



Season 9: Episode 9 | Rosalee Velloso Ewell | How Does Our Diversity Bring Scripture Alive?

Andrew Stirling: I am delighted to be in conversation with Dr. Rosalie Veloso-Ewell. She is the Director of Church Relations of the United Bible Societies. And Rosalie has a rich and a diverse background, from being born in Brazil to now living in the United Kingdom and receiving a PhD from Duke University in the United States, and a Master of Arts from Fuller Seminary in the United States.

She is also the Principal of Redcliffe College in the UK, and she was the New Testament Editor of the Latin America Bible Commentary. So, we are privileged to have Rosalie with us, and to hear what she has to say about her life, about Biblical engagement, and about her own personal story. So, Rosalie, welcome to our podcast.

Dr. Rosalie Veloso-Ewell: Thank you.

Andrew Stirling: As I mentioned, you've had a rich and a diverse background, from your roots in Brazil to now living in the UK, and you've traversed the globe in the service of the Lord. How did you, though, personally come to faith? And who were the greatest influences in helping this happen?

Dr. Rosalie Veloso-Ewell: Well, I was fortunate, because my brother and I grew up in a Christian home, with parents who, from an early age, read to us Bible stories.

And so, we grew up in the church, and I remember thinking, do I have one particular moment when I didn't know about Christ? And I honestly can't say I do, because from an early age, the church, and the stories of the Bible, and the person of Jesus has always been there. But in some

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ways, I think I was always attracted to geography. And as soon as I could read maps, I was determined to find the Garden of Eden.

And so, I had the atlases all out there, trying to figure it out. I couldn't, you know, Tigris and Euphrates rivers, but there aren't too many other hints there. But I remember falling in love with studying the Scriptures.

And I think through that, I was able, with my parents and close friends in church and elsewhere, my grandparents, just deepening the faith and growing in the organic ups and downs way of the Christian life.

Andrew Stirling: And I mean, this occurred in Brazil, I'm assuming?

Dr. Rosalie Velloso-Ewell: Yes, Sao Paulo.

Andrew Stirling: And so, what was the religious environment like, though, that you grew up in? I mean, what kind of denominational affiliations, you know, what sort of tradition did all this happen in?

Dr. Rosalie Velloso-Ewell: Well, mostly when I was a child, Brazil was and still is a majority Catholic country.

I was very involved in the Baptist tradition as a child, partly through my parents' work, because my father was a pastor. And so that was the dominant tradition. But we were very involved in what today we would call ecumenical work.

We didn't use that term back then. We were just, we just had friends in other churches, in the Catholic Church, in the Presbyterian Church. So, youth groups and things like that were always quite mixed.

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My school, Brazilian German school that I went to, offered First Communion classes, because that was pretty standard in the 70s, 80s. So yeah, it was quite a mixed denominational background. What we didn't have much of in interaction was people of other faiths.

Andrew Stirling: That would explain why you move so freely in an environment like the United Bible Society, where you can float so easily amongst different traditions. It was inculcated very early on then in your personal formation.

Dr. Rosalie Velloso-Ewell: Yes, yes, I think so. And I still remember my father, he always talked about how the label that you wear really doesn't exist in heaven or in Christ's kingdom. There are no such labels. And so, what does it mean to take Christ seriously? And as I grew older, one of the big challenges and all that was seeing numerically the growth of Christianity in my country, in Brazil, and parallel to that, the growth of corruption and urban violence.

And you're thinking, if the number of Christians is growing, then what's wrong with this picture? Because some other not-so-great things are also growing. So maybe we need to look again at what does our discipleship look like and what does it mean to take Christ seriously in all areas of our life? Economics, different areas of morality and politics and everything.

Andrew Stirling: An interesting upbringing.

Look, you're a scholar. You hold a doctorate from Duke University. You've written extensively on the place of the Bible in the world and its importance.

How has your, though, academic background, which clearly has been superb, helped you develop your love for the Bible? There are sometimes I hear, Rosalie, that the more people get engaged with the Bible, the less they believe in its truth, or they question its authenticity and its

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origins and so on. Others, however, find that it, in fact, gives them a greater sense of confidence in the Scriptures in knowing more about it. How has it affected you personally?

Dr. Rosalie Velloso-Ewell: Well, I didn't set out to study theology or Biblical studies, for that matter.

I was actually very interested in journalism. I wanted to be the next *Christiane Amanpour*. That's what I wanted to be in war zones and do stuff like that.

And so, I was initially studying journalism in the United States during the end of the dictatorship in Brazil. And university systems, it was all kind of a mess in Brazil. And because I have dual citizenship, it was easy to go to the States because part of my mother's family is American.

I ended up in the United States, and I was on the journalism track, but I had these extra credits, as they called it, in the States. And I thought, oh, Greek, that looks interesting. I'll take Greek, as you do.

