inheritance, promptly leaves for a foreign land, and then squanders the inheritance in debauchery and licentiousness. Eventually reaching his wits' end, the younger son realizes things would be better at home, even if he is only able to be one of his father's servants, and begins the long journey home. As the son approaches, the father rushes out to meet him, embracing him with forgiveness, and then quickly tells his slaves to slay a fatted calf for a party. The older son, understandably put off by the whole situation, becomes angry with the father for the precipitate forgiveness the younger son receives. This anger prompts the father to remind the older son that he has always loved him and will always remain in his household, but that the return of a son once lost necessitates forgiveness and celebration.

This story perhaps best exemplifies the madness of unconditional forgiveness through the actions of the father, who hastily and madly rushes to the youngest son with his offer of forgiveness. The father requires no request for forgiveness, and though the younger son has a hastily prepared *mea culpa*, the father stops him short with a prodigious display of love and forgiveness before his son can utter a word. As he does with the parable of the tax collector, Caputo suggests a shift in focus away from the sons and to the father so that the parable, "on the anarchical reading, should be called the parable of the *Prodigal Father*, who is himself, like God, prodigal with love and forgiveness, and who does not calculate and weigh against each other the respective merits (or lack thereof) of his two sons, but who loves them both unconditionally."[22] This story is another example of the nature of unconditional forgiveness: specifically, that it is most alive, it is at its closest approximation of pure forgiveness, in the face of the unforgivable, in the face of the son who takes everything and squanders it. This forgiveness, as a pure gift of sorts, is always and already extended to the son, whether or not the son repents or makes reparations for his actions. Were this forgiveness conditional and given within the economy of exchange, the father would have set up a table

on the road with an account ledger, interrogated the younger son as to the details of his profligacy and set out the conditions of reparation. However, as Caputo so concisely tells it, "when the son returned home, this father did not seek to determine the right measure of punishment that would redress the offense and repair his wounded dignity. He did not look to settle the accounts, but rather set aside all such calculation for the excess of love he bore his son!"[23]

Re-envisioning Jesus and the Kingdom of God

Jesus may have earned the wrath of the religious authorities of the day by offering forgiveness to sinners not only while they were still sinners, and not only in advance, on condition that they subsequently give up sinning, but rather without requiring restitution and repentance.

The two parables discussed above are part of a more accurate picture of what unconditional forgiveness looks like in the kingdom of God. That the two parables' message of unconditional forgiveness originates in Jesus causes Caputo to seek after an alternative construal concerning the rationale typically given for Jesus' death on the cross. On the typical telling (that offered by the theory of atonement known as "penal substitution"), Jesus died to pay a debt owed to God on behalf of humanity. On that telling, the gift of forgiveness is one conditioned by the necessity of a payment, and God forgives because of the mediatory payment of Jesus on the cross. For Caputo, the typical telling, with its God who depends upon economies of debt and exchange, bears little to no resemblance to the type of unconditional forgiveness offered by Jesus throughout his ministry, as exemplified in the parables of the tax collector and the prodigal son.

In order to give credence to such a reading, Caputo employs the historical work of E. P. Sanders,[24] who, Caputo suggests, is particularly

adept at delineating between the anti-Jewish polemics found within the text of the New Testament and the historical reality of the situation. Caputo follows "Sanders's more scholarly and well-documented inquiry into the place of sinners in Jesus' preaching about the kingdom" in order to draw out the distinctions between what Jesus was preaching about forgiveness and the classical economy established by the Jewish leaders.[25] Caputo essentially concludes through Sanders' research and historical reconstruction that Jesus' teaching about the nature of the kingdom of God caused friction with the religious leaders of the day because it was not the classical doctrine of "Teshuvah," the means of atonement as distinguished by the Judaism of the time. Jesus was announcing that the kingdom was available to all sinners, and not just those sinners who, having recognized their sin, initiated the process of recompense and conditional forgiveness as delineated by the religious system, but those who were still sinning. On top of this, "Jesus may have earned the wrath of the religious authorities of the day by offering forgiveness to sinners not only while they were still sinners, and not only in advance, on condition that they subsequently give up sinning, but rather without requiring restitution and repentance."[26] Such offers of unconditional forgiveness by Jesus would have directly contradicted the laws and religious systems established by the Jewish leaders of Jesus' time and created, as is apparent in the Gospels, an atmosphere of antagonism against Jesus. Jesus' preaching of the unconditional forgiveness found in the kingdom of God is, "in many ways the most amazing grace (gift) in the kingdom, [for it] disturbs our sense of law and order, disrupts our sense of economic equilibrium, undermines our desire to 'settle the score' or 'get even,' blocks our instinct to see to it that the offenders are made to 'pay for' what they did."[27]

