

Postmodernism: A Review Article

by L. Daniel Hawk*

James K. A. Smith. *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church*. Grand Rapids, Mi.: Baker Academic, 2006. 160 pp., paper, \$16.99.

Crystal L. Downing. *How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith: Questioning Truth in Language, Philosophy and Art*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006. 240 pp., paper, \$18.00.

While other segments of the church have carried on a lively interaction with postmodernism for decades, evangelical Christianity has only recently begun to interact meaningfully with postmodern sentiments and their cultural expressions. When, in 1998, I first presented my section on "Postmodernism and the Church" for the seminary's Church Planting Institute, only one book by an evangelical writer appeared on the bibliography I distributed to participants. Now, however, I find myself adding new works by evangelical writers every year.

It has become common, and even fashionable, to claim that we have entered the "postmodern" age. Many evangelical treatments of postmodernism, however, have focused on cultural trends, demographics, and "emerging" spirituality as opposed to the deep currents that course beneath the surface. These surface surveys, along with the increasingly-popular appropriation of the term, have given rise to a degree of oversimplification, misunderstanding, and caricaturing of what has been called postmodernism or postmodernity, both by those who view postmodernism as an opponent of orthodox Christianity and those who view it as an opportunity to rework categories of Christian thought.

The claim that we have entered the "postmodern age" is a case in point (and a red flag for anyone interested in a serious engagement of postmodernism), as the demarcation of history and culture into discrete "ages" with definite and discernable boundaries is a quintessentially "modernist" operation. It is more accurate to assert that we are on the cusp of a profound cultural transition that has been centuries in the making. Like a hologram, we now see two images transposed on culture, one waxing and the other waning as cultural shifts alter fundamental perspectives on reality, morality, the self, and the world.

The publication of these thoughtful, informed, and constructive engagements with postmodernism is therefore most welcome. Both offer accessible and lively introductions to postmodernism that interlace commentary with personal experience and connect theory to practice via illustrations drawn from the media and arts. More than this, however, both writers offer their readers cogent and irenic critiques of postmodernism that clarify the challenges and opportunities it presents to the Church.

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Smith follows a trajectory established by Francis Schaeffer and aims at serious engagement with philosophy (with particular attention to the role of presuppositions) for the benefit of “students and practitioners.” He begins by providing an orientation to postmodernism/postmodernity and elaborating his goals and approach to the topic. He is particularly concerned to demythologize “postmodernism by showing that what we commonly think so-called postmodernists are saying is usually not the case and to demonstrate the “deep affinity” their claims have “with central Christian claims” (p. 22). The program is accomplished in this and subsequent chapters through discussion of a recent film, which becomes the platform for illustrating an axis associated with the philosopher in question and which in turn leads to an overview of a critique of contemporary Western culture. Each chapter then concludes with a case study that describes a congregation shaped by these perspectives.

Three successive chapters deal, respectively, with Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Michel Foucault. Smith enters Derrida’s deconstruction program through the latter’s claim that “there is nothing outside the text” and provides a masterful and careful synopsis of his thought that places it in contrast with philosophical antecedents (e.g. Rousseau) and evangelical misinterpretations (e.g. D. A. Carson). The next chapter, which takes up Lyotard’s “incredulity toward metanarratives,” is worth the price of the book in itself. It is refreshing to read a discussion of “metanarratives” from an evangelical writer who has actually *read* and *understood* Lyotard (who was not concerned with dismantling big stories but with the Enlightenment project’s use of them to legitimate its claims and conceal its mythic infrastructure.) The chapter on Foucault takes up his dictum that “power is knowledge” via a tour through *Discipline and Punish*, illustrated by a particularly insightful analysis of “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” and supplemented by disparate “reads” of what Foucault was after.

In the final and most substantial chapter, Smith offers proposals toward “Applied Radical Orthodoxy” that reclaims premodern practices and issues in postcritical dogmatics of second naïveté” (117). He directs attention to the incarnation as the starting point for a theology and practice that avoids both the Cartesian quest for cognitive certainty and the postmodern rejection of determinate confession. Centering theology on the incarnation provides a path by which the Church might be emancipated from the impulse to transcend history that infuses both ahistorical liberalism (Christianity as a system of timeless values) and evangelical primitivism (Christianity as a replication of the early church). The incarnation, as well, inspires an aesthetic of worship and sacramental imagination that facilitate a “participatory ontology.”

