

Tennent, Timothy. *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam*. Grand Rapids, Mich., Ill.: Baker Academic, 2002.  
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Timothy Tennent's *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam* is an evangelical's effort to respond to the current debates surrounding interreligious dialogue. Tennent, a Wesleyan theologian, is the current president of Asbury Theological Seminary and former director of missions at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. In addition, he has spent many summers teaching at a college in India. He completed his doctoral studies at the University of Edinburgh under the guidance of renowned missiologist Andrew Walls. He has engaged missions theologically in other works, such as *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Zondervan, 2007) and *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Kregel, 2010).

Tennent's goal in writing the book is to offer what is generally missing in interreligious conversations—an evangelical perspective. This is because he feels conservatives tend to avoid such dialogue and liberals forsake essential truths of Christianity. The latter minimize absolute truth claims as signs of arrogance. In contrast to those who think subjective commitment disqualifies one from interreligious dialogue, Tennent retorts, "How can one have genuine dialogue *without* a faith commitment?" (Tennent 2002, 98–102).<sup>1</sup> As an evangelical, he surveys the two most common views held in evangelicalism, exclusivism and inclusivism. (He dismisses pluralism as heterodox.) In general, the dividing line is drawn at one's position of the existence and salvific potential of general revelation. Tennent admits that he holds to an "engaged

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<sup>1</sup> All further notations will follow the format of listing "locations", not page numbers, in keeping with contemporary versions of electronic e-books. All citations in this review come from the Kindle version of Tennent's book (Baker Academic, 2002).

exclusivism”, meaning that general revelation is strongly preparatory for salvation (thought unable to actually save anyone) and that “good theology must be missiologically focused” (284). What follows in the book are some constructed dialogues between a Christian and those of other religions, all based on real conversations Tennent has had with Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims.

Tennent first “dialogues” with Hinduism. In particular, he interacts with the doctrines of Ultimate Reality (Brahmin) and Creation. The diversity of Hinduism makes apologetics anything but uniform. Therefore, he distinguishes between two major themes of Hinduism, that of Sankara and the Hinduism of Ramanuja. The former absolutely separates nirguna Brahmin, which cannot be described with words, from saguna Brahmin, which can be spoke of and from which all seeming reality emerges. Each camp is trying to reconcile the philosophical tension between the one and the many, as evidenced in the world around us. Tennent begins each conversation by affirming what Christians can agree with in the respective cosmologies, only then moving to expose shortcomings and disagreements. In each dialogue, the religions’ speakers clarify typical misunderstandings about their religion. The Christian-Hindu conversation highlights the inadequacy of human knowledge and language. Tennent affirms the Hindu’s desire to uphold the “otherness” of God/Brahmin/Ultimate Reality, but explains that incomplete knowledge does not mean having no describable knowledge. When it comes to creation, Tennent claims the insistence to maintain a nondualistic nature of Brahmin creates a number of problems. Whether Brahmin is utterly other than the world or if Brahmin is identified with the universe, neither view accounts for how evil exists and how change happens without Brahmin also experiencing change. Throughout the dialogue, Tennent presents a number of Christian responses to the questions at hand, showing how Christianity avoids the aforementioned problems.

In discussing Buddhism<sup>2</sup>, Tennent follows the same dialogical approach—affirming, listening, clarifying, and critiquing. At the core of Tennent’s concern is Buddhism’s insistence that all existence is change such that all the world and experience is determined illusory; nothing is real. Either ultimate reality is simply a projection of our imagination (Yogacara school of Mahayana Buddhism) or everything is emptiness, such that all dualities are existential props to be discarded with enlightenment (Madhyamika school of Mahayana Buddhism). Though having a more explicit ethical system, Tennent says that Buddhism’s metaphysic undermines genuine ethics, since nothing is really “real”; in fact such a philosophy could theoretically justify evil since the suffers actually are not real. At times, Buddhism’s logic seems self-defeating. In the end, Tennent thinks Buddhism leads to nihilism or utter relativism. The Buddhists response is that the West fixates on logic, dualism, and thus false dichotomies; propositions undermine true knowledge. Throughout, Tennent explains how the gospel contrasts Buddhism’s system.

The dialogue with Islam centers upon the doctrine of God and the Incarnation. Again, the main issue pertains to the meaning of one’s “essence”. Tennent agrees with Muslims’ reluctance to separate essence and attributes; however, he holds that distinctions within a unity do not nullify identity. The differentiation is more academic, he thinks, than actual since essence expresses itself with characteristics (like compassion, justice, etc.). He gives an example of a tiger, which has many inherent distinctives, which cannot be divided without destroying its essence; however a rock can be divided without losing its essential “rock-ness”. So it is that Muslims may confuse essence and existence. Though the conversation then turns to the incarnation, the fundamental questions are similar. How can Jesus be God incarnate, both divine and human? Tennent admits some degree of mystery in the doctrine, but insists that limiting the

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<sup>2</sup> His discussion mainly focuses on Mahayana Buddhism, not Theravada Buddhism.

*expression or manifestation* of essence does not inherently change essence itself. He then turns to the Quran, arguing that there is no contradiction between it and Biblical Christianity, contra Muslim objectors. Tennent suggests that the Quran actually rejects heterodox forms of Christianity present in Arabia during the time of Mohammad. Moreover, Tennent asserts that ambiguities surrounding some of these texts and the volume of debate surrounding them require Muslims to exercise restraint in making dogmatic claims about the Quran's view of Jesus.