This disequilibrium, Caputo finally contends, is what ultimately leads Jesus to the cross, in that

> Jesus came into the world and brought to the world the paradoxical word of the *Abba* and the kingdom, and so the world received him not. In fact, the world positively hated what it heard, hated this madness of the gift and this kingdom of forgiveness. He came into the world and contradicted its ways, and the world made him pay for that.[28]

For Caputo, Jesus is the primary exemplar of the madness of the gift of unconditional forgiveness, a madness whose imitation requires a similar commitment to the an-economics of the kingdom of God, to *the* impossible that sets everything in motion. Such madness and ex-

cess rightfully disrupts the established economies that seek to control and codify forgiveness into a conditional gift that ultimately is no gift at all.

Implications for Atonement

Caputo's overall analysis of the economies of the gift and forgiveness is insightful and challenging to current theological reflection upon the nature of the atonement. Specifically, it challenges the tradition that traffics in some sort of debt repayment or exchange as necessary for atonement. B. Keith Putt notes that, "this tradition, expressed in Anselm's satisfaction theory of atonement and Calvin's penal substitutionary theory, insists that the violence of Jesus' torment and death is actually required by God in order to restore divine honor or to make retribution as demanded by a divine sense of justice that has been disturbed by human sin."[29] As has been shown in the analysis above, such atonement theories inadequately deal with the economies of exchange that exist within the gift and forgiveness. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly for Caputo, they are inconsistent with the kingdom of God as shown in the New Testament through Jesus. Caputo summarizes such a witness as follows:

It is an extreme disservice to the message of unconditional forgiveness when we systematize it into rules, steps, or even prayers that must be obeyed, followed, or spoken in order to receive forgiveness

> If the invisible God is revealed in the visible icon or figure of Jesus in the New Testament, and if the teachings of Jesus turned on forgiveness in an important way, then the God of Jesus is a God of forgiveness. But if forgiveness is a gift and not an economic exchange, that puts in question the classical terms in which we think of the death of Jesus, specifically as 'atonement' or as a debt paid to the Father that squares our account with God. Is the Father the 'Keeper of All Accounts'? Or is the Father not imaged best in the father portrayed in the story of the prodigal son?[31]

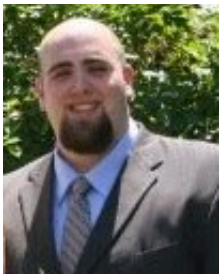
Ultimately, the force of Caputo's argument is to shift discussion of atonement away from an anthropocentric focus upon the sin of the individual, to a theocentric one that understands God in light of God's unconditional forgiveness. God does not traffic in systems of exchange that require payment, blood, or any other form of reparation as a condition of forgiveness. God is the father in the parable of the prodigal son who runs out to humanity, having already extended forgiveness, who lavishes us with unconditional forgiveness that shuts our lips and bowls us over, who turns over the accounting tables and sets them up for a party, for the event of *the* impossible, the im/possibility,[31] and the madness of unconditional forgiveness that disrupts, disturbs, and widens the economy of exchange.

Such a theocentric approach also affects the manner in which we proclaim the forgiveness found in the kingdom of God. It is an extreme disservice to the message of unconditional forgiveness when we systematize it into rules, steps, or even prayers that must be obeyed, followed, or spoken in order to receive forgiveness. This codification of the radical message of the kingdom of God diminishes and economizes it into the very thing for which Jesus was crucified. In short, we set ourselves up as a servant of the father who meets the prodigal son on the road before his father can reach him. We take an orderly account of the sins and offenses in need of forgiveness, coach the son on the proper formula needed to convince the father that he is repentant, and send him on his way, confident we have properly mediated the affair. We have taken the an-economic madness of the kingdom of God and turned it into a recipricatory, properly ordered and formulaic logic of economic exchange.

