

## **Convictional Theology in East and West Twenty Years Ago and Now: Dr Lina Toth in Conversation with Dr Parush R. Parushev**

***Lina Toth: First of all, Parush, can you introduce yourself, for the readers who may be new to JEBS?***

Parush R. Parushev: I am a native of Sofia, Bulgaria, and the first part of my life was spent as a scientist. I had gained a BS/MS and PhD (Science) from Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) State University of Information Technologies, Mechanics and Optics, in what then was the Soviet Union. I became a scientific researcher, senior research fellow and finally the head of a laboratory at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences as well as a lecturer, and docent, at the University of Sofia in the field of applied mechanics and robotics. In the estimation of others, I was considered to be a promising researcher in the field of hard science.

***I have seen some of the patents you secured with your colleagues — what an impressive and exciting career path it would seem to be! How then did you leave it to become a theologian?***

Amongst various invitations to international gatherings of scientists and academicians in the early 1980s, there was one to Krakow, Poland. It happened to coincide with the time of the graduation of Roman Catholic priests and theologians of the Theological Faculty of the local (and Poland's oldest) University. Countless people had gathered for the occasion, many travelling on foot from the most distant parts of Poland in the chilly winter on this yearly pilgrimage to Krakow, as the utmost profession of their faith. Up to that point, my life was embedded in the experience of three generations of communists-by-conviction, and seemingly guided solely by rationality and reason. But there, in Krakow, I was forced to realise that there were people — including some of my academic colleagues — who did not uphold the communist idea and who professed a genuine, wholehearted belief in a very different reality. It was not easy to ignore their witness.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On the details of this encounter with the believing community in Poland and its implications, see Parush R. Parushev, 'Faith That Matters in the Culture of Ghosts', in *Stories of Emergence: Moving from Absolute to Authentic*, ed. by Mike Yakonelli (Grand Rapids: Emergent YS with Zondervan, 2003), pp. 204–18.

This vibrant and active Catholic community confronted me with a different way of life, a way more meaningful and morally appealing than that of the rest of the Polish Communist society or other Communist societies that I knew or lived in. It was a prime example of counter-cultural, and at the same time contextual, corporate witness against the grain of the dominant public ideology.

***How did you come into contact with the Baptists — a much less numerous, and much more secluded, expression of Christian tradition in Eastern Europe?***

I had some questions after I started getting to know the Polish Catholic Church more closely. My primary concern was with its multi-levelled hierarchical structure. It was quite similar to the structures of the ruling Communist parties in Eastern Europe, which I guess were originally copied from the (Orthodox) ecclesiastical institutions. I was asking myself whether such a strict top-down structure could avoid the seduction to power, and whether such power could be redeemed to become an agent of liberation. Was there a meaningful communal way of life of the faithful, I asked, that would be 'flat' in structure?

So it was the corporate witness of the Polish believers that planted the seeds, but such witness, as important as it was, was not enough, at least for me. The plant of faith in me started to grow under the impact of a personal witness which made the biblical story alive and tangible in terms of my immediate life-experience. Faith and mission must always have a personal witnessing face. In my case it was a Bulgarian woman by the name of Fikija Apostolova. She was living out her beliefs against the odds in a way that was bringing new meaning in her life, and making a difference in the lives of those around her. Through her witness I discovered the church not as a structure or institution, but as a community of shared life. In my case, it was a Baptist community.

However, even the faithful witness of a genuine believer, added to the credibility of the visible presence of a community of faith, is still not enough for the conversion process. The pilgrimage of faith is guided by a series of signposts by which corporate and personal witness mark the process of conversion. The mysterious personal experience of the power of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God imparts the new that comes in Christ in the believer's heart and mind — the *metanoia*, or conversion — and that became

my experience too.<sup>2</sup> This enables the next steps in the Christian pilgrim's journey: the continuous transformation and growing in Christ-likeness, discipleship and witness. The repeating cycle of preparation for mission marked by personal and corporate witness to the culture, through conversion and the nurturing of disciples, to maturing them for socially relevant witnessing is at the core of Christian mission, as I understand it.<sup>3</sup>

***In the very way you describe your story, I also hear the echoes of the work of James Wm McClendon — a theologian who has been highly significant for your own theological journey, but also, especially through yourself, for IBTS and IBTSC as a whole. As a way of reflecting on Christian ethics, McClendon suggests a metaphor of three strands. These three are the bodily strand, or personal life; the strand of community, or the corporate embodiment of life; and the strand of the anastatic, or resurrection ethics which colours and aligns the other two strands with the vision of the newness of life through Christ.<sup>4</sup> Here you apply the 'strand metaphor' to the experience of your own conversion. How did you come to study theology, and to be attracted to McClendon's theology?***

