

'Theology' after 'God' A conversation: A conversation

by [Roger E. Olson](#) in the [December 15, 2009](#) issue

In the midst of a theology conference, two postmodern theologians sit down to lunch. [This is just an excerpt of the print article. For the full version, please see the December 15 issue of the Century.]

Moderate Postmodern: Our social location doesn't determine our theology, but it does influence it. In theology we do make truth claims that can't be reduced to politics. We are after the truth about God. But we all work from within some tradition of discourse; we are all working from within some story-shaped community. There's no neutral ground for anyone to stand on. The so-called secularist is not more neutral than the Christian. Even the secularists' truth claims are biased because of their tradition and the story that creates and shapes it.

Radical Postmodern: Ah, so you're postmodern in that you reject all metanarratives?

MP: Well, I am suspicious of all metanarratives, especially insofar as they try to be totalizing by defeating all other metanarratives.

RP: Isn't that exactly what the Christian metanarrative does?

MP: No, actually. The true Christian metanarrative is the only one that by its nature cannot be totalizing.

RP: Tell that to the Jews and Muslims slaughtered by the crusaders past and present!

MP: Well, I would say that those so-called Christians who go out and oppress people in the name of Jesus are false Christians because they are doing what is against the Christian metanarrative, which is Jesus-centered.

RP: Just talking about the Christian metanarrative as true is oppressive.

MP: But claiming to know what is and isn't oppressive isn't oppressive?

RP: You keep dodging the main point, which is to liberate the oppressed. You are playing games with words.

MP: Actually, that's what I think you do. But let me continue. I'm postmodern in that I don't believe in totalizing metanarratives. And I acknowledge that all truth claims arise from within a story about reality. I'm a Christian because I explicitly embrace the Christian story as my own and work from within it while at the same time acknowledging that it is not objectively true for all people.

RP: That sounds relativistic to me. But I certainly agree!

MP: No, it's not relativistic. I'm not saying there is no truth or that all metanarratives are equally true. I'm saying that there is no objective truth; by that I mean that no truth claim can be made outside of some story, and stories are not falsifiable or verifiable except from within themselves. Truth is not a function of neutral observation of evidence or of logical deduction from unquestionable and undoubtable foundations. Truth is a function of coherence within a story.

RP: So there's no way to bridge from one story to another to convince a person working out of another story that yours is truer?

MP: Not in the way modernity tried to do that. Modernity created a whole new story that pretended to be objective and the judge of every other story. Objective reason, foundationalism, became the allegedly sole path to truth. Even a lot of Christians bought into that and tried to prove Christianity true by appealing to the modern story of objective facts verified by evidence, as offered up by modernity itself. I'm postmodern because I think evidence itself is largely determined by a story. Each metanarrative decides what is evidence and what isn't.

RP: But what about the bridges between stories? Can people of different stories communicate meaningfully, or are we locked into our language games?

MP: I wouldn't say we're locked into our language games, but at the same time I deny that there is any overarching language game that is neutral and does not arise out of a story-shaped form of life. Christianity is first and foremost a form of life shaped by a story: the Jesus story of God. Secondarily it gives rise to reflection on that story. The moment that happens, a language game appropriate to the story is created. Doctrines are expressions of the culture of the community that lives by the

story of Jesus and expresses itself by means of the language game appropriate to that culture. No overarching story, culture or language game has the right or ability to dominate all others and make them bow to it by bringing their beliefs to its bar of reason for verification. But we can discover common ground with other cultures, communities and language games. Rarely are they so disparate that people cannot find some common ground.

RP: Give an example, please.

MP: Well, questions about God arise from within most story-shaped communities and their traditions. We can try to show that the answers in our story and tradition are better than the answers found in other ones.

RP: Better? In what sense? Doesn't that assume some neutral, objective standard?

MP: No, it doesn't. All I'm saying is that I can try to show a person with a different worldview than mine that my worldview, partial as it is, provides more satisfying answers to life's ultimate questions. I can try to lead that person to see the world "as" what I see it to be. Not by proving it true but by showing a gestalt, or pattern, that better explains life experience. But in the end, if a person switches life views and worldviews, it means a conversion and not just a change of mind about some facts.

RP: I'm sorry, but I just don't get it at all. Your very belief in truth "out there," outside of our own minds, is not postmodern at all. It's actually quite modern. That's what we postmoderns are trying to get away from. I take it that you're a critical realist, someone who believes truth is out there but inaccessible to our minds, right?

MP: Yes, something like that. Except that I believe it is not totally inaccessible. Through revelation, for example, truth can enter into our world and into our minds, though never perfectly or completely.

The article is excerpted from Roger E. Olson's book God in Dispute: "Conversations" among Great Christian Thinkers, just published by Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing. © 2009. Used by permission.