

A Reply to the papers by Met. Dr. Youhanon Mar Demetrios and Danut Manastireanu, which in turn were responding to my presentation, “The Ethics of Evangelism and Proselytizing.”

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First of all I want to express my thanks to Dr. Manastireanu and Metropolitan Mar Demetrios for their careful responses to my paper on “The Ethics of Evangelism and Proselytizing.” All too often, responders to papers go their own way and do not really interact with the paper they are responding to. This can’t be said of my two responders, though I will suggest later that there are a couple of important ways in which they could have interacted more directly with the argument of my paper.

There are a number of issues on which we are in full agreement. We all agree that the Great Commission of Jesus needs to be acted on. We agree that Christians ought to evangelize, to proclaim the Good News. We agree that Christians have often failed to evangelize in ethical ways. We also agree that Christians of all stripes need to pay more attention to the question of the ethics of evangelism. We agree that the task given to us by Jesus includes more than just proclamation. We need to make disciples. And there is a broader mandate: we are also called to “witness to Jesus Christ in life, deed, word and sign” (Manastireanu, p.1).

Now to some differences. Both responses raise some questions about definitions. Manastireanu objects to my equating of “evangelism” and “proselytizing” in my book, and my trying to redeem the latter term as a neutral or positive concept. In the main, I agree with Manastireanu. If I were to write my book again, I would in fact eliminate the word “proselytizing” in the title of the book, and I would focus mainly on “evangelism” throughout book. My primary reason for using both terms was that I was writing this book for both a secular and a religious readership, and I felt that “proselytizing” was a term that the secular readership was more familiar with. So my intent was very much in keeping with Manastireanu’s advice that we as Christians need “to take upon ourselves the task of learning the language of the unsaved world, rather than requiring them to learn ours” (p.6). My hunch is that North American usage of the term “proselytizing” might be different from that of Europe/Asia. Interestingly, our dictionaries, which reflect common usage, still define the term “proselytizing” as a neutral term. In any case, I now try to avoid using the term “proselytizing” as a synonym for “evangelism”. And, I would remind Manastireanu that in my presentation at the Consultation, I did in fact focus largely on “evangelism,” though I express some worries about the widespread use of the word “proselytizing” in ecumenical circles to refer to evangelistic malpractice. In the last section of my paper, I deal with a very special and narrow meaning of proselytizing as “sheep-stealing.” I still think we need a special word here, but more on that later.

Mar Demetrios uses the term “proselytizing” in two ways: (a) as evangelistic malpractice; and (b) as sheep-stealing (p.2). He is wrong in suggesting that this is in keeping with my own usage, because I quite explicitly argue that using the term in two ways leads to

confusion (p.2). I worry about introducing another word “proselytizing” to refer to evangelistic malpractice. I think it is better to use “evangelism” as a neutral term, and then admit that there is both ethical and unethical evangelism. I also worry that introducing another word like “proselytizing” to refer to unethical evangelism leads to dishonesty in that it allows Christians to say that they are opposed to proselytizing when what they really mean is that they are opposed to evangelism. Clearly, Mar Demetrios does not make this mistake, but I can give examples where this has occurred.

I do however want to retain the word “proselytizing” to refer to the phenomenon of “sheep-stealing.” This usage is quite common in ecumenical circles and is also found in both Mar Demetrios and Manastireanu. In the last section of my paper, I deal quite specifically with the argument that proselytizing understood as sheep-stealing is immoral. One weakness of both responses is that they do not deal explicitly with my arguments in the last section of my paper. Both responses refer to some theological and cultural differences between evangelicals and Orthodox Christians on this issue, but my focus was on ethics. Is proselytizing as sheep-stealing always immoral? That is the question that needs to be faced.

