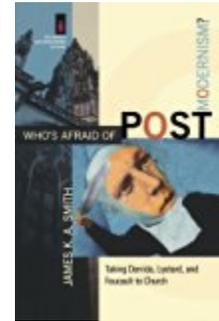


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James K. A. Smith. *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006. 156 pp. \$17.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8010-2918-9.

Reviewed by Pamela Slotte
Published on H-Ideas (September, 2009)
Commissioned by Magdalena Zolkos



What Has Paris to Do with Jerusalem?

The book *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* is based on a lecture series and the first in a series of books that seeks to introduce postmodern theory to a broad audience. It is of introductory character, being intended for students and practitioners of whom no previous philosophical knowledge is expected. For this reason, the book concentrates on general lines of thought in postmodern thinking. More specifically, the book focuses on core ideas found in the writings of three particular thinkers, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Michel Foucault. Hence, the aspect of the pluriform phenomenon of postmodernism that the book engages with is its intellectual home in French philosophy. It seeks to unpack ideas encountered at the heart of postmodernism as an intellectual movement.

In line with its goal of serving as an introduction, the book is not burdened by extensive footnotes but accompanied by an annotated list of further readings for those who are interested in learning more about postmodernism and Christian faith. While few of these titles deal strictly with postmodern theory and none counts Derrida, Lyotard, or Foucault as their author (something the reader might have expected), they do explore the linkages between Christian faith and postmodern thinking. This emphasis in the choice of literature is a consequence of a further and related goal of the book, namely to explore possibilities of postmodern theory to fruitfully impact present-day church thought and practice.

The author notes that vagueness and ambiguity sur-

round the notion of postmodernism when addressed in theological writings. However, there is no easy way to characterize the relationship between church and the phenomenon of postmodernism either. Nevertheless, while the church should not unreservedly embrace all aspects of postmodernism, it is certainly not the case that each should be the other's opposite.

The author sets the stage for a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between church and postmodernism through the following observation: "Our contemporary culture, including the church, has experienced a ... dis- and reorientation. This book focuses on a transition ... an emerging from one place to another, from one construction of reality to another, from modernity to postmodernity" (p. 17). This transition, as the author notes, "calls into question almost all our previously held sureties and rattles a faith that has been too easily equated with such Cartesian 'certainties,' sometimes issuing in a kind of vertigo" (p. 17).

From the start, the author therefore makes clear that the church forms part of the time in which it lives and the book wants "to offer a kind of therapy and rehabilitation, an orientation to the world of postmodernism, in which we now find ourselves" (p. 18). The church has to relate itself to the spirit of the times and investigate how this relationship is carried out. The author asks for critical self-consciousness. It is in this exercise, especially when critically revisiting the impact of modernity on theological thought and church practice, that postmodern theory

has something vital to offer.

Offering a helping hand in this self-critical exercise is a key motivation behind the whole series, *The Church and Postmodern Culture*. The themes and authors touched upon in the series are vast and varied. Proponents of so-called deconstruction and radical orthodoxy share the stage with ancient and medieval voices, such as those of Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. A reason for this multivocality is that a dialogue between voices of various ages is predominant in postmodern writings themselves. However, emphasizing voices from ages past is also at the heart of the project of radical orthodoxy, of which the present book is an example.

The topics that are discussed in the book are not easy. Popularizing such thinkers as Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault takes some doing. Linking their theories to theology and ecclesiology makes the work even more challenging. However, the author manages well in his attempt to “unpack primary philosophical impulses behind postmodernism” (p. 21) that might prove important to today’s church. The variety and depth of postmodernist thinking is presented in an easily accessible and inviting way. A chapter each is dedicated to the key idea of a French philosopher. In the case of Derrida, the book focuses on deconstruction’s claim that there is “nothing outside the text” (p. 23). In the case of Lyotard, we encounter a discussion of his statement that postmodernity is “incredulity toward metanarratives” (p. 23), and as regards Foucault, the inquiry centers on his claim that “power is knowledge” (p. 23).