As I (slowly) turned from a Communist Party Secretary and an atheist to a Christian believer and a member of a Baptist church in Bulgaria, it led me to gaining an MDiv from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary of Kentucky (SBTS), and a PhD (Theology) from Fuller Theological Seminary, (California), as well as ordination into Baptist ministry. I am sure that it was by God's provision that on this journey I have had several outstanding theological guides. I met first Glen Stassen (an ethicist) in SBTS. He introduced me to the work of Jim McClendon (a theologian) and later to that

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<sup>2</sup> For some testimonies of the critical role of the examination of one's nominal or inherited convictions confronted by authentic Christian living and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, see Yakonelli, *Stories of Emergence* 2003, passim.

<sup>3</sup> See Parush R. Parushev, 'Witness, Worship and Presence: On the Integrity of Mission in Contemporary Europe', *Mission Studies*, 24, no. 2 (2007): 305–332, and Parush R. Parushev and Lina Andronoviene, 'McClendon's Concept of Mission as Witness', in *Anabaptism and Mission*, ed. by Wilbert R. Shenk and Peter F. Penner (Erlangen, Germany: Neufeld Verlag Schwartzenfeld, 2007), pp. 247–64. For a somewhat similar holistic paradigm in the theology of mission, cf. Bernhard Ott, *Beyond Fragmentation: Integrating Mission and Theological Education; A Critical Assessment of some Recent Developments in Evangelical Theological Education* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Regnum Books International with Paternoster, 2001), pp. 103–149.

<sup>4</sup> James Wm McClendon Jr, *Systematic Theology: Ethics, Volume I*, rev. edn. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002; originally published 1986), passim; James Wm McClendon Jr, *Doctrine: Systematic Theology, Volume II* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 109. Parush Parushev himself often employs the term 'visionary' to describe the third strand of human life which has to do with the vision 'of construing the world according to [...] [the] best aspirations' of its holders. (Parush R. Parushev, 'Convictions and the Shape of Moral Reasoning', in *Ethical Thinking at the Crossroads of European Reasoning*, ed. by Parush R. Parushev, Ovidiu Creangă and Brian Brock (Prague: International Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007), p. 37.)

of Nancey Murphy (a philosopher). I studied with all of them and they also guided my doctoral studies as a team. These world-class thinkers became my friends and shaped not only my way of thinking but, importantly, my way of being a thinking *Christian*. All three of them believed in a community that lives out its faith corporately, and reflects on it and passes it on in words, songs and deeds to the next generation of the disciples of Christ. This holistic theological view reflected my own experience of Eastern European baptistic communities. McClendon's theology of convictions became for me the primary vehicle of engaging with the theology of a faith community and of a believer.

***Can you tell us about your involvement with IBTS and IBTSC, and what you are doing now?***

From 2000 to 2014, my life was based at the International Baptist Theological Seminary of the European Baptist Federation, in Prague, the Czech Republic, and for a few more years, at the International Baptist Theological Study Centre in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, as the institution relocated and refocused. There I served as a senior lecturer (2000–2016), Academic Dean (2002–2013) and the Rector/Director of IBTS in Prague (2013–2016).

Whilst I am still involved in the work of IBTSC as a senior research fellow and doctoral supervisor, I am once again based in Bulgaria. I serve as the Rector of the St. Trivellius Higher Theological Institute in Sofia, and as Associated Director for Academic Development of the Scholars' Programme of the Langham Partners International.

***You were instrumental in the birth of this very journal. Tell us a little bit of that story.***

When I started working at IBTS, I was asked what, given my previous academic experience, I could contribute to the development of the institution. I suggested that for us to have credibility as a European Baptist research and higher educational institution, we should have a journal. This idea had already been in the minds of Keith Jones (the then Rector) and Ian Randall (the then Academic Dean), so very quickly we started to work on launching the new journal which was named the *Journal of European Baptist Studies*. The publication showcased each of the main four academic fields of IBTS, with articles in the area of Biblical Studies, Baptist and Anabaptist history,

Contextual Missiology and eventually Applied Theology — at that time the newest of the four MTh programmes in the making.

