

## A RESPONSE TO STEPHEN BEVANS

I'm very pleased that Peter Phan invited me to respond to the topic of missiological imagination as presented by Stephen Bevans. This topic is of particular interest to me for a variety of reasons. First, I honor the work of Stephen Bevans, who has written extensively on missiology and inculturation. Second, I began my own ministerial experience in the missions. Third, I note the personal and intellectual challenge I experience in maintaining my cultural identity and Catholicity while desiring an ongoing authentic dialogue with others. As one who comes from a missionized people I was relieved to have Bevans acknowledge that there is a tainted history in our mission work. I am sensitive to the challenge and struggle of reformulating an understanding of missiology that maintains our integrity while respecting others' culturally mediated experience of the divine.

Just as contemporary theology has witnessed a resurgence of interest in the doctrine of Trinity, Bevans argues that systematic theologians today should likewise reconsider "the contribution of a missiological imagination" as demonstrated by Mattio Ricci and Bartholomé de las Casas. I'd like to hear more of what Bevans refers to as their "ground breaking principles." Just as some systematic theologians, in the wake of contemporary Trinitarian revival, have proclaimed that the only option to do theology "is to be Trinitarian,"<sup>1</sup> Bevans also strongly proposes that the proper way to do Christian theology today is to be "missiological." He has a point when he reminds us that "the church's missiological imagination was what gave it identity and inspired its theology." For me, he made an even more important point that when Christianity became the established religion of the Roman Empire and identified itself as *Christendom* "theology was gradually transformed into reflection on the church's life and on Christians' faith." The focus shifted from reflection on the challenge of proclaiming and witnessing the Christian faith to what that faith was and how it should be properly expressed. My initial response is formulated in the following questions. I ask myself, from what culture is this paper written and for what culture is it intended? Is the argument in this paper holding up a particular perspective (in this case missiology) as the normative way of doing theology? And is this position being held up as the only way to do theology or might it not be better to say it is *a* way, a neglected one perhaps, but *a* way or *a* perspective of theological reflection?

In the first part of his article Bevans laments the lack of attention given to missiology's contributions and seeks to rectify the marginalization of missiology ("Mission *at* the Margins"), demonstrating some possible directions and options of reconstructing systematic theology from the missiological perspective

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<sup>1</sup>Catherine LaCunga, *God for Us* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991) 3.

("Wisdom from the Margins"). The genuine and original insights of the article show undoubtedly that Bevans is one of the foremost theologians at the crossroad of systematic theology and missiology today.

I want to affirm Bevans' desire and competency in contributing to systematic theology, that is, his notion of missiological imagination. While Bevans articulates a new spirit in mission theology, one that is respectful and dialogical, my previous experience in the missions and my reading of this paper lead me to reflect on the following issues regarding the subject matter. They are issues of trust and ambiguity, the struggle for truth, and the challenge of risk. I am aware that no project can do everything.

### TRUST AND AMBIGUITY

Bevans articulates a desire to enter into a dialogue. This dialogue, however, will come up against centuries of distrust and suspicion. Therefore, while there is the suggestion for some general, possible directions for theology, I believe that these concepts need to be filled out in a more detailed, contextual way to see where it would ultimately lead us. Bevans provides an initial framework. An echo of distrust in me wants to know: Is this another First World attempt to do theology for the rest of the world? Let's exercise our missiological imagination for a moment and go back in time, not one or two centuries, but five. Sixteenth-century friars have just given an incredibly moving and eloquent catechetical lesson to the wise elders of the Aztec people. What comes to mind as we hear their response?

Our Lords, our very esteemed Lords:  
Great hardship have you endured to reach this land,  
Here before you,  
We ignorant people contemplate you. . . .  
We are ordinary people,  
We are subject to death and destruction, we are mortals;  
Allow us then to die,  
Let us perish now  
Since our gods are already dead.

But calm your hearts . . .  
Our Lords . . .  
We will open a bit now  
The secret, the ark of the Lord, our god.

You said  
That we know not  
The Lord of the Close Vicinity,  
To Whom the heavens and the earth belong.  
You said  
That our gods are not true gods.  
New words are these  
That you speak;  
Because of them we are disturbed,  
Because of them we are troubled,

For our ancestors

Before us, who lived upon the earth,  
 Were unaccustomed to speak thus.  
 From them have we inherited  
 Our pattern of life  
 Which in truth did they hold;  
 In reverence they held,  
 They honored, our gods . . .  
 Thus before them, do we prostrate ourselves;  
 In their names we bleed ourselves;  
 Our oaths we keep,  
 Incense we burn,  
 And sacrifices we offer.

