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A Review Essay: The Church and Postmodern Culture Series

The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens
Graham Ward
Grand Rapids: Baker Academic

Whose Community? Which Interpretation?: Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church
Merold Westphal
Grand Rapids: Baker Academic

The geo-political world is turbulent with the breakdown of the secularization thesis. The textual world is turbulent with the supposed death of the author. Some fear the growing realm of religion in the geo-political world. Others fear the growing prominence of forms of relativism in hermeneutics. In the midst of this fear, the Church and Postmodern Culture series offers two texts that speak into these turbulent worlds. The first, The Politics of Discipleship by Graham Ward, is an impolite book (21) to an impolite world. It tackles a turbulent world with a turbulent word. The second, Whose Community? Which Interpretation? by Merold Westphal, uses another approach. It attempts to show that new worlds emerge from the words of the text whose “absolute author” is deceased. Whether or not the reader will agree with the authors’ approaches or answers, the Church and Postmodern Culture series continues asking the right questions. This review will discuss each text on its own and then as a tandem.

The wall of secularism erected between religion and politics is crumbling because it is false. An account of discipleship, then, must blur the lines between politics and religion. Graham Ward’s The Politics of Discipleship thus describes the world (Part I) and the church (Part II) to see how faith plays a role in the world (17-18). A deep connection between world and church is
necessary because the church is “hardwired” into the world (24). In this threatening world, owing some of its dangerous potential to its growing religious nature, mutual understanding of oneself and the other will only happen by “being impolite and listening to one another’s impoliteness” (22).

Ward describes the world under three categories: democracy, globalization, and post-secularity. Each category is handled as a chapter that offers a new vantage point on the world. First, Ward argues there is a crisis of democracy. While liberalism asserts the individual over the community, emphasizing a limited government whose main responsibility is security (41), egalitarianism emphasizes the benefit of the community even if individual freedom is curtailed (42). Democracy holds these values in tension. In crisis, the balance gets tipped. Ward believes that because democracy is always straining for appropriate authority that it is always unstable. Democracy is always “in search of a body,” a body that is most easily seen in a sovereign power.

Since that body is never permanently realized in democracy, it is in flux (56): “[W]hile pursuing equality and freedom, the democrat is always dreaming of the return of the king, the return of the body—and it is this dreaming that makes all totalitarianisms possible” (57). Postdemocracy, a challenge to democracy as a system because of the threat of totalitarianism, has four characteristics. First, the will of the people is created by media persuasion (66). Second, economic questions dominate the political sphere (68). Third, there are active forms of depoliticization (69), where the person is considered as a customer or client, more than a citizen. The fourth characteristic is a crisis of representation. Minority interests garner attention beyond what their numbers would warrant and politicians must communicate with concern for the party line, rather than their constituency (71). The answer to such a condition is not socialism as it has been practiced, but a “responsible capitalism” (74). This turns Ward’s attention to economics and globalization.

Globalization is a product of Christian theology and church history (79). The expeditions that took the Christian faith beyond national borders needed more than greed, acquisitiveness, and opportunity (91). Yet the result of a globalization detached from theology has been a dematerialized world (93). Everything is examined in relation to universal commodity (95), which creates ubiquitous desire and the global presence of credit. This means that globalization cannot be “at the vanguard of democratization” (113) because no one is accountable to the “unbounded market,” whereas democracy has systems of accountability (113). Perhaps using Ward’s language of the body, there is no body to hold accountable, in part, because the market is always dematerializing.

Ward then turns his attention to the question of postsecularity. Contrary
to the secularization thesis, which argues that religion is an effect and that it will die out without the appropriate cause (121), religion is now resurging in “hybrid, fluid, and commercialized” forms (131). This religion has become united to business, social networking, and video games and as a result “has become a special effect, inseparably bound to an entertainment value” (149). Ward cites the Harry Potter series and the Lord of the Rings trilogy as movies that express this “re-enchantment.” The religion of modernity “was not about discipline, sacrifice, obedience, and the development of virtue,” but a “spiritualized human subjectivity” (157). This spiritualization is a private affair and thus reinforces one theme of the religion of modernity (157).

Having described the world, Ward wants to know how Christians can speak into what remains of the public space. Ward wants Christians to engage boldly with those of other faiths (and no faith). There should be “more contestation and something much deeper than liberal tolerance” (162). Such engaging conversation challenges depoliticization because it helps to liberate religion from the private and to promote the importance of myth (163).

Discipleship—the effort to produce such Christian citizens—must therefore unmask the (false) mythologies in the world and re-read faith back into the culture (165). Why? Because God is never divorced from the history of this world (169). Theologically speaking, this is the eschatological remainder—a continuity between the coming Kingdom and now (167-69). Such an eschatology, a Christian one, is Messianism with a Messiah (179). The King is returning!