***The MTh in Applied Theology was launched in 2001, with you serving as the director (or course leader). I remember this well, as I was a student in that first cohort, and the programme was absolutely formative for my own development as a theological thinker.***

IBTS was looking for an umbrella programme that would include aspects of Christian pedagogy, spirituality and homiletics. I knew I wanted to add a module on Church and Social Ethics. We also supplemented pedagogy with leadership, and spirituality with discipleship. I also remember conversing about this new programme with Jim McClendon. He was just about to publish his third volume, *Witness*.<sup>5</sup> Under Jim's influence, I was particularly interested in the relationship between theology and culture. That's how the key element of the programme emerged, in the shape of the module then called Church in Contemporary Society. He seemed to be very happy with this idea.

***So, 'applied', but not 'systematic', theology?***

That was precisely the question asked by our external examiner during the process of validating the programme. Yet in my view, systematic theology is a grandiose term without much content. The way I put it, what passes for systematic theology is simply systematically organised subjectivity. In my understanding, for Baptists, or baptistic communities, it is much more important to explore what is actually believed (rather than simply claimed to be believed), and why (including the way these beliefs may be shaped and coloured by the culture-at-large).

***In other words, McClendon's convictional theology?***

Indeed. I started pondering the issue of convictions and convictional theologies relatively early in my theological studies, whilst taking a course with Glen Stassen in the Southern Baptist Seminary on Christian ethics. McClendon's *Ethics* was one of the textbooks. What impressed me first of

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<sup>5</sup> James Wm McClendon Jr, with Nancey Murphy, *Witness: Systematic Theology*, Vol 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000).

all was the carefully crafted way Jim presented his thoughts in that volume by using the structure of 3x3x3...

***...Of course, most of your students at IBTS will remember your mathematical take on the structure, and your attempts to convince them to follow 3x3x3, especially for their doctoral projects!***

Quite so! But beyond my being impressed by structural beauty, it struck me how much sense *Ethics*, as well as *Doctrine*, which McClendon was presenting to us at the time, made, especially to those of us who came from faith communities that were not saturated by a great deal of systematic theological thinking, but where the primary source of theological thinking was the life stories of ‘saints’ (regardless of whether we used the language of saints or not). For instance, for us as Bulgarian Baptists, our faith had been nourished by such books as Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Encountering McClendon, it dawned on me how dissenting communities in Bulgaria or elsewhere were passing on their theological heritage through such stories.

***And hymns and songs — which were also stories of a kind.***<sup>6</sup>

Yes, indeed. In contrast to the recommendation attributed to Barth (the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other), these communities hold the Bible in one hand and the hymnal (or its equivalent) in the other.

However, my real immersion in convictional theology came when I started my studies with McClendon himself, by that time at Fuller Theological Seminary. In so many ways McClendon was ahead of the trend, paving the way for non-foundational theologising.<sup>7</sup> As Curtis Freeman notes, convictional theologising became more widespread in different educational centres in the US and in Europe,<sup>8</sup> including the Vrije Universiteit and the Chair of Convictional Theologies there. There are a number of younger scholars who have developed and are developing this line of thought.

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<sup>6</sup> Lina Andronoviene, ‘As Songs Turn into Life and Life into Songs: On the First-Order Theology of Baptist Hymnody’, in *Currents in Baptist Theology of Worship*, ed. by Keith G. Jones and Parush R. Parushev (Prague: International Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007), pp. 129–141.

<sup>7</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy, and Mark Nation, eds., *Theology without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Curtis Freeman, ‘A Theology for Radical Believers and Other Baptists’, introduction to James Wm McClendon Jr, *Systematic Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012).

***The first issue of the first volume of JEBS included your article entitled ‘East and West: A Theological Conversation’.<sup>9</sup> It is a fascinating reminder of the interplay of culture and theology we have already noted, and particularly, the differences, as you saw them at the time, between the way Baptists in the East and the West thought about and expressed their theology. So, what is this ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ way of thinking?***

This article was written *ad hoc*, upon the encouragement of the then *JEBS* editor, Ian Randall. He had heard me share that, in my understanding, there were two distinctly different ways of theologising. One way based on logic and analysis, representing the traditional Anglo-American approach to critical thinking. I have been trained in it myself both as a scientist and as a theologian. The other way was much more narrative-dependent, and I could observe it in Eastern European churches as well as in Eastern European students who struggled to express their ideas in a way that would be appreciated by their (Western) markers and examiners. Hence ‘East’ and ‘West’, or ‘integrative’ and ‘differential’ thinking, and my argument that there was a need for both.