We know on Whom life is dependent;  
 On Whom the perpetuation of the race depends;  
 By Whom begetting is determined;  
 By Whom growth is made possible;  
 How it is that one must invoke,  
 How it is that one must pray.

Hear, oh lords,  
 Do nothing  
 To our people  
 That will bring misfortune upon them.  
 That will cause them to perish. . . .

We cannot be tranquil,  
 And yet we certainly do not believe;  
 We do not accept your teachings as truth,  
 Even though this may offend you.<sup>2</sup>

You may think this is solely a record of an ancient document, yet I have heard these voices and their messages today. For colonized and oppressed people the bitter memory and consequence of conquest makes a message of love and salvation difficult to internalize.

#### STRUGGLE FOR TRUTH

How does a body which claims to have ultimate truth listen to the proclaimed truth of others? How do we seriously think about the nature of truth? How do we hold in tension truth as incarnate and relative and truth that is absolute? Bevans argues that the "Christian mission is nothing more or less than participation in God's existence in the world. It is about respectful, dialogical crossing of cultural, religious, racial, etc. boundaries . . . it is a single but complex reality . . . of proclamation of witness." How is this new mission

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<sup>2</sup>Virgilio P. Elizondo, *La Morenita* (Virgil Elizondo and Mexican American Cultural Center, 1980) 50-53.

different from nineteenth-century colonial missionaries? Bevans struggles to redefine the Church's missiological function in the current world context by bearing in mind the lessons of the earlier missionary nineteenth-century period. Having learned those lessons, would mission be different if we were to take more seriously the economic underpinnings of such mission? If nineteenth-century missionary work coincided, for example, with the economic and military agendas of European colonizers, that link was not accidental. Similarly in our global economy, the first world church is backed by the wealth of the first world. What insights might be gained by analyzing the economic underpinnings of this dialogue? Such are the charms of globalization—there is not one particular nation that one can indict as significantly more imperial than another, and such diffusion of agency, because of the operation of multinational capital, also applies to the church. A multinational church financed mostly by European and American money will lead the way for the imposition of European and American culture. If American clothes, food, and medicines minister to the Third World, can the American consumer economy be far behind?

I have a friend who is Hindu.<sup>3</sup> Most of her education, however, has been in the Catholic school system in India. She remains a Hindu, I believe, because of the influence of her mother. Nalini, my friend, tells me of the time when her Catholic school classmates informed her that she was going to go to hell for being a pagan. Needless to say, when my friend found out what hell was, she was very upset. When Nalini told her mother, her mother's response was this, "Oh, those Christians, they believe in hell, that's where they go. We believe in reincarnation." All kidding aside, though, my "dialogue" with Nalini exposed something I wouldn't have known. India is a poor country. Within the Catholic institutions resources were directed to schoolchildren who were Catholic, whatever culture, caste or class. These same resources, however, were not made available to the needy Hindi children. Destitute mothers and fathers made the decision to have their children baptized Catholic so they could have access to the basic necessities of life. So is there a connection here between preaching the good news and economic stability? In a globalized world the lines of division go beyond culture to class and economics. The agency of the converted is the issue—in Gramscian terms, the missiological function becomes hegemony. One has to examine both the "coercion" and the "consent" aspects. The coercion here comes from American financial capital; where is the consent of the Third World coming from? If it is from the seduction of American money, how does this differ from earlier colonial missionary agendas? If it is something else, what is it?

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<sup>3</sup>I am indebted to friends and colleagues who shared their insights, including Dr. Nalini Iyer, postcolonial literature specialist; Dr. Ted Fortier, cultural anthropologist; and Dr. Donna Teevan, systematic theologian.

## WILLINGNESS TO RISK

Anyone who ventures into mission, whether it is the theological reflection or the pastoral dimension of it, is very brave. When we enter into this area I believe we must acknowledge and recognize our own inculturation, and that our very ways of talking about God, our understanding about truth might have to shift if in fact we are open to an authentic mutually appreciative dialogue. What I find missing in this paper is risk: risk to have our own point of view changed; risk being silent before others while they speak; risk becoming confused; and significant risk entails placing our very own expressions of what we understand to be true and ultimate on the line.