I know, right? Anyway, so I took *Koine Greek*, New Testament Greek, as an elective, as they called it, and absolutely fell in love studying the Biblical texts. And then I took Hebrew.

I did a bit of Latin. I had done that in school in Brazil. And so, I thought, you know, this is really interesting.

And my New Testament professors, in particular, were very encouraging and said, you know, we don't have a lot of women doing Biblical studies. You know, you've done great. Why don't you think about shifting? Much to the distress, maybe, I'm not sure, of the journalism department.

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So, I ended up shifting to theology and Biblical studies. And so, in some ways, I didn't come to it as an academic. It was accidental, one of God's good accidents, that I came to this deeper study of the Scriptures and ended up doing the master's and then doing the PhD.

I can't say that the academy enriched my reading of Scripture. It gave me tools and skills to study. But what I did learn, or what I was exposed to, was reading these texts with people who were very different from me.

And that's what I also get in the United Bible Societies, is that the joy of reading Scripture and seeing it through the eyes of another. I did that for the PhD. And I still find that as one of the most valuable and enriching experiences of studying.

So, the academy gave me the tools, and it was a great place. Duke was a great place to study, and I had wonderful professors. But it's still a bit remote from, there's a whole wide world out there.

Andrew Stirling: Yes.

Dr. Rosalie Veloso-Ewell: Outside of the academy. And sometimes academics forget that.

Andrew Stirling: We preachers keep saying that all the time, by the way.

Dr. Rosalie Veloso-Ewell: Exactly. But I am very grateful for those experiences and for what I learned.

Andrew Stirling: There was a very helpful book published by the UBS, by the United Bible Societies, called *Your Word is Truth*. And *Your Word is Truth*, for those who aren't familiar with it, is basically people of different denominations explaining how their traditions read the Bible.

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And you did a section on evangelicals reading the Bible. And you said this, and I'm quoting you here, Rosalie: *"The importance of the Bible and admission in evangelical theology points to the belief that God has called all Christians to be witnesses to Jesus, and that such a witness must always be exercised and practiced in Christlikeness."* Now, you've already touched on that a little bit where you talked about sort of the influence of faith in the whole of life and the disparity sometimes between people who confess their faith and then social problems and so on. But what does Christlikeness and its witness look like in our contemporary context?

Dr. Rosalie Velloso-Ewell: I think I must confess I don't remember writing that, but you say I did, so hey. But I think our contexts are all very different. And one of the things that I think Christlikeness looks like is the diversity of the body of Christ and the church.

I think when we read the Scriptures, let's take the book of Acts, for example, when we read the Scriptures, we see the struggle of those early Christians. We see the struggle of the disciples figuring out what it means to be like Christ in Jerusalem, in Corinth, in Philippi, wherever, and working out that Christ life. And they needed one another because we all have blind spots.

And that's what I mean about the diversity of living it out in the body of Christ, because we all have our blind spots and our weaknesses. And they're blind spots, so we can't see them. So, we need someone else to point them out to us.

And, you know, Peter needed Paul to say, hey, come on. That's not really what we had talked about before. And Paul needed Barnabas to help him out in some things.

So, we all, we need one another. And I think that that's how we grow in Christlikeness. And one of the challenges of contemporary society, certainly in Western cultures, is that tendency towards individualism that then keeps you from being in those spaces where you're challenged to live a full, whole life for Christ.

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How many times do we challenge another fellow sister or brother around finances? We don't do that. There's a lot about finances in the New Testament.

Andrew Stirling: A lot.

Dr. Rosalie Veloso-Ewell: A lot. Yeah.

Andrew Stirling: Jesus wasn't shy about making his point, though, was he? No, he wasn't.

Dr. Rosalie Veloso-Ewell: No, not at all. And so, I think, you know, it's trying to recover what does that look like today around all sorts of issues. In Brazil, have you been to Brazil?

Andrew Stirling: No, no. I know, a great weakness of mine. I'm sorry. Well, I should, shouldn't I, really? Yeah, as the football fan that I am, I really should. I know, I know.

Dr. Rosalie Veloso-Ewell: But as an example, not a football example. In Brazil, one of the main, it's not really a national dish, it's just what we're known for, is this barbecue.

It's called a *churrasco*. And it's a terrible thing if you're a vegetarian. It's this barbecue type thing where they bring out different pieces of meat on huge skewers.

And yeah, it's just this massive meal. In Brazil, when you're at a *churrasco*, you don't think twice about where your meat has come from. That's not an issue that's dividing churches or families.

It was a real problem in Corinth. Where the meat came from mattered. It was dividing communities, dividing families, splitting the church, so to speak.

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We need to think about the issues that we have today just as seriously as Paul and the Corinthians were wrestling with them in their day. In Brazil, you don't worry about meat. But we have other issues that we need to take just as seriously, just as Biblically.

