In his text, *The Ethics of Evangelism: A Philosophical Defense of Proselytizing and Persuasion*, Elmer John Thiessen aims to provide a defense of religious proselytizing. This defense is based on his central claim that proselytizing, which he defines as the “intentional, direct, and overt communication that results in someone’s conversion” in a manner that involves “a change of a person’s belief, behavior, identity, and belonging” (2011, pp. 10–11), can in fact be ethically sound. The author maintains that this is the case despite widely held aversion by the public to most forms of religious persuasion, as well as other (i.e., liberal) arguments against evangelism.

In defending his central thesis, Thiessen begins by distinguishing between proselytizing based on emotional, social, or psychological coercion, inducements, arrogance, and other such manipulative tactics from religious persuasion that is respectfully tolerant, mindful of the dignity of all parties, and upholds an ethic of care. This ethic, Thiessen contends, expresses “a genuine concern for the person” such that “the person is not simply being used as a means to an end” (2011, p. 165). Thiessen also, in line with this ethic, defends his assertion that most of the opposition to religious evangelism fails to consider the benefits it has for both proselytizer and proselytizee.

Overall, I found Thiessen’s book to be well written and insightful. I also appreciated the fact that the author took pains to be both balanced and fair with respect to the historical excesses of proselytizing and the possibility of its more ethical deployment. He makes it clear throughout this text that religious persuasion based upon coercion, manipulation, inducements, and other forms of exploitation are not acceptable. In doing so, he also takes up and deals with issues of etiquette, as well as the arguments that comprise liberal opposition to proselytizing in a perceptive and comprehensive way.

There are, however, a number of areas of Thiessen’s text that I found to be problematic. To begin with, I found that Thiessen underplays the colonial excesses of religious persuasion and defends religious conversion in rather problematic ways. For example, his tendency to emphasize Christian opposition to slavery and its defense of native rights (instead of its complicity in perpetuating the former and undermining the latter), while somewhat accurate, tends towards being both overly simplistic and Eurocentric. This supposition both facilitates the undervaluing of non-European societies and persists in framing non-Western peoples as barbaric and in need of civilizing. It also, as such, undermines Thiessen’s conclusion that “[t]here is nothing wrong with this dimension of missionary imperialism, if indeed it is even appropriate to use the label “imperialism” here” (2011, p. 101).

There are also a number of instances in which the author uses insights from prominent social theorists and philosophers to support his thesis in ways that are selective. In fact, in a few instances, it becomes evident that the work of these thinkers refutes Thiessen’s central claims. For example, in his section on truth, the author draws on Jürgen Habermas’ basic pragmatic framework of communication and cites his asser-
tion that all human communication employs the four validity claims of understandability, truthfulness, sincerity, and appropriateness. This basic framework is used to reinforce Thiessen’s claim that because truthfulness is a definitionally open and elastic concept, and because proselytizing demands that some truths be concealed—since no one can ever be entirely truthful—it is therefore acceptable for religious proselytizers to conceal some truths.

This example of the author’s selective use of Habermas is a case in point of a discrepancy that is replicated with Thiessen’s use of Martha Nussbaum and Martin Buber. In fact, a more accurate use of Habermas’ insights on truth and religion would most likely refute Thiessen’s central thesis. Habermas, in such texts as *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, is clear that while religious traditions have contributed to Enlightenment thought, there is an obvious distinction between scientific knowledge and religious truths and, as such, no religious or theological claims can be redeemed through argumentation in communicative action. This argument also directly refutes the author’s assertion that one cannot divorce faith from other aspects of one’s life and that religious proselytizing in the public square is acceptable (see p. 138). A short discussion of Habermas’ position, as such, might prevent readers from assuming his work on communication supports Thiessen’s central arguments.

Thiessen also, in a number of cases, appears to confuse arguments of form with those of content. For example, early in the book he conflates the accepted use of emotional manipulation by charities, which often use images of starving children to solicit donations, to the work of religious proselytizers who might use emotion in a similar way. It is unclear, however, how closely related emotional persuasion aimed at religious conversion, which requires that one make a personal and existential conversion in line with religious doctrine, is to charitable appeals, which require one to simply donate money.

In another example, Thiessen compares the ethical criteria of communication in the realm of advertising and public relations to that of proselytizing in a manner that elides their fundamental differences. With respect to truth, Thiessen asserts that since “all advertising, indeed all communication, is selective in truth-telling … we cannot demand of each instance of proselytizing that the entire truth be told about the faith being advocated” (2011, p. 192). However, religion and advertising are dissimilar modes of communication that differ in the most significant way possible, namely, what they are “selling.” On the one hand, religion aims to promote a particular moral, ethical, and sometimes political, way of life based on explicit conceptions of truth, justice, morality, and community. The advertising of products, on the other hand, fails to meet this set of criteria, except perhaps on the most superficial level possible, and therefore provides little to warrant the comparison.

Yet, to be fair, further in the book Thiessen cautions against making a strong comparison between marketing, advertising, and religious communication since the former, because of its connection to commercialism, capitalism, and success, often “fails in upholding the dignity and worth of persons” (2011, p. 207). However, he goes on to argue that in light of this tendency towards crass commercialism, advertising and marketing, like religious proselytizing, needs to operate in line with certain moral con-
straints, such that it is made ethically acceptable. Yet, again, I question whether this is a fruitful comparison in light of the intrinsic differences between the sale of commodities and that of religion.

Thiessen also makes what I see as a troubling parallel between work being done on the sociology of science and technology (STS), which insists on the fallibility of scientific truths, and the lack of so-called “proof” of religious truths, which he claims should, as a result, be seen as laying on similar foundations. This, I argue, is not an accurate, nor indeed a fair, comparison. There are, in science, both better and worse theories, and although epistemic perfection can never be reached, sociologists working in this area do not advocate for scientific relativism. Rather, most proponents of the STS perspective call for increased reflexivity and a discussion of relations of power, politics, risk, and social impacts with respect to science. As such, the connection made by Thiessen between fallible science and religious belief, I argue, does not hold.

I further question whether, because religious persuasion aims to fundamentally alter beliefs about the most central and profound question of life and reality, it is possible for concerted exterior efforts to make such changes to ever be considered ethical in the way Thiessen describes. Religious belief, for a number of historical, philosophical, and political reasons, is an intrinsically personal thing and it remains the case that religious proselytizing has a propensity to impinge on and offend that very personal sensibility, no matter how ethically it is approached.

Overall, while I found that Thiessen’s text had much to offer by way of a novel perspective on proselytizing based on ethical principles, as I have discussed in the preceding review, I also found several thematic and structural inconsistencies that require further attention.

Reference

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