***What I found particularly helpful was your observation that whilst the differential theological discourse is concerned with the question of ‘what’ is being said, paying attention to integrative thinking helps us understand the ‘why’ — that is, where the person is coming from and what story, or stories, they are living in. Paying attention to the latter is just as significant in church life as it is in academic theological discourse if we are to help each other to identify, interpret and transform our own convictions.***

Indeed. I started thinking about these two types of theological discourse whilst working on my own doctoral dissertation and considering different methodological issues involved in theological argumentation. I have greatly benefited from Nancey Murphy’s<sup>10</sup> appropriation of Stephen Toulmin’s work on the analysis of the uses of arguments in philosophy and science,<sup>11</sup> and particularly her work on a theological argument as a comprehensive logical structure comprising different elements of logical thinking: grounds, claims, warrants, backings, rebuttals and qualifiers. I also looked at Glen Stassen’s dimensions of moral reasoning in terms of how our way of

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<sup>9</sup> Parush R. Parushev, ‘East and West: A theological conversation’, *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 1, no. 1 (2000): 31–44.

<sup>10</sup> Nancey Murphy, *Reasoning and Rhetoric in Religion* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958 and 1993); and Stephen Toulmin, Richard Rieke and Allen Janik, *An Introduction to Reasoning* (New York: Macmillan, 1978).

perceiving reality, our trust, our loyalties, interests and ground-of-meaning beliefs guide our ethical thinking. For him all these dimensions of reasoning are as important as the rational aspect.<sup>12</sup> I noticed that it really did not differ from McClendon's insistence that what guides our lives is our deep-seated, if not easily verbalised, convictions in all three strands of our theological and ethical thinking.<sup>13</sup> So all these amalgamated in presenting my perspective on the way our minds work when we address theological and ethical issues, and looking at the ways in which convictions really colour our way of argumentation — how we use texts to build on and present our arguments.<sup>14</sup>

***Your consideration of these two different 'mental languages,' as you called them, also served as an impetus for developing a new module at IBTS on Critical Thinking which sought to recognise, affirm and develop these two distinct ways of theological reasoning.***

The module certainly helped students, especially those coming from Eastern Europe, to organise their writing and become more fluent in the Anglo-American theological reasoning and rhetoric. At the same time, they started to use their own context, life stories and images within that framework more confidently. This is where such notions as convictional and embodied theology were particularly helpful. They did not lose some of the excitement of the topics arising out of their own life stories, but were able to present them, eventually, in a form that would be appreciated by more analytically inclined readers.

***How did your own thinking about convictional theology and these different ways of thinking continue to develop during your years at IBTS?***

In the module and in my later thinking I moved away from the categories of 'differential' and 'integrative'. Instead I frame it as two levels of critical

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<sup>12</sup> Glen H. Stassen, 'Critical Variables in Christian Social Ethics', in *Issues in Christian Ethics: A Festschrift honoring Dr. Henlee Barnette*, ed. by Paul D. Simmons (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1980), pp. 57–76.

<sup>13</sup> Parush R. Parushev, 'Walking in the Dawn of the Light: On Salvation Ethics of the Ecclesial Communities in Orthodox Tradition from a Radical Reformation Perspective' (doctoral dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, School of Theology, 2007), p. 112 and Chapter 4 passim. Similar observation was made by Parush's colleague Michael Lyndsey Westmoreland-White earlier in 'Incarnational Discipleship: The Ethics of Clarence Jordan, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Dorothy Day' (doctoral dissertation, SBTS, 1995), chapter 1, n. 97.

<sup>14</sup> On a somewhat similar way of thinking, although in a different key, see Marlene Enns, 'Towards a Theoretical Model of Mutuality and its Implication for Intercultural Theological Education: Holistic and Analytical Cognition' (doctoral dissertation, Trinity International University, Deerfield, IL., 2003).



analysis of an argument — the rational logical superstructure of intellectual reasoning which is guided by and grounded in the author’s convictions. Most critical here was my encounter and work with yourself and David McMillan, two of my PhD students who defended their theses with distinction. You, Lina, asked me some important questions: How might convictional theology help our discourse on a ‘good’ or ‘happy’, or ‘fulfilled’ life?<sup>15</sup> What does friendship mean in terms of how we communicate with ‘friends’ and ‘foes’?<sup>16</sup> I remember us discussing the substantial overlapping of convictional sets in the context of friendship, and the idea that primary disagreements typically arise from the grounds of ultimate convictions.<sup>17</sup> Of course, our loyalties and interests also matter, but the reason why we have different loyalties and interests is because we hold to different visions of the meaning of life. So the ‘foes’, or those we strongly disagree with, are those with a very different understanding of the meaning of life and how good life is guided by visionary, inspirational impulses.

