

Book Review

Benno van den Toren and Kang-San Tan,
Humble Confidence: A Model for Interfaith Apologetics

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Van den Toren, B. and Kang-San Tan (2022). *Humble Confidence: A Model for Interfaith Apologetics*. IVP Academic, Downers Grove, CA, 296 pp., \$32.99 paperback, ISBN: 9780830852949.

What is the best way to conduct apologetics in our religiously plural and globalized world today? Are logical or propositional-based arguments still effective, or should we now explore other approaches? In *Humble Confidence*, Van den Toren and Tan argue that “many of the dominant approaches to apologetics are ill-equipped for the cosmopolitan, multireligious, and multicultural environments in which we find ourselves today [because] Western Christian apologetics is too often insufficiently contextual [and] too insufficiently Christian” (1-2).

The authors (who both have lived and worked in the U.S. and Europe, with experience in different religious and secular contexts) seek an apologetics that is contextually effective to engage today’s diverse environments. For Van den Toren and Tan, apologetics is an “art,” not “a science or technique but “an individual and communal journey” to understand non-Christians and their beliefs with “increasing sensitivity to particular needs and barriers” to attractively present Christ (2).

They term their approach “apologetic witness, apologetic dialogue, and holistic apologetics”; the last especially addresses “the entire person with their emotions, commitments, and attachments” (3). Moreover, apologetics is to be the task of the entire Christian community, not only the professional apologist.

Van den Toren and Tan’s model has both practical and theoretical aspects for interreligious apologetic witness and dialogue. The model builds on a trinitarian theology of religions and the world, philosophical insights in epistemology, and recent developments in missiology (5). Christian conversion testimonies are also stressed to bridge the foundationalist model of apologetics (that omits personal Christian stories) with postmodern religiosity that prefers human experiences that are socio-culturally embodied in a community (5). Part 1 (chs. 1-7) explains the nature and type of their apologetic approach, while part 2 (chs. 8-13) are case studies of religious groups and beliefs that illustrate their model.

Chapter 1 critiques universal foundationalism by showing how the four Gospels were crafted differently for different audiences. Additionally, Paul’s apologetics toward the Jews and Greeks used different entry points and arguments to appeal to each audience’s culture and affections (16-22). That Paul was fully and bodily present in each encounter demonstrates how apologetics “should be holistic, addressing not just free-floating minds, but dialoguing with real human beings as integrated personalities ... all embedded in their histories, relationships, communities and societies” (28). Thus, any apologetics must engage with different communication styles and trust-building with specific audiences (38-40); in evangelistic encounters, Christians’ knowledge and style of persuasion and argumentation are culturally conditioned (78-79).

To avoid relativism, relying on a trinitarian theology of religions shows God's diverse ways of revelation among various peoples and the Spirit's work to relate to particular witnessing points in their contexts (60-67, 72-75). Such trinitarian theology as a foundation for apologetics is better than foundationalist approaches because Christianity has no other basis than Christ. However, the "particularity of this starting point [is] deeply problematic for Western modernity which supposes that trustworthy knowledge can only be based on a universally accessible or acceptable foundation" other than Christ (78).

Additionally, "predispositions" (at the level of the will or emotion) affect how the apologetic witness is received (93). Consequently, trust in the Spirit to discern and "heal deep hurts and overcome human resistance" is key (94).

However, because Christian faith is not based on a universally accessible type of knowledge "but on the self-revelation of God in ... Christ, [the] basis for trustworthy religious knowledge differs among different religions [whether] it [is] revelation, wisdom or enlightenment and how should each of these be understood" (78-79).

In addition, "a growing openness to truth ... does not demand neutrality and disengagement [but] the development of appropriate desires and attitudes, [and] healthy virtues of the mind" (119). Thus, deploying biblical narratives or personal testimonies "appeals to our emotions and desires" and makes such a world "emotionally credible and even appealing" (122). Naturally, the messenger's life or story must be credible so that the story comes across as true.

A final key discussion advances the triangular nature (or three points) of interreligious dialogue and persuasion (97-98): (1) God's revelation is a reality independent of our interpretation. (2) This revelation is transmitted and received in Christian witnesses' own perspectives. (3) It is also transmitted and received in *other* people's perspectives. Thus, rather than convincing others to understand and receive Christ through our *own* perspective (point 2), we as Christian witnesses should invite others to explore divinely revealed reality (point 1) via their own perspectives (point 3) while we continually interact with their reflections.

As we interact with others in the manner just described, the authors argue, we Christians can be enriched in the insights that followers of other religious traditions bring from their own religious understandings (125, 163-164). With Buddhists, dialoguing with their concern for search to realize their "no-self" (or non-self) with Christianity's view of losing oneself gives new insight to both parties about desiring God as the object of our true desires that Christ liberates us from (187). With Muslims, grappling with Islam's claim as the "natural, rational and sensible religion" uncovers shared tensions within Christianity of how Islamic (and Christian) rationality explains many features of life but not of the many ways God reveals himself to humanity (195-202).

Van den Toren and Tan assert that secularism's idols are more complex; secular modernity's idols are akin to a pseudo monotheistic religion—replacing the one true God with another that is "the highest authority to be obeyed, the greatest good to be sought after, and the most secure source of help in trouble" (213). Conversely secular *postmodernity* resembles a polytheism where no god is the ultimate authority or truth, but there are simply regional deities for different peoples (214). Engaging *postmodernity* uncovers similarities to the Greco-Roman worldview: behind their polytheism was a "highest authority" that assigned regional gods and beliefs to their people and place, so long as the Roman Empire's rule and worldview remained unchallenged (214-215).

Van den Toren and Tan also discuss how, while secularism's beliefs ultimately fail as human constructs, they are in fact another form of belief. However, secularism diminishes humans to live in earth-bound goals, whereas Christian faith turns human desires toward a transcendence that only a real God can satisfy (216-219).

Overall, *Humble Confidence* showcases a kind of apologetics that is dynamically relational and listening, context-sensitive, and holistically focused. The book's approach succeeds by modeling how "to take these religious and secular traditions seriously, as culturally embedded and embodied attitudes to life in which worldview, values, deep quests, and the emotive layers of existence are intertwined," to "communicate, bridges [and] be reminded of the inadequacy of our own views and attitudes toward life" (241). In this way, apologetics becomes "a dialogue that is attentive to others and a witness to a truth that we do not own" (242), yet bears that truth by the grace revealed to us in Christ.

Even as the book takes seriously a trinitarian theology of religions and the Spirit's witness in encounters, the authors curiously neglect discussing prayer and trust in the Spirit's power and presence to protect our apologetic witness from demonic (not just human, sociocultural, or emotional) opposition. Because the god of this world has blinded unbelievers from seeing the gospel, prayer for breakthroughs is needed (2 Cor 3:17 – 4:4)!

Notwithstanding this oversight, the book is a watershed development in apologetics for better engagements with all non-Christians. It rewards Western readers by expanding the horizons of apologetics to be greatly contextual and humble, and it aids non-Westerners with a non-confrontational and relational approach that are relevant where Christians live as minorities. Students and teachers in particular will profit from well-crafted study questions and further readings at the back of the book (243-252).