
Living and working in Turkey, I have been massively confronted with accusations of allegedly “unethical” missionary activities. That is why Thiessen’s book got my attention. Indeed, in his monograph about “the ethics of evangelism,” Thiessen is addressing an audience with a Western postmodern background. Yet his study is dealing with issues of proselytizing on such a general philosophical level that I find it very helpful as a basis for further thinking about ethical and unethical mission work even in a Muslim context.

Elmer Thiessen taught philosophy at Medicine Hat College in Alberta, Canada, for 36 years. After his retirement in 2007, he has been teaching about philosophy and theology in different universities in a variety of countries, amongst them the Centre for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto, Canada.

I have not read many books that are as clearly structured as The Ethics of Evangelism. At each step of the argument, the author is explicit and transparent about his own strategy. Because of the clarity of argument, it is easy to summarize the book’s contents. In Part I (3–50), Thiessen provides important definitions of the terminology and gives the background of the discussion about proselytizing. Part II (53–129) deals with “Objections to Proselytizing,” part III (133–153) gives positive reasons that provide a defense of proselytizing. Up to this point it was Thiessen’s purpose to prove that proselytizing is not “inherently wrong” (53, emphasis by the author) as some critics seem to presuppose (cf. 19). The right and even the duty to proselytize have to be defended.

After having established that proselytizing is not unethical in itself, in Part IV (157–211) Thiessen tries to develop criteria for distinguishing between ethical and unethical proselytizing. The final chapter (Part V, 215–233) aims at the practical application and some ideas about how to reinforce ethical ways of proselytizing.

Being aware of the fact that the term “proselytizing” “is used in a pejorative sense to denote evangelistic malpractice” (12, emphasis by Thiessen), Thiessen decides to use the word “in a neutral way, which then allows for the possibility of ethical and unethical ways to proselytize” (13). Often Thiessen uses “persuasion” as a parallel term and defines proselytizing as “any activity that attempts to bring about a conversion.” Though he mainly deals with religious proselytizing, especially as part of Christian mission, Thiessen regularly draws attention to the fact that proselytizing/persuasion is “a natural part of being human” (58) and is regularly used in secular areas like education, advertising or politics.

There are two main groups of addressees for Thiessen’s theses. Firstly, he speaks to a wide range of opponents to religious proselytizing. Some of them come from a postmodern background and argue against any claims of truths, others oppose allegedly wrong methods of persuasion but implicitly seem to leave not much space for “good proselytizing.” The second group Thiessen addresses is the evangelical Christians. He counts himself as committed to this brand of Christianity, but states that Evangelicals “rarely give serious consideration to the question of the ethics of evangelism” (ix).

Thiessen never denies his position as a Christian. However, in pleading for the right to proselytize he tries to outline ethical foundations that, he hopes, might be acceptable for people regardless of their beliefs. Thiessen derives his ethical foundations from the Christian
concept of human dignity as being created in the image of God (cf. 45). Philosophically he mainly builds on Immanuel Kant’s secular version of human dignity and positively quotes Hans Küng, who “sees Kant’s categorical imperative as basically a modernization and secularization of the golden rule” (48). Following Kant, Thiessen’s most quoted witness is Aristotle and especially his “Rhetoric” (cf. for instance 186, 187, 208).

There are some noteworthy outcomes of Thiessen’s study. First, he very convincingly argues for the right to try and persuade others to accept one’s own convictions. To try to persuade others of something is part of human dignity. “Proselytizing, by its very nature, involves making a statement of identity” (145). To try to persuade another person is also an act of taking serious the dignity of the proselytized, that is, his or her own search for truth. He writes, “I will seek to enhance the other’s search for truth” (147). The attempt to refute misconception about (in)tolerance (105–114) is one of the highlights in the author’s argument.

Thiessen lists carefully differentiated criteria for ethical evangelism. These include that proselytizing has to respect the dignity of the other, has to abstain from coercion and inducement, and has truthfully to give reasons that enable the other to make a good decision. The proselytizer should be humble and respect the cultural setting of the proselytizee.

All these criteria (briefly summarized in Appendix 1, 234–237) need to be further developed and applied, especially by those who are involved in evangelism. However, Thiessen rightfully warns against a rigorous and unrealistic use of the criteria that practically could lead again to a total rejection of proselytizing. For instance, truthfulness is certainly required; but everybody will be selective to a certain degree in the representation of their convictions (188–190). Yes, love for others must be the motivation of evangelism, but “Our motivation is never absolutely pure” (200).

Thiessen argues very strongly for a more specific development of criteria for ethical proselytizing within the proselytizing religions themselves (219–223). Yet he warns against the effort to enforce with legal means a rigorous idea of ethical behavior in “evangelism” (226–230), because the border between “ethical” und “unethical” often cannot exactly be defined and because the value of religious freedom includes freedom to proselytize.

When Thiessen wrote his book, the declaration “Christian witness in a multi-religious world,” issued together by the World Council of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and the World Evangelical Alliance, was not yet published (though Thiessen mentions the efforts for such a declaration, 247). The subtitle of this declaration about ethical evangelism, issued in 2011, however, is very much in tune with Thiessen’s thesis. “Recommendations for conduct” have to be given and have to be published in a world where people of different faiths are living together closer than ever. However, in order not to jeopardize the right to proselytize, only “recommendations” can be given.

My main critical concern about Thiessen’s study is whether the general revelation is so comprehensive and his references to Kant and Aristotle so convincing as to generate effective global guidelines for ethical proselytizing. Thiessen’s “faith and hope that others will eventually respond to ideals that are positive and good” (233) for me is one of the less convincing statements in the book. Indeed, from a biblically based theological perspective, the eschatological urgency of calling everybody to Christ is not clearly taken into account. The need to call people to the kingdom before the king comes sometimes may require