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Sex-Trafficking, Evangelical "Colonialism", and the Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit

January 25, 2013 By [Guest Contributor](#)

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In preparing to teach my students about Jesus' hard saying about the "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" (Mark 3:29) this week, I couldn't help but make the connection to the recent, biz criticism of Evangelical efforts to end the sex-trafficking trade. What's the charge? Well, apparently taking women and children out of the pay-for-rape game smacks of [Evangelical colonialism](#) to some. According to Yvonne Zimmerman, a professor of Christian Ethics, instead focusing on trafficking in *all* of its forms, Evangelicals seem to narrow their concern to sex-trafficking, likely because of their "Protestant" theology of sex and vision of the "sexually pure woman." (Read "evil, Victorian sexual mores that Freud opened our eyes to, and Foucault exposed as forms of social control.") If they weren't so obsessed with restricting sex to their particular norm, they wouldn't be so focused on the prostitution-trade. What they seem to be overlooking is that some of these women might actually *want* to stay in prostitution and so the imposition of our values is, at the very least, problematic. They are assuming an idea of freedom and inadvertently limiting the freedom some of these women would choose for themselves.

Right.

At the front-end, I must say that, yes, trafficking in all of its forms is wrong and ought to be stopped. Evangelicals should definitely expand their focus to labor trafficking and be aware of their own economic interests might pull them away from working for justice in that area. At that point, I find the criticisms helpful, and ones that ought to be thought through carefully by Evangelical leaders in the fight against trafficking. That concession made, I find the rest of the charge silly. I'd argue for it extensively, but Timothy Dalrymple and John Mark Reynolds have already done a [magnificent job of it](#).

So what's the connection between these criticisms and the "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit"? In a nutshell, the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is calling the good work of God evil—imputing the work of God to the devil. The context of Jesus' dark saying is Mark 3:22-30, in a conflict between Jesus and the teachers of the Law, the scribes. Word has gotten out about Jesus' work of healing and exorcising demons, and the teachers of the Law are accusing him of being possessed by the devil.

exorcism, and rolling back the kingdom of darkness with the good of God's reign. The problem he's doing it in ways that don't suit the scribes' particular vision of the coming Kingdom of God. His authority isn't being exercised in the ways approved of by scribal interpretation of the Law. In order to discredit him while still accounting for the obvious power he's wielding and the good he's doing, his critics attribute his Holy Spirit-empowered authority over demonic spirits, to—get this—another demonic spirit! *"And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, 'He is possessed by Beelzebul,' and 'by the prince of demons he casts out the demons.'" (Mk 3:22)*

Jesus moves on to point out the silliness of the charge with a few parables to the effect that instigating a civil war within in his own kingdom isn't a winning strategy. If Satan is going around casting out demons, he's basically shooting himself in the foot. It makes no sense. He moves to paint a picture of his ministry as "binding the strong man", defeating Satan and loosening his grip of human lives and destinies. Jesus' ministry is bringing the kingdom of God, God's good and grace into the world, and he presents it as a battle between two kingdoms—the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Satan, the ruler of darkness. One is about bondage to darkness, to slavery to sin, addiction, shame, and opposition to all that's holy. The other is about grace, healing, freedom from sin, forgiveness, the love of the Father, and all that God intended for human life to be.

If that's not a description of the end of the sex-slave trade, I don't know what is.

And yet, like the scribes with Jesus' original ministry, the critics are attributing the liberating work of the Holy Spirit to a false spirit of "Protestant" purity theology. I don't mean to demonize Elizabeth Zimmerman because, along with the teachers of the law in Jesus' day, she surely means well. This kind of nonsense needs to be identified as the grotesque mockery of truth that it is. Evangelicals working to end the sex-slave trade is a good thing. Thousands of women and children have been taken out of degrading and dehumanizing conditions and brought into healthy, safe, and hopeful environments as the restoration of shalom. Justice for the oppressed is the spirit at work here. Protestant prudery. As Tim Dalrymple summed it up, *"evangelicals are committed to rescuing sex-trafficked not because they disapprove of the sex workers' activities but because they feel compassion for the little girls (and sometimes boys) who are raped for profit. To call this 'colonialism' in another form may make for a passing dissertation but honestly it's the kind of nonsense I fled academia to escape."*

While it is right and good for Evangelicals to expand their focus and work against trafficking and injustice in all of its forms, they have nothing to be ashamed of in the fight against sex-trafficking. If that's "colonialism", then it's the holy colonialism of God at work through his people.

Soli Deo Gloria



[Derek Rishmawy](#) is the Director of College and Young Adult ministries at Trinity United Presbyterian Church in Orange County, CA, where he wrangles college kids for the gospel. (Think non-ordained college pastor.) He is the blessed husband of a very pretty lady named McKenna. He got his B.A. in Philosophy at UCI and his M.A. in Theological Studies (Biblical Studies) at APU. He loves Jesus and more importantly Jesus loves Him. Throw in too many theological tomes, coffee, craft beer, loud music, and a picture (not necessarily a pretty one) starts to emerge.