I hope I am being fair here, but I get the impression that both responders believe that proselytizing understood as sheep stealing is always wrong. Both responses tend to conflate their objections to unethical evangelism with the implicit objection that proselytizing understood as sheep-stealing is wrong. For example, Mar Demetrios, in a paragraph on page 2, uses the word “proselytizing” in two different ways – to refer to evangelistic malpractice, and to refer to sheep-stealing. I would suggest that Mar Demetrios draws on the negative connotation of proselytizing as evangelistic malpractice to condemn all proselytizing understood as sheep stealing. This isn’t done explicitly, but the overall thrust of Mar Demetrios’s paper gives the impression that he sees all “proselytizing” (understood in the special sense of sheep stealing) as wrong. I get this same impression from Manastireanu’s response. Indeed, at one point Manastireanu quite explicitly objects to “sheep stealing,” and he seems to be making a generalization here, though he admits that both Orthodox and Evangelicals are guilty of the same (p. 2). Then there is the title of Manastireanu’s response: “Ethical Witness, Absolutely. Proselytizing, Hopefully Not!”

I maintain that proselytizing understood as sheep-stealing need not always be wrong. Both papers, I believe, tend to load the concept of sheep-stealing with elements of evangelistic malpractice, and then of course proselytizing becomes unethical. Here they fall prey to the error I identify in my first point in the last section of my presentation (p.8). By and large, evangelicals and Orthodox Christians both agree in condemning unethical evangelistic practices. But that still leaves open the question as to whether proselytizing (understood as sheep-stealing) is in and of itself unethical. I argue that it need not be unethical.

There is an oddity about the very notion of sheep-stealing that needs to be brought to the fore. Is it even appropriate to talk about sheep (i.e. church members) being stolen? Or owned? There is a possessiveness here that worries me. Ultimately, the sheep or

members of a church are not owned by the church. If anything, we should rather talk about sheep being owned by the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep (John 10).

Further, the Good Shepherd is very concerned about sheep that get lost. Both Orthodox and evangelical Christians need to acknowledge that church members can get lost. There are many Christians who are only nominally Christian. And in our secularized world, many leave the faith entirely. The Good Shepherd is concerned about these lost sheep. And He asks us as Christians, whatever our denomination, to go and look for these sheep and bring them back into the fold. These sheep need to be “re-evangelized,” to use a term that has been introduced by some Orthodox writers (Gurion 1999, pp. 241, 243). But, here again, does it really matter who does the re-evangelism? Surely Orthodox Christians should have no objections to evangelicals helping them in the task of re-evangelism. And surely it is wrong then to accuse evangelicals of stealing sheep.

There is another oddity to the notion of sheep-stealing that needs to be highlighted. Describing proselytizing as sheep-stealing creates a distorted picture because people aren't exactly like sheep. It is much harder to steal a person than it is to steal a sheep. In fact, stealing persons is generally described as kidnapping, and one has to take very special measures to kidnap a person. Surely it is not fair to describe proselytizing as kidnapping, at least in most cases. I believe proselytizing can be, and sometimes does violate a person's freedom, in which case the analogy to kidnapping is appropriate. But the analogy is not always appropriate. And claims about the probability of proselytizing as kidnapping occurring are empirical claims that require evidence, as I pointed out in my presentation.

Let me make illustrate this point by painting a scenario of proselytizing (understood as sheep-stealing). A native Albanian evangelical Christian (Eduard) is in a coffee shop with a longstanding friend of his (Luan) who is nominally Orthodox. A pleasant conversation eventually shifts to the topic of religion, as has been happening fairly often in their recent conversations. Luan, who hasn't attended church for several years, asks Eduard why he so committed to his faith and to his church. Eduard explains his religious commitment to Jesus Christ. In the ensuing conversation, Luan expresses his desire to attend church with Eduard some time. Further conversations, and further visits to the evangelical church eventually result in Luan becoming serious about his own religious commitment, and in the end he requests to be baptized and to become a member of Eduard's evangelical church.