Eschatology thus forms the context for the Christian act. In a chapter entitled, “The City and the Struggle for Its Soul,” Ward affirms that Christians act in the space opened by Christ and so within the context of the church acting for the city and the city’s eschatological hope (181). Cities are places of eschatology because “[a]ll cities seek a timeless and universal perfection.” (214). Thus the church must struggle for the city, affirm its opportunities for social life, diversity, and help shape its social imaginary (218). This work is essential because by reaffirming a metaphysics of the body, the church counteracts the practices of bodies without material substances—identities that have simply become “user names and log-in codes” and “bodies are reduced to avatars” (231). How ironic in a culture obsessed with physical fitness! (223). Ward desires citizens who are postmaterial, not in the sense that avoid materiality, but that overcomes materialism and reaffirms the body’s importance as a body, rather than a “billboard” (224).

Discipleship means producing people who engage in the city’s life with the ability to see what is needed for the common good (266). Practices of listening and watching—listening to others and watching for the coming
future—enable discernment of the common good (279). Thus, discipleship is theocratic (299). Yet theocratic contestation does not mean war, but a return to the vibrancy of civil society with citizens deeply opposed to one another, especially because of religion. In such a world, Ward will not shy from this conflict. Instead he finishes with an impolite word. “There will be no new Enlightenment. So let us herald the next stage: the advent of the postsecular state” (301).

Merold Westphal’s project is not so broad as Ward’s, but it is no less ambitious. Whose Community? Which Interpretation? aims to help academics, pastors, and lay people to think philosophically about what is involved in interpreting the Bible (13). Such thinking is to enable better biblical interpretation, in part by forming interpreters able to engage self-critically in how philosophical commitments shape their interpretation of the Bible (14).

Westphal’s ambition is displayed in his book’s accessibility. He clearly wants an array of readers (who may be) leery of (what they believe is) postmodern hermeneutics to read, challenge, and be challenged by this book. He answers fears: No, postmodern hermeneutics is not an “anything goes” relativism (15). He challenges naivety: No, one cannot “just see” the text and know its meaning by a form of intuition (18-20). Instead, texts require “a multitude of different readings...because no single reading is able to capture and express the overflow of meaning...texts contain” (26).

Westphal builds to this conclusion starting with romantic hermeneutics. He introduces readers to deregionalization, the hermeneutical circle, psychologism, and objectivism. Westphal does not believe that the goal of psychologism, to work backwards from language to the inner life of the author’s experience (29-30), is the real goal of interpretation. People read Paul’s letters, for example, not to discern Paul’s experience, but his thought about a certain subject (31). Neither does Westphal believe that objectivism, which desires a “consensus in which all interpreters arrive at an identical meaning” (47), is attainable. Instead, Westphal believes author and reader are “co-creators of textual meaning” (61). While some might fear that this is the death of the author, Westphal affirms it is only the death of the absolute author (58). Meaning is a cooperative effort because the big question facing classic texts is how they might change the reader’s life (61).

Westphal also introduces the reader to Gadamer, arguing that interpretation is not just a reproductive activity, but a productive one, as well. Thus, while even Derrida affirms that “doubling commentary” has its place in interpretation (62) and Ricouer believes that method is an “indispensable ‘guardrail’ in interpretation” (68), texts surpass their author’s horizons and achieve meaning in new contexts. Thus, texts are not objects over which the reader exercises mastery, but “voices to which we do well to
listen” that put the reader’s (and the author’s) world into question (73). As texts become illuminating for more people, they become classic texts, resisting definitive interpretation (89), and producing practices, attitudes, and propositions that form communities (91). Texts do not just produce propositions, but a world (93).

Westphal’s most important model for interpretation is conversation (115). This model requires the reader’s openness and vulnerability to the voice of the text. “This means genuine listening” (115). As the text poses questions of the reader in this conversation of meaning, the reader learns to ask one’s own questions of the text (116). Here one sees how the text does not have a meaning to be mined, but inspires a conversation with other interpreters that takes on a life of its own that challenges, replaces, and affirms presuppositions (117).

The church is such a community of conversation around a classic text. As a community, it must be considered politically, and Westphal offers and critiques liberal and communitarian approaches to the church as models for its conversation. Ultimately, however, Westphal wants conversation to allow the complexity of the text to form the unity of the church. The church’s range of interpretation in conversation gives space for the Spirit of God to be heard and for the Word of God to shape the church (143, 148).

Graham Ward and Merold Westphal have both written texts to shape communities. Taken together, these texts unite hermeneutics and political theology because they show how becoming appropriate interpreters of Scripture has important implications for how a community engages the world, especially when faced with other texts that have founded religious communities. We see this in Westphal’s model of conversation and Ward’s emphasis on the practice of listening. Listening is a political practice because it is a (communal) hermeneutical practice. As the church body is the place where interpretation is practiced through conversation, then the church can help re-form democracy as a community of dispute (Politics of Discipleship, 180) by being this community of dispute that produces citizens of dispute. In a postmodern world, these disputes will inevitably be religious. This means that classic texts will come into conflict with each other as the communities they have founded and which they sustain come into dispute. This is the church working toward the post-secular state that Ward predicts in a way that reflects an interpretation practice of the Bible.