You can go read his stuff at the *Reformedish* blog, derekzrismawy.com

You can also follow him on Twitter @DZRishmawy and on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/derek.rishmawy>)

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**Morgan Guyton says:**

January 25, 2013 at 1:35 pm

Here's something that needs to be named though. Colonialism has always been morally justified as a means of saving less civilized people from very real, legitimate evils, and it needs to be okay to say that it hasn't always been completely wrong. I'm not going to go Doug Wilson and justify slavery, but we do need to grapple with the fact that the motives of colonialism pre-1950 were not purely diabolical and cynical and the motives that are at play in analogous situations today are not purely benevolent. The 16th century Spaniards were not completely off-base to want to "rescue" New World natives from cultures in which child sacrifice and cannibalism were prominent. We've got to get away from drawing a thick line at some moment in the historical past and saying everyone was just plumb crazy before that and there are no legitimate analogies that can be drawn.

It's wrong to use the word "colonialism" in order to summarily dismiss the anti-trafficking movement, but I'm also uncomfortable dismissing the critique out of hand without knowing the details of Zimmerman's work. It is fair to look at whether there is hidden paternalism and/or cultural chauvinism at play in the structures of different organizations that disempower the victims not in order to say anti-trafficking movement bad (and land an indirect dig on Louie Giglio) but in order to say here are some areas where improvements could be made. If a critique happens along the lines of the book *When Helping Hurts*, that would be useful.

It would also be appropriate (in my view) to question the approach an anti-trafficking organization that operates under a philosophy in tune with John Piper's recently proclaimed position that it's okay for female victims of domestic violence to seek help from the state only if/because they're appropriately *submitting themselves* to the male police officers who intervene on their behalf. If ensuring that the reinforcement of gender "complementarity" at all times were part of the defining philosophy of an anti-trafficking organization, I would have a problem with that (this is purely a hypothetical and not intended to be a side-swipe or anything like that).

What I suspect has occurred is that Zimmerman did legitimate research, which overzealous feminist bloggers appropriated for their own polemical purposes, and then other bloggers made Zimmerman's ideological misappropriation by these feminist bloggers into a straw man for bashing "secular humanist" academia. There is certainly a tendency within the postmodern/gender studies/postcolonial studies milieu to want to reduce and dismiss anything that Western-rooted charity organizations do to whatever -ism seems to fit the best. The question is whether these critiques can be appropriately constructively. I tend to think they can. You've got to filter. It's just like James Cone saying that white people have to become black to be saved; well, no, but there's something worth pondering about the nature of privilege within that ridiculous claim.

The other thing is that we don't have the best track record in the Christian social justice movement of actually responding to the needs on the ground rather than projecting our own need to be heroes onto whatever situation exists (c.f. Kony, Darfur, etc). Causes are shaped all the time by the needs of college kids and activists to feel special rather than the needs of the people who are supposedly being served. I don't have enough information to assess whether this is a case of a conventional critique of paternalistic aid work being misapplied or a legitimate critique being misappropriated.

I can't call you out for leveling the blasphemy of the holy spirit charge, because I just wrote a blog saying that Mark Driscoll's attention-getting tweets are an example of Romans 9:22 in action. What we do need to move towards is a non-dismissive form of critique and a way of responding to even ridiculous statements that advances constructive conversation rather than shaming. I'm actually not saying that as a critique of what you've written here because you're actually a lot better at constructive, irenic discourse than I am. Keep wrestling and seeking the truth. It's made a huge difference in my life. Soli Deo Gloria.



Derek Rishmawy says:
January 25, 2013 at 2:20 pm

@Morgan – Look at us! We've totally switched roles here. I told you it was "Guytonese." :)

You wrote:

"It's wrong to use the word "colonialism" in order to summarily dismiss the anti-trafficking movement, but I'm also uncomfortable dismissing the critique out of hand without knowing the details of Zimmerman's work. It is fair to look at whether there is hidden paternalism and/or cultural chauvinism at play in the structures of different organizations that disempower the victims not in order to say anti-trafficking movement bad (and land an indirect dig on Louie Giglio) but in order to say here are some areas where improvements could be made. If a critique happens along the lines of the book When Helping Hurts, that would be useful."

Okay, I can see that.

"It would also be appropriate (in my view) to question the approach an anti-trafficking organization that operates under a philosophy in tune with John Piper's recently proclaimed position that it's okay for female victims of domestic violence to seek help from the state only if/because they're appropriately *submitting themselves* to the male police officers who intervene on their behalf. If ensuring that the reinforcement of gender "complementarity" at all times were part of the defining philosophy of an anti-trafficking organization, I would have a problem with that (this is purely a hypothetical and not intended to be a side-swipe or anything like that)."

Kind of a Red Herring but you totally acknowledge that so...call it a wash.

"The question is whether these critiques can be appropriately constructively. I tend to think they can. You've got to filter. It's just like James Cone saying that white people have to become black to be saved; well, no, but there's something worth pondering about the nature of privilege within that ridiculous claim."

And like I said, I think there is some helpful critique that Zimmerman's research probably delivers. We ought to broaden our focus and see whether the right emotional appeal of sex-trafficking maybe causes us to ignore the tragedy of labor-trafficking. What I think needs to be named is that "tendency within the postmodern/gender studies/postcolonial studies milieu to want to reduce and dismiss anything that Western-rooted charity organizations do to whatever -ism seems to fit the best." That turns into the sort of blind opposition of the scribes and the Pharisees that names the good work of justice as only so much prudery parading itself as charity.

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