I want to suggest that it very difficult to find anything that is morally blameworthy in the above scenario. Luan was a willing participant in the conversations and he freely made a decision to be baptized and join an evangelical church. If this assessment is correct, we have to conclude that ethical proselytizing (understood as “sheep-stealing”) is possible. Of course, a change in some of the details of the above scenario, might result in a different ethical evaluation. For example, suppose we introduce another variable involving vulnerability, to follow up on a suggestion made by Mar Demetrios, who objects to evangelicals and Pentecostals targeting members of an established church

“when they are in vulnerable situations emotionally, either when they are sick or distressed or when they are alone and isolated” (p.3).

So, in this revised scenario, we are still dealing with a long-standing friendship between Eduard, an evangelical Christian, and Luan, a nominal Orthodox, but now Luan gets very sick. As a close friend, we would of course expect Eduard to visit Luan. Again, on one of these visits the conversation turns to religion, and to make a long story short, eventually leads to Luan making a genuine confession of faith in Jesus Christ. Is this exploiting vulnerability? I’m not so sure. I would rather see this as a friend caring for another friend. Luan doesn’t even think of inviting an Orthodox priest to come and visit him, because he hasn’t attended an Orthodox church in years. Instead, he turns to a friend for help, and the ensuing conversations eventually leads to his “re-conversion.” Here again, I do not think there is anything unethical occurring. This is not to say that sometimes there is a danger of exploiting vulnerability when engaged in proselytizing (understood as sheep-stealing). Indeed, my criteria #4 & #6 deal with the dangers of exploiting vulnerability. But I suggest that we need to be careful not to exaggerate this danger, or to make the accusation of exploiting vulnerability too quickly. The notion of exploiting vulnerability is vague, and we must exercise care in making this charge.

Let me make a further revision to the above scenario. Instead of Eduard being a native Albanian evangelical Christian, suppose he is a short-term Canadian missionary who shares his testimony with Luan via a translator. This is the scenario I describe in my paper (p.9), and I remind my readers that I raise some ethical concerns about this scenario. So I am quite prepared to admit that sometimes proselytizing understood as sheep-stealing is wrong. It all depends on the details of each situation.

Lest it be thought that my scenarios thus far skirt the real issue, let me suggest a final scenario, similar to the first one except for one important detail. Suppose Luan is not just nominally Orthodox as in the first scenario, but a faithful and committed Orthodox Christian. Of course, now it is quite inappropriate to talk about Eduard trying to evangelize Luan. Eduard and Luan are both Christians, and if their friendship is a genuine one, and if they are mature Christians, they will both acknowledge the same. Now suppose we change the scenario once again, and suppose Eduard refuses to acknowledge Luan’s genuine Christian commitment, and thus tries to evangelize Luan and to persuade him to switch churches. This is not only inappropriate but also un-ecumenical. Now we are really dealing with a case of attempted sheep-stealing. But, is it unethical? Here we need to be careful. If we are dealing with two mature adults who are friends, I find it hard to describe even this scenario as unethical. Luan is after all free to say “no” in this exchange. Remember, kidnapping a mature adult is difficult! However, if Eduard, in his attempts to lure Luan to his church, makes false claims about the Orthodox church, then of course something unethical has occurred (see criterion # 8 in the appendix). Again, ethical assessment depends on the details of the situation.

In the above scenarios, I have focused on an evangelical trying to evangelize a person of Orthodox background. The roles could be reversed. Here I appreciate a point made by Manastireanu, that “such unfriendly and un-ecumenical behaviour can be observed in

various degrees in both ecclesial communities” (p.2). It is equally inappropriate for an Orthodox Christian to try and convert a committed evangelical Christian. But, as I have argued above, it would not be wrong for an Orthodox Christian to try to convert a lapsed evangelical Christian. Enough on practical scenarios.

I return to the point made earlier about Mar Demetrios’s tendency to conflate objections to unethical evangelism with the implicit objection that proselytizing understood as sheep-stealing is wrong. This is very apparent in Mar Demetrios’s response when he begins a new section by clearly referring to proselytism understood as sheep-stealing, and then going on to provide a catalogue of examples of unethical evangelism (p.3). He objects to targeting of members in vulnerable situations. I agree, and hence my “Psychological coercion criterion” and my “Inducements to convert criterion” (#4 & #6). He expresses concerns about a preoccupation with numbers of converts. I agree, and hence my “Results criterion” (#15). He worries about colonial arrogance. I agree, and hence my “Humility criterion” (#9). He expresses concern about evangelism being separated from a local culture. I agree, and hence my “Cultural sensitivity criterion” (#12).