The approach chosen by the author to unravel these claims is meaningful. The author starts each chapter by recapitulating the central plot of a recently screened movie. This serves as an illuminating introduction to the feature of human reality that the philosopher in question tackles in his writings. Abstract thoughts are framed visually in a way that helps readers connect the core idea presented to everyday human experiences. The issues at stake become tangible.

After this, each core idea is analyzed in some detail. In this presentation, which at times becomes somewhat repetitive, the author also tackles misunderstandings that can be found within the theological discourse, and which have led some to claim that the core idea in question is antithetical to Christian faith.

The author does concede that there are points where postmodern philosophy and Christian faith contradict each other. One such major point of division is formed

by the idea of the world as disenchanted. However, the author also identifies a deep affinity with central Christian tenets, especially regarding the core ideas of Derrida and Lyotard. It is for exactly this reason of deep affinity that the author thinks that postmodern thinking, when understood correctly, can prove productive. It can contribute to giving new importance to such Christian claims that are central yet have been pushed aside by the modernist legacy holding various Christian churches in its grip.

Here it seems that the author primarily has an American audience and religious landscape in mind. He is especially critical of modernist features found in nondenominational evangelical churches. However, his critique of modernist features in present-day Christianity is of general importance.

Therefore, the analysis can be read as a revealing critique of modernist traits that, among other things, lead to forgetfulness of a rich Christian tradition that bears witness to the continual revelation of God through the Holy Spirit and the works and deeds of innumerable believers. The celebration of a God who becomes flesh at a particular time and in a particular place has given way to modern ahistorical, a-geographical, transcendental, and reductive accounts of religion.

In modern Christianity, the believer has not, in the dramatic and inescapable fashion that postmodernist thinkers argue is the case, been viewed as part of a tradition that offers the believer a language by which he or she becomes aware of and orients him- or herself in the world and also conceptualizes his or her own person.

Instead, much of evangelical theology builds on the assumption of believers making historically unique and unmediated religious experiences. The human being is viewed as autonomous, having recourse to a truth “out there,” beyond language. Even more generally, an individualistic notion of faith and an understanding of man in which “reason” is held in special regard, plague modern Christianity.

For this reason, the church has also, in a modernist fashion, engaged in apologetics of a kind that presumes that there is a universal truth that can be encountered and framed in words quite independently of particular narratives. It is “haunted by the modern desire for objective certainty” (p. 51). Because religious utterances are judged by a Cartesian criterion of knowledge that argues that something is true only if it is objective, such a phrase as “Jesus saves” must come off as nonsense. It cannot be

objectively verified.

Modern (liberal) academic theology has bought into a scientist framework. Christian theological claims and their “truth” value have been assessed with regard to facts disclosed by secular science. Within the limits of what secular science then allows, the attempt has been made to give the Gospel an explanation that will appeal to any rational person.

However, with the help of the postmodern intellectuals, the author unpacks underlying biases found in modern understandings of such notions as “truth,” “reason,” and “knowledge” that have influenced theology. Moreover, with Lyotard, the author designates the modern idea of a neutral science as itself ultimately grounded in just another narrative.

According to the author, this does not mean that we all have to become skeptics. It does not mean that it would be meaningless to talk of something as “true” or “good.” However, with Derrida, the author wants to rebuke a false modernist notion of knowledge that does not help us to understand religious utterances and why it would be possible to hold that saying “Jesus saves” is meaningful.

What Derrida so clearly shows in his writings is how our experiences are always linguistically mediated. With the help of Derrida, then, confusion as regards the act of interpreting can be cleared up. There is no place beyond interpretation; rather, all of our actions and words build on presuppositions. These may, for some of us, have been influenced by a religious tradition present in the community into which we have been born and raised.

