

NEWS & OPINIONS

Five Cheers for the Ontological Turn

Jim Harries

A response to: “The Ontological Turn for Christians.” News and Opinions by Eloise Meneses in *On Knowing Humanity Journal* 2(2), July 2018, pp28-30.

Eloise Meneses’ opinion piece published last year in this journal struck a resonant chord of appreciation within me as I read it. I appreciate her concern that Christians not “pin our hopes for recognition of Christian truth on any trend in academia” (30). Western academics’ recognition of the arbitrariness of any ‘truth’ is, however, to me a major step forward.

Meneses does not seem to totally explicate what I see as an implication of the above arbitrariness. Her opinion piece should have us ask ourselves how Western people ever got to be sure of their belief in anything at all, and with such communal conviction that it is continuing to shake and make the whole globe? The answer to that question is, when Westerners began to believe in the Bible it was not as an alternative to nature, as biblical belief is often considered to be today. It was rather as an alternative to a chaotic arbitrariness that tends towards dog eats dog, or ‘he who is strongest wins,’ an arbitrariness which results in less than pleasant ways of living. God’s word provided a foundational order, when believed in and acted upon, where there was not one before. This continues to happen today when faith in the God of the Bible reaches the majority world.

I would also encourage Meneses to hone her use of the term ‘religion’ (or religious). Meneses’ use of this term, to me, promotes what she is trying to undermine—the view that there is nature which is *not* religious. What continues to deceive many to date is exactly that error, the failure to adequately realize that the *content* of the concept of religion in the West comes squarely from Christianity, and Western Protestant Christianity at that. That means in turn that, to Westerners rooted in Christian belief, Christian beliefs are not as ‘wild and weird’ (28) as may be the practices of others because these beliefs are profoundly foundational to what Western people are, including to secularism itself.

Meneses also demonstrates why anthropology is inherently extractive. Pre-ontological turn, the belief might have been that anthropological writing was neutral, and so, foundationally ‘true’ to the people being studied (would they only realize it) as well as to the anthropologist. Insights arising from Meneses’ piece should make it clear that this is far from the case. Anthropologists’ accounts are themselves coming from a position, and only make sense to those who share that position. The current practice, whereby many students in the developing world are required to root their own ethnographies in what was already discovered by Western anthropologists, is now being discredited by the ontological turn.

Christian missionaries to the majority world today should realize they are not up against nature, as the concept of ‘nature’ is not there in the majority world. They are not presenting a religion, as if there are other ‘religious alternatives’ to it. This is because the very contours of their understanding of what a religion is are themselves rooted in Christianity. So, what are they presenting? Would it be too much of a stretch to say, it is the word of God, or should one say, ‘he is the word of God’, who is Jesus the Christ, God incarnate?



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humble example of Jesus, who demonstrated His vulnerability in part by living like the Jews of His time and place.” <http://www.vulnerablemission.org/>

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