So, why do I highlight this section in Mar Demetrios’s response? While I agree that there is some overlap between unethical evangelism and proselytizing understood as sheep-stealing, I think we need to keep these two activities separate. To load sheep-stealing with nuances from evangelistic malpractice is simply to beg the question. Further, we need to separate a descriptive analysis of evangelistic malpractice from a normative analysis. It is one thing to catalogue unethical ways of doing evangelism or proselytizing understood as sheep-stealing. It is quite another to try to define norms that should govern ethical evangelism or proselytizing. My concern was and is with the ethics of evangelism, with what we ought to do. This is a constructive and positive enterprise. And while I believe it is important to describe the past failures of evangelicals in their witnessing zeal, we must not let that overshadow the important task of doing ethics. My focus was and is on describing norms that would prevent this sort of evangelistic malpractice. So I was disappointed that my responders did not focus more on the 15 criteria of ethical evangelism that are found in the appendix of my paper. Are these norms justified? Have I missed some norms? These are the questions that my responders should have focused on.

Mar Demetrios highlights one objection to proselytizing understood as sheep-stealing that deserves separate treatment. Proselytizing divides families and creates disunity in society (p.3). I agree that this can be the result of evangelism or proselytizing. Jesus himself said that the gospel would sometimes divide families (Mk. 13:12). And I agree that evangelism and proselytizing will sometimes create divisions in society. But, as I point out in my paper (pp.9-10), we need to be careful not to overemphasize unity and collective identity. While the Western world tends to overemphasize the individual, I believe Orthodox theology overemphasizes collective identity. The truth is somewhere in the middle, and I believe a biblical anthropology will balance an emphasis on individual and collective identity.

Manastireanu raises another objection to my treatment of the ethics of evangelism. He identifies himself as “a true postmodern person” and as such objects to persuasion. “I would prefer as a safer option, to apply the hermeneutics of suspicion to any form of persuasion, including its religious versions” (Manastireanu p.3). But is not Manastireanu himself trying to persuade me and other members of the Consultation by writing and reading his response to my paper? Indeed, much of our conversation involves persuasion. Parents persuade their children. Preachers persuade their parishioners. Teachers persuade their students. A young man tries to persuade the woman he is courting to marry him. Are all these forms of persuasion wrong? Surely not! Here, as with evangelism, we need to be careful not to condemn all persuasion. What is needed instead is to distinguish between ethical and unethical forms of persuasion. I would also question the postmodern assumptions that underlie this objection. Indeed, I worry about the extent to which postmodernism has infected our churches. But this is a topic for another time.

I conclude on a more positive note. I am deeply grateful for opportunity to attend the second consultation of the Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative. I want to affirm my love and appreciation for Danut Manastireanu and Metropolitan Youhanon Mar Demetrious as Christian brothers. My hunch is that we really agree more than we disagree on the question of the ethics of evangelism and proselytizing. I think the issue that needs to be faced more squarely has to do with the possibility of individuals in both ecclesial communities slipping away from the Christian faith. There are nominal Christians in both ecclesial communities. Christians can lose the faith. And when this occurs, there is a need for re-evangelism. I believe there needs to be more openness on both sides to having the other side help in this task of re-evangelism. And when persons are re-evangelized, it might be appropriate sometimes to encourage this “new convert” to return to his/her original church. And, in cases where this doesn’t happen, for whatever reason, then, as Manastireanu suggests, it would be well to have in place a code of conduct, where pastors/priests of the two communities involved would inform each other of the change of affiliation of the “new convert” (Manastireanu p.4). Such candid communication would, I believe, go a long way towards building understanding between Orthodox and Evangelical Christians when proselytizing does occur.