

Embracing the Albatross: The Need for Evangelical Theological Religious Studies

The godfather of the phenomenology of religion Ninian Smart infamously declared that theology was a 'conceptual albatross around the neck of religious studies'. Although often existing in the same university department, theology and religious studies have not had a good relationship. In recent years theologians such as Gavin D'Costa and Paul Griffiths have argued that religious studies can only, and indeed must, find its true home in theology. In this session, we will outline the need and shape of an evangelical theological religious studies to be developed under the discipline of missionary apologetics also known as 'elenctics.'

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Introduction

- 'meta-madness': confession, contingency, civility
- *elenctics* - "the science which is concerned with the conviction of sin...it is the science which unmasks to heathendom, all false religions as sin against God, and it calls heathendom to a knowledge of the only true God."¹

1. The problem of 'religion' and the need for *theological* religious studies

It was once a tactic of students of religion to cite the appendix of James H. Leuba's *Psychological Study of Religion* (1912), which lists more than fifty definitions of religion, to demonstrate that 'the effort clearly to define religion in short compass is a hopeless task' (King 1954). Not at all! The moral of Leuba is not that religion cannot be defined, but that it can be defined, with greater or lesser success, more than fifty ways. Besides, Leuba goes on to classify and evaluate his list of definitions. 'Religion' is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as 'language' plays in linguistics or 'culture' plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon.²

2. *Elenctics* as the home for *theological* religious studies

Taken in this sense, *elenctics* is the science which is concerned with the conviction of sin. In a special sense then it is the science which unmasks all false religion as sin against God and calls people to the knowledge of the one, true God. To be able to do this well and truthfully it is necessary to have a responsible knowledge of false religions, but one must be able to lay bare the deepest motifs which are therein

¹ J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1960), 222.

² Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 194.

expressed. This can actually occur only if one recognizes and unmasks these same undercurrents within himself. *Elenctics* is possible only on the basis of a veritable self-knowledge, which is kindled in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.³

- Normative confession
 - a ‘subversive fulfilment’ theology of religions.
 - *deisidaimonesterous*
 - ‘magnetic points’
- Situational contingency
 - ‘scientific awareness’ - ‘partisan objectivity’

Insider reporting is a descriptive interpretation that would usually be agreed on by an insider or a well-informed and sympathetic outsider. Outsider reporting is an interpretation of the insider reporting, which may be entirely congruent with the insider account, or may diverge. If it diverges, a plausible explanatory framework within the outsider report needs to be provided. It is quite possible that an insider might learn constructively from an outsider reporting process, or indeed contest and argue against it. Or simply ignore it. The question of truth operates in both areas, insider and outsider reporting, but obviously in different ways. For insider reports to be true, they must be intra-systematically coherent with the beliefs and practices of the insider group, and the question of their referential ontology might be part of the insider report, or it might not. For outsider reports to be true, they must be intra-systematically coherent with the world of the outsider reporter, who is of course an insider to her own world, and their persuasiveness to the insider about whom they are reporting is entirely contingent on a whole range of factors. If, for example, a problem is located in the insider’s world by both the insider and the outsider, the outsider may claim that it is best resolved by actually leaving that worldview, adapting it in a certain way consonant with an insider report, or adapting it in ways that would create intra-systematic dissonance. This process might happen through rational discussion, rhetorical persuasion, example of life lived, and in a whole range of explicit and implicit ways.⁴

- ‘lived approach’

Elenctics as the science of *elengein*, the conviction of sin, can actually be exercised only in living contact with the adherents of other religions. Each generalization, every systematization, carries within itself the danger that one will do injustice to the living person. In practice I am never concerned with Buddhism, but with a living person and his Buddhism, I am never in contact with Islam but with a Moslem and his Mohammedanism.... Elenctics as a science, in other words, can never make superfluous the sensitive probing of the hidden depths of a person, a probing of his inner existence.⁵

- Existential civility
 - *suaviter in modo, fortiter in re*

³ Bavinck, *Introduction to the Science of Missions*, 222.

⁴ Gavin D’Costa, *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 93-94.

⁵ Bavinck, *Introduction to the Science of Missions*, 241.

Elenctics receives the greatest support from its repeated awareness that the sharpest weapons must in the first place be turned against ourselves...Anyone who knows himself to any extent knows the finesse with which a man can escape from God, and wrestle free from his grasp. To be really able to convict anyone in sin, a person must know himself, and the hidden corners of his heart very well. There is no more humbling work in the world than to engage in elenctics. For at each moment the person knows that the weapons which he turns against another have wounded himself. The Holy Spirit convicts us, and then through us he convicts the world.

Conclusion

- seminary and church

- academy

- culture and nation

J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1960).

Gavin D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions* (Blackwell, 2009).

Daniel Strange, *Their Rock is Not Like Our Rock: A Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

_____ *Making Faith Magnetic: Five Hidden Themes Our Culture Can't Stop Talking About ... and How to Connect Them to Christ* (London: Good Book Company, 2021).