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A Review Essay: The Church and Postmodern Culture Series

Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church
James K.A. Smith
Grand Rapids: Baker Academic
2006, 156 pp. softcover, $17.99

What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church
John D. Caputo
Grand Rapids: Baker Academic

GloboChrist: The Great Commission Takes a Postmodern Turn
Carl Raschke
Grand Rapids: Baker Academic
2008, 175 pp. softcover, $17.99

Baker Academic, under the direction of James K.A. Smith, is partway through publishing The Church and Postmodern Culture series. The series, with three of an anticipated seven books published, aims to capitalize on the opportunity that postmodernity (the cultural phenomenon) provides to rethink church comprehensively utilizing postmodernism (the philosophical movement). Pastors, specialists, lay members are all welcome to read and explore where continental philosophy meets the church. The books are offered, Smith says, “as French lessons for the church.” This review essay examines the first three books of the series, Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? What Would Jesus Deconstruct?, and GloboChrist, offering overall thematic strengths and weaknesses of the series.

Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?

James Smith’s Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? kicks the series off by considering postmodernism’s most recognized mottos: “There is nothing outside the text;” “Postmodernism is incredulity toward metanarratives;” and “Power is knowledge.” Smith begins with Derrida’s claim that “there is
nothing outside the text,” which he reads as saying there is nothing that is not interpreted via language (39). A consequent practice of deconstruction, then, allows the church to break up the world as it is interpreted by contemporary culture (57-58). Smith sees in modernity a danger for lone-ranger Christianity, and Derrida’s belief that all interpretation is community governed is a welcome practice for the church as she seeks the guidance of the Spirit (58).

Next Smith urges his readers to see Lyotard’s claim that postmodernism is incredulity toward metanarratives as a deep skepticism, not toward the scope of stories, but toward the legitimation of stories by appeal to universal reason available to any smart and virtuous individual (67-68). Postmodernism’s belief that all narratives are culturally and temporally conditioned does not negate whether or not something is true, only the certainty with which it is known. If all knowledge is narratively based, then Christianity can boldly proclaim its cultural, temporal, and universal story without appealing to something beyond it (70-71). Not only can the church preach in humility and confidence, but the church must do so.

Third, Smith defends Foucault’s claim that “power is knowledge” as the belief that communities form truth claims based on the structures already found therein. Knowledge is never neutral. Now, one can read Foucault as a Nietzschean—power is neither good nor bad—describing power’s role in culture, or as an Enlightenment liberal—power is bad and please take your hands of my individual autonomy—prescribing roadmaps for a better society (96-97). Smith reads Foucault as the latter, but defends power, and the role it plays in formation by institutions. Smith’s critique of one flavor of the emerging church—denominations shouldn’t tell us how to run our churches and churches shouldn’t tell people how to run their lives!—results in a defense of formation through discipline. If Foucault is right, Smith says that it’s not a matter of whether or not there will be power, discipline, and formation, but who will do it and what direction it will go. The answer to a culture forming sexualized, publicized, and electronically networked people is not no formation, but formation with the proper telos in focus—Jesus (106-7).

All of this gathers the role of the church as a confessional community, relying not on universal reason, but revelation; preaching Christ rather than demonstrating the faith’s correlation to absolute truth. Smith is more concerned that the church put forth something worth adjudicating than who gets to adjudicate. “We confess knowledge without certainty and truth without objectivity” (121). Though postmodernity has not completely supplanted modernity, it haunts it. We like penicillin and anesthesia but we are keenly aware that, as Stanley Hauerwas has said, we won’t make it out of life alive. Faced with a postmodern culture preoccupied with death, individualism, and skepticism, Smith says we preach, practice, and perform the story of Jesus.
What Would Jesus Deconstruct?

Next, John Caputo seeks to show how deconstruction can help save the church as an institution by reflecting on the four words of the book’s title, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* Caputo argues that the “bite” of the *would* must be felt by those who first ask the question (24). What *would* Jesus do? Certainly not capitalize on the profitability of such a slogan! Caputo urges that we keep this question open refusing to give quick answers because while deconstruction does not deny that there is a path, or way, to God, it does believe that the path is covered by many footprints (38). This is the “plain sense of the plurality of things” (41). Caputo illustrates this with the French word *pas*, which can mean either ‘step’ or ‘not.’ Deconstruction answers the question “What is the beyond?” with “*Pas.*” But does this mean a step or nothing? Precisely: the “step/not beyond” (42-46). This is the path walked by deconstruction.

Caputo clarifies this step/not by distinguishing between events and names. Events have happened and are still happening. They are vocative—but though they call to us and we call to them, they are beyond our reach. Names, on the other hand, are existential. They are the natural order of real things (58-59). [This is not a defense of realism. Caputo affirms with Derrida that what is beyond, the step/not, is beyond real; it is “hyper-real” (39).] Names must always be deconstructed in order to hear and continue striving for the event. For example, what passes under the name democracy must always be deconstructed so that the event of democracy is always pursued (61). True democracy, along with gifts, hospitality, justice, forgiveness, and love, is impossible. Our names for these events are never the events themselves and must always be deconstructed and in this deconstruction we see their impossibility and thereby practice them as expressions, but only expressions, of the impossible. Relentlessly pursuing these impossibilities is a type of “madness” for the Kingdom that is the uniqueness of Jesus (86-87). He pursues these things and his Kingdom is just such an impossibility.