With the postmodernist thinkers, the author therefore argues that we are always carriers of tradition of sorts. We all “see” the world through an interpretative framework and thus we always inescapably express a worldview through our deeds and what we say. Here, he picks up, with Lyotard, on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of language games to explain how the community itself will put limits to what can or cannot be meaningfully said. For a Christian, the community of believers forms a context that governs interpretation. Given this “location” of all talk in a narrative and a communal framework, it is also meaningful to talk about something as good or bad, or of “knowing” something.

Throughout the book, the narrative character of faith is therefore emphasized. Faith is not to be seen as some sort of collection of propositions about life, human be-

ings, or God, in line with a modern way of thinking. Faith is a way of being in the world and a way of “seeing.” By building on the idea of narrative knowledge, the author seeks to move beyond the dichotomy of faith and reason posited by modern theory. This is also one instance where it, again, proves useful to revisit tradition: “By calling into question the idea of an autonomous, objective, neutral rationality, I have argued that postmodernity represents the retrieval of a fundamentally Augustinian epistemology that is attentive to the structural necessity of faith preceding reason, believing in order to understand—trusting in order to interpret” (p. 72).

Given this scenario, the church should also feel comfortable enough to profess its own. Postmodernism frees the church to embrace what is at the heart of its mission. The church should boldly give witness to a particular tradition and the narrative “knowledge” it embodies, the collective memory of God’s revelation. The church should cast aside any inclination to yield to an idea of a universal truth accessible by reason alone in accordance with some standard of scientific knowledge.

The presentation of theological readings and misreadings of postmodernism, which shows the vast knowledge of the author, gives evidence for the fact that much academic writing is blind to its own biases as well. Given that there are both continuities and discontinuities between modernity and postmodernity, the postmodern theorists discussed in the book also do not go uncriticized. A point of critique that is especially noticeable in the chapter on Foucault concerns his understanding that all power is bad, as the author views this. This, the author contends, is a modern liberal understanding of power that celebrates unlimited individual freedom. While it is true that all communities discipline their members, this may not necessarily be a bad thing. We have to distinguish between the formal structure of discipline and the specific direction that this discipline takes, which is a “telos” determined by the particular narrative, of capitalism, Christianity, and so forth. There are different kinds of telos, good and bad.

However, this is, it could be argued, to introduce a criterion from the outside. Who is to say that the one or the other telos is better or worse? Such a stand, it seems, is always taken against the backdrop of the presuppositions delivered by the particular narrative. In line with an understanding of theology as examining and telling about a particular narrative, the book can also be read as the author’s own witness or confession. Throughout the book, it is clear where the author is taking the discussion.

At the end of each chapter, the most important points are recapitulated, and in the final chapter the results of the dialogue with postmodernism are fleshed out more fully.

The last chapter is about lessons learned for “a robust confessional theology and ecclesiology that unapologetically reclaims premodern practices in and for a postmodern culture” (p. 116), a radical orthodoxy that “refuses the modern (and skeptical) equation of knowledge with omniscience” and “refuses to be haunted by Cartesian anxiety” (p. 117).

The church and its liturgy are located in time, space, and place, and the consequences of this location are taken seriously. The author emphasizes the need for churches to realize their commitment to the particular local communities of which they are part. It is about how to worship and where to worship. More specifically, liturgy is

conceptualized as being for all our senses, and the author finishes the book with a detailed account of what this may entail.

Overall, the book lives up to its promises. It serves as a good introduction to central tenets of postmodernist philosophy. It identifies misunderstandings regarding these tenets and highlights the strengths of postmodernist readings of the world and human life. However, it does not shy away from critique. Furthermore, with the help of postmodern theory, the book uncovers an uncomfortable modernist legacy present in much present-day congregational life and theological enterprises.

Throughout, the book is readable and clear even if the presentation is sometimes burdened by repetition. However, given the themes it deals with, this might be just as well.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-ideas>

Citation: Pamela Slotte. Review of Smith, James K. A., *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church*. H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. September, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25509>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.