The closing section of *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable* looks at a few case studies designed to explore the limits and applications of interfaith dialogue. Drawing from ancient and modern history, from people spanning the globe, Tennent is particularly interested how to use these insights for the advancement of the gospel. He notes that John's Gospel gave Justin Martyr warrant to use the *Logos* motif in his apologetic, but that a careful distinction between title and personal name may restrict the use of other cultural significations. That is, terms and names have linguistic, theological, and cultural meaning; each must be considered before drawing parallels between a Christian concept and a local idea. In addition, Tennent contrast two more recent attempts to communicate the gospel in contextually relevant ways. For example, in India Upadhyay employed language from the Upanishads to articulate a distinctly Indian conception of the Trinity. On the other hand, A. G. Hogg feared such an approach would wind up in syncretism. Instead, "His goal was to demonstrate how Christian beliefs are more cogent and consistent than those of other religions and are therefore better able to sustain faith" (Tennent 2002, 2989–92).

Tennant certainly achieves his goal of offering a distinctly evangelical approach to interfaith dialogue, without falling into pluralism and indifference. Laudable is his constant reiteration of the gospel, drawing up essential corollary doctrines to contrast other religions. In

this way, the conversation does not remain at an abstract, philosophical level (as necessary at that is). Accordingly, he alternates between apologetics and affirmation.

Methodologically, Tennent's book stresses the importance of meta-theological questions. Worldviews, historical conflicts, and logical assumptions shape the way we pose questions and resolve tensions. One's metaphysical views direct us to certain ethical positions, and vice versa. This is especially evident in the dialogue with Buddhism. Tennent consistently tries to show internal contradictions within the religions, in particular Hinduism. These charges of then followed up with the Christian view that better answers the inconsistency. Of course, many would argue that Tennent is simply defaulting to Aristotelian logic, which is invalid outside the West. This charge is again and again showed to be nonsense, even within the confines of these dialogues. For example, when the Buddhist claims that ultimate reality is either perception or emptiness, he is not at the same time affirming that ultimate reality is objective and absolute. Thus, even the Buddhist employs the law of non-contradiction.

More controversial is Tennent's use of the Quran to rebut Islamic theology. Some would charge that this in some way validates the authority of the Quran. Yet, Paul clearly uses pagan literature in Acts 17 to turn his listeners' attention to the one true God. Tennant and other missiologists would do well in mapping out the possible limitations of such an approach. On the one hand, this method starts the conversation; asking a Muslim or a Buddhist will typically be a non-starter. Pragmatics aside, beginning with their own religious beliefs may help them to understand their own values and belief system. In the process, inconsistencies and inadequacies may emerge that lead them to inquire about Jesus and the Bible. An important question is at what point would the continued use of other religions' texts be tantamount to endorsing its inspiration? This is an important boundary to be aware of when entering into these conversations.

The book makes a number of contributions. First, it should be noted that those who most resist interreligious dialogue often do so because they are so convinced in the importance of evangelism and Scriptural truth that these conversations could not benefit a Christian. Tennent, however, comments that these sorts of exchanges have helped him personally wrestle with issues otherwise neglected in the West. Thus, he is spurred on to reexamine the Scriptures in the same way as the Bereans in Acts 17. Second, Tennent's reminder is helpful, in history, "there are few new problems that the church faces. Most of the problems that we think are new are really just old problems with a slightly different look to them" (Tennent 2002, 2581–85). Thus, missiologists should be competent historians. At another level, the same idea could be expressed about other cultures and religions. Just as the early church struggled to understand the essence of God and the Christians continually try to understand the existence of evil, so too have other religions pondered these philosophical-religious questions. As we listen to their own thoughts, we may find solutions to problems we personally had not thought of but are nevertheless in Scripture. Third, the comparison between Upadhyay and Hogg force us to assess the role of apologetics and the meaning of contextualization. Confrontation and logical sword fighting have a place, but this sort of apologetics is not contextualization. Hogg's fear of syncretism reminds us of the risk Christians face when communicating the gospel. Upadhyay's careful effort opens our eyes to the possibility of faithful theological contextualization. Tennant's book hints that missiologists interested in contextualization would do well to study other religions. As an aside, a healthy exercise would have been to imagine a dialogue among those Christians who brought the gospel to our own cultural forefathers. How might our theologies be contextualized in ways unknown to us but nevertheless offensive in previous times?

In future editions of the book, Tennent would do well to expand his discussion of “faith”. He strongly endorses “faith” understood as personal conviction; indeed, such faith grounds genuine dialogue. If a person deems a perspective true, then any dialogue between two people holding two perspectives would necessitate some sort of persuasion. Otherwise, why does each person hold to these beliefs rather than those beliefs? Why even have a dialogue? This point needs repeating again and again. However, more could be said in response to Hogg’s “faith-faiths” distinction. In other words, faith (defined as “trust”) has an object. One trusts in *what*? In Scripture, Abraham typifies genuine faith; Romans 4:20 explains that this faith glorifies God. Faith speaks to the nature of the object being trusted in. Abraham, for example, was “fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised” (Rom 4:21, ESV). In response to those who minimize theology and religious distinctives, this point is important. When the objects of faith are so different to be unrecognizable, we cannot say that the nature of that faith is the same. Therefore, this perception undermines the agenda of many supporter of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, whose aim is to exalt sincerity and minimize differences. If the goal of dialogue, however, is to encourage trust, it is imperative that all the participants be *honest* about their differences, beliefs, and ambitions.