The most striking difference between these books is their level of accessibility. On the one hand, Westphal has written a most accessible text, in the same vein as James K.A. Smith’s Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?, that captures the goal of the series to “provide accessible introductions to postmodern thought with the specific aim of exploring its impact on ecclesial
practice” (8). One mark of a good teacher is the ability to take complex writers and encourage students to read their texts. Westphal has written a text that will encourage many to pick up Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* and give it a first (or second, or third) attempt.

As a result of its accessibility, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation?* is beneficial to the local church in a few ways. First, Westphal has given his fellow academics an example by writing for the sake of the church. Second, this book is accessible for lay readers with a beginning interest in hermeneutics. It is an appropriate introductory text, not least because it has good flow and is not dry. His brief discussion on *lectio divina* helps affirm the lay reader’s responsibility to read and interpret Scripture. The lay reader may not have the training to perform excellent historical criticism, but must still participate in discerning, performing, and translating what God is saying today (144-45).

In addition to this strength, this book is useful for pastors as they read and discuss Scripture to prepare for sermons. It provides a context in which preachers can begin to answer the challenge of preaching classic texts because new meanings emerge in new contexts and must serve to found contemporary expressions of the church. Texts that have served the church for centuries, proving to be classics, must be preached because they sustain the church and form the church in new ways. Preaching needs to be intentional at how it shapes this community at this time. This creates a space for preaching to be seen as a performance of the text, rather than downloading of information. More attention to preaching would have been welcome in this text.

On the other hand, Ward has written an often challenging and stunning text that illumines what one might call meta-themes—themes that serve to illuminate different challenges, events, and conditions of the world. However, and this is a large however, this book does not fit the series in both level of content and length. *The Politics of Discipleship* is 142 pages longer than the next longest of the series and while others of the series have made challenging thinkers accessible, Ward does not so much help his readers enter a conversation, as extend an existing conversation, believing readers can be caught up to speed on the fly. Perhaps we could take a lesson from Westphal and say that *The Politics of Discipleship* requires a translation for the church.

This is unfortunate because Ward has written a text that helps to shape the theological imaginary, not least regarding contemporary discussions of ecclesiology. Ward capably defends the church as an institution. But even as an institution part of civic life, it is never (and should never) be encountered simply as an institution. People encounter the church in the
interactions of various agents. This can include the building as the work of “architects, stonemasons, carpenters, glassmakers, weavers of cloth, bankers, and bishops” (202). This means the institutional church does not exist for itself. Instead, it plays a role both regulating and “encouraging the development of the body of Christ well beyond its borders” (204n.32), forming Christ in believers through practices of prayer, confession, praise, and public worship that affect other social practices like nursing the sick and administering the law (189). Thus ecclesiology is always ecclesiality: It is what “this body of Christians do” (202). As a result, there is always room for critique and new practices for bodies—whether for the church or the city, or, as Ward might say, for the church for the city.

Let me offer two opportunities in light of these texts in a turbulent world. First, Christians can become more astute citizens in a world moving toward post-secularity by deepening the historical nature of their faith as they learn from their political ancestors, seeing that theology so often went hand-in-hand with politics. Ironically, I believe this grounds an appreciation of democracy and modernity. Indeed, because of his thorough critique of modernity and democracy, one wonders, with Luke Bretherton, whether Ward truly appreciates modernity and democracy. Could it not be the case that as political liberalism has kept the religious tiger caged it has also helped to minimize forms of violence? Ward answers by saying he agrees with Oliver O’Donovan that “democracy is the polity best suited to the West at this particular time in its history.” Yet this appreciation is now with full disclosure of the consequences of secularity and with an eye to shaping political engagement in light of the coming reign of the King Jesus.

Second, this theological politics provides the opportunity for Christians to re-engage Scripture as a political text. Modernity helped people think as the individual, thus prompting Christians to read Scripture as the individual, rather than as the community. Once philosophical presuppositions of individualism are challenged, then Scripture, especially the minor prophets, Psalms, and the Gospels begin to take on new light for the church. Westphal’s model of conversation helps guard against purely private and individual readings of Scripture.

In this turbulent time, the church must consistently place herself in the hands of the Spirit to face an uncertain future. Yet Politics of Discipleship and Whose Community? Which Interpretation? exhibit the virtue of hope, believing that the uncertain future will provide the context for God’s Spirit to illumine Scripture in new ways and form its readers into Christlikeness. So, whatever awaits Christians of the 21st century, it will not be a world that Scripture will not illumine or a history that God will abandon. As Jesus opened the Scriptures and opened the disciples’ minds to the Scriptures (Luke 24:32,
45), so may he open mind and text so that disciples may live in present anticipation of his coming Kingdom.

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End Notes

1 Interesting that as I was reading through this book, James Cameron’s Avatar was still garnering plenty of box office revenue and media buzz.

2 For further discussion of performance, hermeneutics and preaching, see John W. Wright, Telling God’s Story: Narrative Preaching for Christian Formation (Downer’s Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2007).