Paul's writing to Gentiles, but if you were to take a pair of scissors and cut out the Old Testament quotes, you would have lots of holes in your pages of the Bible. So, he's wrestling with the Scriptures, getting the churches to wrestle with the Scriptures that were mostly unfamiliar to those Gentiles. How can we faithfully do that today with the issues that matter, that matter for our witness, that matter for our lives in all sorts of contexts of our world?

Andrew Stirling: It's the amazing thing about our faith.

We talk about being in a highly pluralistic world right now, with the movements of people and cultures running into each other and sometimes in a collision. Yet our faith has its very foundations in a highly pluralistic world that was sometimes very segmented and very judgmental and violent. Our roots are in that, Rosalie, right.

So, the Scriptures has something to say to a pluralist society and has something to say to societies regardless of their diversity, and it has something profound to say. In your capacity as Director of Church Relations, you encounter many ecclesiastical traditions. So how do you and the UBS seek to be supportive of those various traditions, respecting them and their places, and is there a common theme that you find running through the diversity of these traditions?

Dr. Rosalie Veloso-Ewell: The common theme in the sense of our work as the United Bible Societies is, of course, the Bible.

So, I wouldn't think of the Bible as a theme, but the Bible is certainly what the churches, the different traditions have in common. A previous colleague used to say, you know, *the Bible brings us together so long as we keep it closed*. And there might be some truth to that, but I

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think it's also an opportunity for us to learn from one another, and that's one of the unique gifts that the UBS brings to the broader field of Bible translation and engagement, publishing.

There's a lot of other groups out there doing important work in translation, but in our DNA is what in the UBS language we call interconfessional, which means we work with all Christian traditions in our contexts. So whatever country it is, the National Bible Societies are independent, but we're all part of the same fellowship. And within the fellowship, we are very intentionally interconfessional, working with all the church traditions.

And because of that, again, it gets to reading Scripture with someone who's very different. So if you're from a Protestant church in Western Europe and you're at a UBS meeting and you're reading Scripture with an Orthodox from Syria, you read Acts with someone from the Coptic church in Egypt or the Orthodox from Syria or Iran, Iraq, those Scriptures come alive in ways that they really wouldn't if you were just in your Protestant church in Western Europe. And that's such a gift.

And I think that the way the Scriptures come alive when different traditions come together, there are differences. Differences in interpretation, in readings. That's not necessarily a bad thing.

There's always something new to learn from the Scriptures.

Andrew Stirling: And even in my participation in this conference the last few days, I mean, I've become acutely aware of the respect that people have for their various traditions and the richness and the diversity that they bring to it. Translation, as we know, is a major part of the work of Bible Societies and it's such a big part of the mission.

How do you see it developing in the world we're in?

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The thing that has staggered me is how many, in fact, indigenous languages need to be translated in so many different countries. I had somebody say to me, well, Andrew, surely, haven't we done enough translations? I mean, all the major languages are being covered and why are you still engaged in something of this magnitude? And why is it so important without any awareness of just how many, indeed, languages there are? What's your sense of that challenge? And how does one kind of select which of those languages are to be translated?

Dr. Rosalie Velloso-Ewell: Well, I could tell you how we do it in the Bible Societies. So, I learned quite recently about, let's just take one region, Asia, which is the biggest region, both by population and by diversity of languages.

So, in Asia, you've got hundreds of languages that don't have the Bible in that language. And we're not talking a few thousand people per language group. We're talking millions.

This is Asia. So big numbers of people behind a language that none of us have ever even heard of. So, part of the translation work, and translation work involves the text, the written text, but not necessarily, because some languages don't even have a written script, right? So, part of the work of the Bible Societies working in collaboration with other organizations is around translation, around script design, around literacy.

And translation isn't just about getting the text into that language. It's about the importance of that culture, the importance of the different traditions that are represented linguistically, you could say. And so, through all of that, it's a justice issue.

Translation is a justice matter. And so that's at the heart of how UBS approaches translations. And yeah, I think there's a lot of work for the future in that area.

Andrew Stirling: Yeah, I do too. Rosalie, you have had a great experience in academic training and were the Principal of Redcliffe College. Young people and their engagement with Scripture,

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how do you see the next generation reading Scripture? And do you see a trend, or do you see changes taking place within next generation, younger people in terms of their engagement with Scripture, seeing its authority or recognizing its importance in their lives? I know that's a general and a broad statement, but as a general theme, how do you see young people engaging with Scriptures today?

Dr. Rosalie Velloso-Ewell: So, two things, I think, about young people and how they might engage with Scripture.