So, what would Jesus deconstruct? Caputo highlights Christianity’s (mainly in the form of the Religious Right’s) approach to war, abortion, and homosexuality. What is good is impossible because, for example, justice calls to us and our name for justice is simply a lesser evil. One might need to resort to war at times, but while it is justified, it is never just (101). Likewise, while Caputo is against abortion, he admits that it might be the lesser evil (115). Caputo seems less complicated regarding homosexuality, however. Quite simply, the Greeks were right and the Christian/Jewish tradition was wrong (109). While we have no reason to think Jesus would have taught differently from Judaism (108), his gospel of love would today find love in homosexual relationships (109).

Caputo finishes by examining two churches in light of his apology for a deconstruction of Christianity. These churches struggle to live out the
Kingdom of God in their contexts while it is impossible. The good news is that by deconstructing Christianity the church can continue living into the impossibility of the Kingdom of God (137-38). With this summary in place, let's turn to a critique.

Caputo's ability to communicate complex subjects with humor is undeniable. He is a gifted philosopher. However, several problems are equally evident. First, Caputo urges that the impossibility of knowing the path to God makes one's tentative steps possible as steps of faith. While some worry that this path leads nowhere, Caputo is quite right to say that deconstruction does not lead to nihilism. Even though one never knows where it will lead, it will lead somewhere. Now, this may be an appropriate approach for one exploring the Christian faith or Islam or Judaism, but it is not appropriate for one determined to follow the way of Jesus. When Jesus announces that he is the way, he is the deconstructor of all paths but his alone. While deconstruction can still apply to all attempts to follow this Jesus, the resurrected Jesus is not tentative in where he is leading. He is leading to the Father. He calls people to repent and follow. The One whom Jesus reveals is one with Jesus. If you have seen Jesus, you have seen the Father. The step not beyond has taken flesh in Jesus.

Second, Caputo falls into the Enlightenment camp through his defense of homosexuality and his critique of Scripture. Caputo grounds his defense of homosexuality by "invoking the spirit of a certain Jesus" and "the basis of critical reasoning" (109). But whose critical reasoning? And which Jesus? Certainly not the historical Jewish Messiah nor the critical reasoning of the majority of Christians. Because Caputo is not making an appeal from the Christian tradition, but an appeal to common sense (available to all?), he is continuing the Enlightenment project. We should all agree on homosexuality once we've reasoned well enough, right? From here, Caputo rightly assumes that people will wonder exactly what status he believes of Scripture when he believes homosexual love should be accepted by Christians, even though Scripture teaches against it. He answers by saying that he is not an "idolater" (110). Whatever status one affords Scripture, one cannot put a book before God who is wholly other. But if Caputo rejects aspects of the Bible and the broad tradition of followers of the God whom he claims to worship, can Caputo be worshiping this same God? And if he rejects aspects of the biblical teaching, then from where does Caputo's understanding of God come? This seems a Christian religion without the bounds of Scripture and within the bounds of Caputo's reason.

Perhaps if Derrida could say that he rightly passed for an atheist, then one can read Caputo and say he rightly passes for a Christian. Caputo is devoted to the church and follows (his interpretation of) the way of Jesus. But one still wonders: Who does Caputo believe Jesus to be? Could this Jesus, right
now, deconstruct Christianity personally or would it simply be the memory of Jesus that deconstructs Christianity? Caputo wants to live out the teaching of Jesus with habits that Jesus would recognize today (112), but why doesn’t Caputo think that this is exactly what the Religious Right, Caputo’s favorite target, is doing?

**GloboChrist**

Carl Raschke’s *GloboChrist* is a most appropriate third installment of the series. Raschke’s call for radical Christians to take their love to the world nicely follows Smith’s desire for a confessional witness of the Christian faith. This love must be as radical as the devotion of radical Muslims and reflect the radical difference between these religions. As Raschke says, the “differences make the difference” (115). Raschke’s work is also a strong counterpoint to Caputo’s work because Raschke is devoted to Jesus of Nazareth crucified, resurrected, and, most importantly, coming again.

Christ Jesus is becoming the GloboChrist. Contrary to the religious critics of the death of God movement, secularism has not moved the world over. Rather, religion is making a comeback. Controversially, Raschke believes that mass communication, globalization, religious and political upheaval is not something Christ is working against, but a way he is showing his relational power. “Christ is showing his power not just among the nations but also for the nations” (19). Yet religion has not taken this ally in its propagation neutrally. While it utilizes globalization, religion also battles against globalization because of its secular flavor. As a result, the clash of civilizations is not between religions, as Samuel Huntington believed, but between the religious and the secular. With the upsurge of Christianity and Islamism, religion is winning (32). That said, the clash will inevitably come between these distinct religions and their radically different eschatologies (139). *GloboChrist* is Raschke’s critique of the West’s anemic versions of Christian faith and his brave challenge that Christians become radical, relational, revelatory, and rhizomic in order to fight Islam as we watch and wait for the Kingdom of God in the return of Jesus. This is the Globopomo moment.