This is a valuable introduction to postmodernism in many respects. It calls for a constructive engagement with postmodernism, corrects misinterpretations of some of its prominent voices, and offers useful points of reference for assessing its impact on theology and practice. I would press Smith on two points, however. First, while I concur with his point that Foucault imbibes deeply of the Enlightenment myth of emancipation, I think he sidesteps the import, for the church, of Foucault’s assertion that human society is fundamentally configured by networks of power relations and “the endlessly repeated play of dominations.” Here Foucault offers a powerful optic for confronting the ubiquity of sin in a fallen world where interactions are inescapably enmeshed in hierarchies

power. As such, he confronts Christians with an important reality check. As long as the Church remains in the world, the primal impulse to dominate others will infuse its operations and influence the knowledge it produces, even in Christian communities that seek to inculcate counterdisciplines toward godly ends.

Second, Smith's proposal for a postcritical dogma that appropriates the logic of the incarnation provides an avenue for rethinking the foundations and operations of Protestant theology. Protestantism originated and developed in tandem with assumptions, perspectives, and convictions that gave rise to the Enlightenment and modernism, and the Cartesian anxiety for certainty configures the framework Protestant dogmatic systems. The waning of these fundamental assumptions, however, has precipitated something of an identity crisis within Protestantism, particularly among its more conservative adherents. Re-centering dogmatics in light of the incarnation then offers an opportunity not only to recast faithfully the content of Christian confession but even notions of what dogma is, how it is communicated, and how it functions in the life and mission of the Church.

Rethinking Protestant paradigms through the lens of the postmodern critique constitutes one of the main threads of Crystal Downing's overview of postmodernism. Downing offers a wide-ranging and comprehensive introduction to the topic that weaves together leading ideas and thinkers with their manifestations in art, literature, and popular culture. She begins the first of four sections ("Situating This Book") with a brief orientation to postmodernism and Christian responses to it, followed by a personal narrative of her journey from conservative evangelicalism to a realization that postmodern thought offers important resources for Christian life and mission.

The second section, "From Modernism to Postmodernism," comprises three chapters. The first offers a wide-ranging overview of the development, characteristics, and pivotal voices of "modernism," from its emergence in the Renaissance through the Enlightenment and into the late 20th Century. The following chapter explores the expressions of modernist and postmodernist thought in art, literature, and architecture, with attention to such ideas as originality, genius, autonomy, and intentionality. The final chapter of the section zeroes in on postmodernism's "anti-foundationalism," that is, its denial that truth can be apprehended through reason alone and expressed through universal axioms. Here Downing carefully elaborates the ways in which strains of "modern" Christianity have been shaped by the quest of certitude through the application of reason, corrects misapprehensions of postmodernism's critique, and explores postmodern Christian options (including "Radical Orthodoxy").

Downing devotes herself to "Situating Influential Postmodern Thinkers" in the third section. As in Smith's book, Derrida and Foucault figure prominently. Downing, however, aims for a more comprehensive and eclectic overview of the postmodern landscape. This includes a discussion of postmodernism's intellectual and cultural precursors, explanations of its divergences from modernism, and cameo appearances by such figures as Richard Rorty, Homi Bhabha, Thomas Kuhn, Jacques Lacan, and Jean-François Lyotard. Although Downing focuses on Derrida in a chapter on Deconstruction, the following chapter, on the cultural construction of knowledge, takes the form of a rapid-fire presentation of various threads of postmodern thought on language, truth,

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culture, and religion. Here again, she places these threads in dialogue with Christian thought and thinkers (e.g. C. S. Lewis) and points to their potential for helping the Church rethink and recover aspects of Christian thought that have been skewed or constrained by Enlightenment thought and modern culture.

In the final section, "From Relativism to the Relating of Faith," Downing directly confronts the bugbear that terrorizes many evangelical opponents of postmodernism; that is, the view that truth is "relative" and "subjective." Drawing together the various topics and perspectives she has elaborated throughout the book, Downing cogently explains postmodernism's distinction between "facts" and "interpretation." She is not scandalized by postmodernism's pluralism and acknowledgement of multiple truths but rather counsels confidence in Christianity's confession of revealed truth centered in the person of Christ.

Downing's rapid pace and stream-of-consciousness presentation may leave some readers' heads spinning. Frequent illustrations and autobiographical narratives, however, keep things from blurring together, particularly for the novice. Her "zoom out" perspective is an excellent complement to Smith's "zoom in" approach.

Together, Downing and Smith offer inviting entry points into the maze of postmodern thought and serve as reliable guides for readers who wish to track the maze. Both articulate an unapologetic apologetic for postmodernism and the significant resources it offers Christians concerned with thinking critically and creatively about how to witness to "the faith once delivered." These books offer accessible, knowledgeable, and engaging treatments of postmodernism, whether read as introductions or as refresher courses.