One, on your general point, even in a digital age, young people, and most of us, I suppose, engage with our friends and our peers. And I think if we, if the church, if Bible Societies want to be serious about seeing young people engage more with Scripture, we need to think about those friendship groups and about how we develop relationships and where is the place of the Bible in that. In general, I think a lot of the world's young population is also in places of great conflict, wars, civil wars, other types of violence, poverty.

We can't just get there with the Bible text as the book of James says, you know, just read this text. No, no. So, we need to have, and we had this at Redcliffe, this holistic approach.

How do we help young people or how do young people help one another answer the question when Jesus says to the disciples, *are you also going to abandon me* in the Gospel of John? And Peter says, *where else would we go? You have the words of life*. That full life, as it says elsewhere in the Gospel of John, the fullness of life. And that's what we want young people, old people, everyone to engage with the Scriptures, with The Word of God, the Bible text, but with The Word, The Word Incarnate, The Word made flesh. And I think there's different ways we can do that, but it's an ongoing challenge.

And to be honest, I think recently, certainly since the COVID pandemic, the churches have not been great at that.

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Andrew Stirling: Yeah. It's fascinating.

You should say that about relationships because I was at an event at the University of Toronto a week ago, and I decided to have a coffee at Tim Hortons, which is a coffee shop here in Toronto, and it's all over the country. And there were two young men and it was nine at night. And with their Bibles open reading, and one was explaining to the other what the text was about.

And so, I had to say hello. And so, I walked over to them, and I said, may I just interfere for a moment? I'm just really impressed that you're reading the Scriptures to each other. And the one said to the other, well, actually my friend here is a new Christian.

And he said, I've been a Christian for a while. And I'm trying to explain how the Old Testament is still important for the new, because my friend is very much into the new, but doesn't understand why some of the Old Testament texts are influential in the new. And so, it was a relationship.

It was a conversation over coffee at nine at night. And so, your point is well made. And I think it's in those engagements where things are really important.

Rosalie, as we wind things down a bit, do you have, or is there a favorite text that you have, sort of a life text that you go back to, or are there just too many to recount and that's putting you in an awkward position?

Dr. Rosalie Velloso-Ewell: Yes, and yes. I think recently, partly because of the world events and the things that make it onto the news, the things that don't make it onto the news, but we know are happening and that I hear about from my sisters and brothers across the United Bible Societies fellowship and elsewhere, the words that were read earlier today of Psalm 23 have

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echoed often. And what it means from the comfort of my home in England right now, that's home for me, what does it mean for me to walk through the valley of the shadow of death with my sisters and brothers who are quite literally walking through that? So that's a text that has been on my mind and heart a lot recently.

From an early age, one of the first Bible verses that I learned, I'm going to have to remember it in English though because I learned it in Portuguese, Isaiah 41:13 - *For I, your God, will take you by your right hand.* That always struck me because I'm left-handed, but *for I, your God, will take you by your right hand and will say to you, do not fear for I am with you.*

Not unlike actually the walking through the shadow of death, I suppose, but that verse has always meant a lot to me. And then there are so many from the New Testament as well that it would be a bit hard to choose, but I think Philippians 1:21 was very close to my father's heart, and quite literally because he had a bad heart for most of his life. But having that sense of trust in Christ that's good for this life and the life to come, that it's not about just out over there, the other side, but actually that faith that informs.

And so that verse in Philippians has also been very important. But there's so many.

Andrew Stirling: I know.

Dr. Rosalie Veloso-Ewell: It's a very unfair question.

Andrew Stirling: Cheeky of me, I know, but I just wondered.

What can we as listeners to this podcast pray for, for you? What's on your heart and what would you want us as listeners and as followers to pray for, for you?

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Dr. Rosalie Velloso-Ewell: One of the things that I think we need prayer for, for any of us that work regularly in Christian ministry, in all its diversity, is to keep a humble mind and a heart and mind filled with charity. Because I personally struggle with being sometimes a bit cynical and critical.

And I have been at conferences and events, sometimes church services, where I just think, Lord, I need a bit more grace. I need your patience, your charity, not to be critical because I'm sure there's something for me to learn here as well. That's a prayer to have others pray for me.

But I think for all of us, because there are challenges. And when you're so close to different types of ministries, you also see the mistakes. And we don't want that to lead to cynicism.

And so, I think that's a prayer that we need to keep at the forefront of our work and our lives.

Andrew Stirling: Well Rosalie, those are wonderful words for us all to hear. And I want to thank you for your ministry and the work that you do, and the scope of it, the nature of it, the importance of it, the sheer amount of work involved in it.

And I know that both you and your family must make sacrifices for you to be able to do this. So, on behalf of the Canadian Bible Society, our thanks are to you for your ongoing work, and may God continue to bless you in it.

Dr. Rosalie Velloso-Ewell: Well, thank you. Thank you. Well, the best part of the work is the people I get to work with. So, thank you for having me.