Let’s focus on Raschke’s two most important contributions. First, Raschke moves beyond deconstruction to the semiotic project of Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze uses the notion of the rhizome to illustrate the relation between ideas. A rhizome is a subterranean root structure that grows horizontally that sends up shoots periodically. In applying this to Christianity, Raschke says that globopomo mission must recognize that there is no pure gospel, but only one that is contextualized. Similarity between expressions of the faith, then, is not found in their being logically self-similar but in their having “rhizomic” relations (40). They are related as family trees reveal relations over generations: something unites them, but it is often difficult to see what (41).
Raschke defends this notion as a necessary outflow of Incarnation by saying that the real is always relational. Christian missionaries—and yes, they are desperately needed—must utilize indigenous religious expressions in order to spread the gospel, not only for theological reasons, but because this is how Christianity spread so quickly in the first three centuries.

Second, Raschke takes the Emerging Church movement head on, challenging those who may be tempted to think that the “new kind of Christian is simply an easier-to-get-along-with Christian” (160). Raschke writes, “Open-mindedness, nonjudgmentalism, and radical inclusivity, are no less idolatrous” than “narrow-mindedness, legalism, [and] exclusivity” (159). Raschke’s relationality is always radical. Radical relationality recognizes and believes religious differences, while believing one to be right and the other wrong, but all with a radical devotion to love the other. This is not Gianni Vattimo’s “weak Christianity.” It is the postmodern application of mission by a product of the Magisterial Reformation. One almost expects Raschke to yell, “To arms!”, but instead Raschke queries, not disapprovingly, with the words of the controversial Mark Driscoll: “[I]s the ‘emerging’ future of the new evangelical Christianity in the hands of a generation of ‘whiny idealists getting together in small groups to complain about megachurches and the religious right rather than doing something’ that will hasten the eschaton itself?” (150). One wonders how Caputo might respond!

Reflection and Critique

The brunt of critique in this review has fallen, perhaps unfairly, on John Caputo for two reasons. First, because his work supersedes the boundaries of what is normally associated with Baker Academic projects. Second, because Caputo has most thoroughly practiced one of the most important emerging themes of this project: Preaching. Smith urges that we communicate with confessional language and Raschke says that Christians must be about “preaching the joyful inevitability of the coming GloboChrist, the GloboChrist who turns back the sword of Islam.” (150). Caputo does not simply talk about preaching; he preaches! Thus my critique attempts to capture the true strength of the series: It has something to say and it demands response. It preaches and it stirs me to preach, but not in the way of modernity, which, I believe Peter Leithart has said, “thunders from the pulpit.” This is Incarnational, relational, active preaching. It is full bodied preaching. I hope the Church and Postmodern Culture series continues in this regard.

On the other hand, the series is not readily accessible for as wide an audience as they hope. For those with eyes to read, however, it is this challenge that both draws Christians into the postmodern conversation and provides space for readers to think about their own vocations. While each book reviewed here finishes with sections that focus on local churches with Smith’s
enthusiasm for radical orthodoxy, Caputo’s praise for St Malachy’s and the “Ikon” assembly in Belfast, and Raschke’s critique of emergent Christianity, the series still struggles to draw the academy and the church closer together. However, this shortcoming allows for reflective and effective practitioners to find their place as practical theologians. I do not know how Smith and Raschke would fare as preachers or how Caputo would fare as pastor, but their work can make embolden preachers in their proclamation and encourage pastors in their discipleship, thereby facilitating the call of more preachers, pastors, and professional thinkers. The series deconstructs itself by always calling for more participants.

A second critique is that the three contributors so far are all men working in a North American context. Would it not be better to have alternative voices and geographical contexts? Perhaps not. First, while these are all North American men, they do not always agree. Caputo roves outside the Christian tradition while Smith emphasizes a confessional witness. Caputo relies heavily on Jacques Derrida while Raschke opts for Gilles Deleuze. Second, these men are working in the context for which they are writing. Perhaps the people who need to read this series are best served listening to others in their context who ably provide resources to begin critiquing that this is (and is expected to be for future contributions) a “guys only” group. Perhaps we could see that the current (and expected) contributors aim to deconstruct the series itself by making it clear that more needs to be written and read and practiced. This is not meant to be seen as a final word because we haven’t yet heard from another gender or the rest of the world! The series deconstructs itself by offering a certain uniformity of voices.

Conclusion

Toward the end of the series preface, Smith asks, “What does Paris have to do with Jerusalem?” The challenge I faced as I paced myself through some of the tough reading was “What does Paris have to do with Johnson City, New York?” I thought of people in my church who would hear my sermons, sit in our small groups, and raise money for their teens. The challenge (and it is a challenge) of every reader of the Church and Postmodern Culture series is to ask this same question in the hope that God’s Spirit makes the connection clear and shapes our worship and witness of the resurrected Jesus—even through our institutions.

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