Then came my very substantial encounter with David McMillan, who raised a key question: what happens when we are in a conflict situation? How do we reconcile, or deal with, convictional differences when both sides appeal to the same source of authority?<sup>18</sup> His primary concern of the time was, how do we use the source of inspirational thinking such as Christian Scriptures, in the conflict situation of Northern Ireland, when we seemingly hold one and the same source of religious inspiration, but have radically different views on how they work out in our lives. This question became the focus of his dissertation, and I consider it one of the most significant contributions to convictional theology.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Lina Andronoviene, ‘Struggling with Female Happiness: God’s Will and God’s Blessing in Primary Evangelical Theology’, in *Grounded in Grace: Essays to Honour Ian M. Randall*, ed. by Pieter J. Lalleman, Peter J. Morden and Anthony Cross, Centre for Baptist History and Heritage Series (Oxford: Regent’s Park College: 2013), pp. 277–291; *Transforming the Struggles of Tamars: Single Women and Baptist Communities* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Lina Andronoviene, ‘“I have Called You Friends”’: On a Theology of Friendship’, in *Ethical Thinking at the Crossroads of European Reasoning*, ed. by Parush R. Parushev, Ovidiu Creanga, Brian Brock (Prague: International Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007), pp. 115–129; ‘From the Love of Friends to the Love of Strangers: Reflections on Friendship and Discipleship’, *Baptistic Theologies*, 7, no. 2 (2015): 73–87.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Patterns of Academic Reasoning’, in *Academic Reasoning, Research and Writing in Religious Studies: A Concise Handbook*, ed. by Parush R. Parushev, Rollin G. Grams and Lina Andronovienė, 2nd edn, revised and enlarged (Prague: International Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), pp. 5–19; Lina Andronovienė, ‘“I have Called You Friends”’, p. 128.

<sup>18</sup> David McMillan, ‘McClendon/McClendonism: Methodology or Ideology?’ *Baptistic Theologies*, 3, no. 1 (2011): 45–58; ‘Willem Zuurdeeg and the Concept of Convictional Theology’, *Baptistic Theologies*, 6, no. 1 (2014): 72–81; ‘Discipleship as Deconstruction’, *Baptistic Theologies*, 7, no. 2 (2015), 117–131.

<sup>19</sup> David McMillan, ‘Convictions, Conflict and Moral Reasoning: The Contribution of the Concept of Convictions in Understanding Moral Reasoning in the Context of Conflict, Illustrated by a Case Study of Four Groups of Christians in Northern Ireland’ (doctoral thesis, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2019).

***Coming back to your article on theological discourse in ‘East and West’, has your thinking changed since, given the break-neck speed of cultural change over these past twenty years, as well as the impact of Western-funded initiatives in the European East?***

Twenty years may not be enough for a monumental change. However, our context in Eastern Europe has indeed very rapidly become open to the ideas and mission work of various Western theological networks. With them, for good or for bad, came a much more Western way of presenting ideas and approaching the biblical text. Indeed, younger theologians who have graduated from West-based or Western-funded schools have appropriated a rather different hermeneutical approach, and that has brought a clash of traditions of reading and understanding the Bible, and a conflict between a ‘literal’ approach, so to speak, and the more ‘scholarly’ or rational way of handling the biblical text.

The second influence was through translated material. Here again we have mixed impact on traditional narrative-embedded ways of theologising. Saying that, the very fact that there were resources made available, and to a wider circle of people, provided for a broader platform to express various views, especially through newly established theological journals. In any case, neither of these different ways of thinking have won the day yet in Eastern European evangelical thinking.

So, there is no sharp divide. There are arguments in the biblical text and in theological treatises, no doubt about that. On the other hand, stories matter — both in the East and in the West. This is our common ground. The richness of the narrative provides a venue to inquire into the convictions of the author, and they continue to be the primary vehicle on the level of grassroots theological thinking and expression. The real challenge is, can we have these two ways of thinking complementing each other, rather than clashing. What is needed is appreciation for convictions in the West, and for logical thinking in the East. As Father Dumitru Stăniloae notes encouragingly, we may see them as gifts to be exchanged ‘for the sake of the other’.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, ‘The Holy Spirit and the Sobornicity of the Church’, in *Theology and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 54.