Given the above analysis, perhaps it is we in the Church, those who consider themselves to be on the inside, who are in need of repentance for cloistering the im/possible forgiveness of God, not realizing that the radical nature of such forgiveness resists our very attempts at controlling it. But, then again, perhaps we are already forgiven for such an act, even in, and perhaps because of, our own petulance. Nevertheless, our task seems clear: as those who seek to imitate Christ and proclaim the kingdom of God, our message ought to be that of the radical and unconditional forgiveness to be found therein, so that our communities are marked by the practice of inclusiveness and actions that seek to disrupt the economies of exchange through the implementation of the im/possible.

To be sure, there are issues with Caputo's overall project, primarily in regard to his treatment of the biblical text. His accounts can at times be a bit tenuous as well as dependent upon disputed

scholarship. These issues continue to be addressed by the insight of commentators, such as B. Keith Putt, Mark Dooley and James Olthuis, who have found Caputo both helpful and challenging. Perhaps what is most helpful about Caputo's work is that he has ignited a trajectory, or one might say, disrupted the circle of religious thought in a way that brings new life to the Christian tradition. The task remains for others to join in that trajectory, filling in the gaps and informing the vision, all the while seeking to, like Caputo, disrupt it, leaving it open to the call of the impossible, and the necessity of striving to affirm and achieve as close of an approximation to a pure "gift" as possible. Such affirmation suggests the necessity for the Church itself, in all of its multifarious manifestations, to take up the task of proclaiming the aneconomic, always mad, and profligate love and forgiveness found in the Kingdom of God.



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Notes

1. John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 69-70.
2. John D. Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1997), 141.
3. Ibid., 144.
4. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 71.
5. John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 160.
6. B. Keith Putt, "Prayers of Confession and Tears of Contrition: John Caputo and a Radically 'Baptist Hermeneutic of Repentance," in *Religion with/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo,* ed. James H. Olthuis (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 65.
7. John D. Caputo, "Love among the Deconstructibles: A Response to Gregg Lambert," in *Journal for Religious and Cultural Theory* (5, 2:2004), 46.
8. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 71.

9. Ibid.
10. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshel*l, 148.
11. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 178.
12. Jacques Derrida, "To Forgive: The Unforgivable and the Imprescriptable," in *Questioning God*, eds. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 46.
13. John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 210.
14. Ibid., 211.
15. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 73.
16. John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 112.
17. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 227.
18. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 73-74.
19. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 214-215.
20. Caputo, "The Time of Giving, the Time of Forgiving," in *The Enigma of Gift and Sacrifice,* eds. Edith Wyschogrod, Jean-Joseph Goux, and Eric Boynton (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2002), 121-122.
21. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 215.
22. Ibid.
23. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 75.
24. Sanders approaches the text with an eye for uncovering the relationship between Judaism and Christianity within the first century context in order to determine the degree to which the two are contiguous.
25. Caputo, "The Time of Giving, the Time of Forgiving," 124.
26. Ibid., 127.
27. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 208.
28. Ibid., 234.
29. B. Keith Putt, "Violent Imitation or Compassionate Repetition? Girard and Caputo on Exemplary Atonement," in *Religion and Violence in a Secular World: Toward a New Political Theology* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 21. Putt's essay is insightful in regard to Caputo's emphasis on non-violent atonement over and against these two dominant traditions. See also John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).
30. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 75.
31 The use of the "/" within the word is a shorthand way of demonstrating the structure of the economy that is harbored within the word. In this instance, using "im/possibility" is akin to saying the possibility of the impossible, e.g. the attempt at approximating most closely that which is impossible.

"The Call of the Impossible" . . . So What?

Questions for Consideration:

1. What type of forgiveness is extended by you and your church, conditional or unconditional? Based on Derrida's hermeneutic of forgiveness, when was the last time you truly forgave someone?

2. Is your message of God broad enough to convey God's radical forgiveness for the ostracized, marginalized and unforgiveable (e.g., convicted murderers, illegal immigrants, terrorists)?

3. What is the portrait of a contemporary Christianity accused of the madness of unconditional forgiveness?

4. How would the presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ be received in your church in light of forgiveness not requiring restitution and repentance?

5. How does Garza's refinement of atonement alter the Church's current perspective of the Missio Dei and the message of salvation?

Prepared by Abra Bailey

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