Bevans wants to be respectful of other churches in Asia, Africa, etc., and speaks of pushing the boundaries. I find this postmodern metaphor of fluid boundaries replaces the 19th century metaphor of penetration, but I'm afraid that it may imply the same thing of the church. Bevans anticipates transforming local churches and being mindful of their values, but is he ignoring the fundamental transformation that American Christian churches will experience if this were a true dialogue? Are the churches ready to be transformed by the encounter? For example, I think of the role that Mary has in India in this context. There are several churches—Shrine Velankanni (Our Lady of Lourdes) in Nagapattinam, for instance—where thousands of Hindus, Muslims and Christians go to pray for the health of those who are terminally ill and seeking miracles. Hindus have syncretically adopted Mary into their pantheon of goddesses, in this case without transforming their fundamental beliefs. (Interestingly, missionary priests adopted a local lore about a goddess of the fisher folk to stories about visions of Mary to establish this church). This religious interchange has not transformed Hindus as much as it has transformed Catholic religious practice in Southern India by bringing in worshippers from multiple religions.

Although the essay uses "God" as if it were a culturally neutral and a transcendent or universal term—this "God" is a Christian god. If the mission here is to bring a dialogue between the Christian god and other gods, then how does one enter into that dialogue when the Christian vision of God is still perceived as the "true" god?

Missionary efforts entail stories of commitment, heroism, and sorrow depending on the position from which one is speaking. We are all aware of the demonstrated critique of missionaries who were not respectful of native cultures and were at the forefront of cultural colonization of many lands, i.e., Africa, Latin America, etc. This caution is necessary of course. Theologies of liberation and feminist theory have helped us understand the deep-seated issues underlying often hidden implications of our "preaching" the gospel and/or evangelizing.

Bevans argues that it is time for the marginal to become central. Missiology should be redefined and reconstructed so that it can "shape the method and content of systematic theology." Saying that the trinity is fundamentally mission is not enough to define what he means by the missionary experience and reflection of it. If I read his article accurately, on any reading, systematic theo-

gy is not practical theology. I too think that all theology, however, is contextual at least in its roots. A European missionary who has derived her theology from her European experience must thoroughly immerse herself in the culture of the Oglala Sioux for example. If she does so, when she comes to see the connection between Sioux conception of the great hoop and her Christian concept of God, she has arrived at a *transcultural truth* that is speaking to both cultures. This is a speculative insight and it is crucial for any practical theology of mission, but it is not practical theology. Confusing the two, I think, can only lead to disaster.

Following this new recognition of the centrality of Christian mission, Bevans proceeds to reconnect some of the missiological insights to the field of systematic theology. Due to time constraints, I will address only one theme.

In the doctrine of God, Bevans proposed to construct a "Trinitarian theology of mission," i.e. to emphasize the "pneumatological character of God's saving presence" in the world. One gets the impression that, for Bevans, God is mission, but in fact, God is love. Therefore, Jesus' mission was about love of one's fellow human being, about love for another. This is a love driven by a provident God caring for God's world by enspiriting disciples to feed the poor, clothe the naked, heal the sick. The only way in which the Christian mission is credible is by incarnating this love, even for Christian enemies.

I greatly appreciate the work of Stephen Bevans. His paper has afforded us an opportunity to ask and wrestle with tough questions, to test our tenacity for open dialogue and to propose a path to follow toward greater wisdom. Important to remember is that culture is ideally adapted to a specific place and time. This adaptation can lead to either a profound deepening of life-giving and life-affirming values or it can lead to the destruction of a people. What we have seen in our world for the last 500 years is a continual assault that we have come to assume is a normal course of events. Reflecting on the function of religion in all cultures may give us insights, because as the social sciences have informed us, religion is not an add-on to the culture, but forms a very basis of a people's world view, a basis of people's identity, and their hope for continuity. Fray Pedro de Gante, one of the early evangelizers of Mexico, learned and decided that the only way he was going to "preach" the gospel to the indigenous was to become one of them. He learned their games, their humor, their songs, their way of life, and without realizing it "he took on the mind and heart of the native world."<sup>4</sup> For me, this friar is an example of one who embodied missiological imagination. I look forward to our continual dialogue on this subject matter.

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<sup>4</sup>Virgilio P. Elizondo, *La Morenita* (Virgil Elizondo and Mexican American Cultural Center, 1980) 54.