

Issue 1.1
August-December
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Why churchandpomo.org?



The idea for churchandpomo.org began on napkins at a coffee shop here in Grand Rapids. While working on some planning for the "Church and Postmodern Culture" Series, a friend and I both remarked how fruitful we thought the conversations were over at [Generous Orthodoxy's Think Tank](#)--which got us to thinking whether we might not try to foster a similar environment, with a slightly different focus, in a context like this. A year later, here we are.

While there is a seminal connection between the book series and this online conversation, we don't mean for the churchandpomo site to be only about matters related to the books. Instead, we are hoping this site will be both a springboard for new conversations from fresh and emerging voices (including you!), as well as something of a gathering place for folks interested in the intersection of continental philosophy, theory, religion, lived experience, and the church. (Learn more about the [series](#) and the [conversation](#).)

Perhaps it's important up front to note that our vision is one of a "big tent": that is, neither the series nor the site is pushing some implicit party line. Both the book series and the site will include a wide range of voices, many of whom disagree quite pointedly--but nevertheless are interested in forthright, fruitful (and, we hope, charitable!) conversations. So this isn't a "Radical Orthodoxy" site, or a "deconstructive" site, or a "new universalism" site, etc., etc. Instead, we hope it will be a place where folks from all these sensibilities (and more) will engage one another, important ideas, and challenges of practice.

And if we want to prop up a "big tent," we also see ourselves as only a small part of a bigger universe of conversations that we eagerly listen in on: such as conversations over at [Think Tank](#), or in the [Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory](#), or at [Emergent Village](#).

At churchandpomo.org we're looking forward to hearing from both established and emerging voices, both scholars and practitioners, theologians and pastors, philosophers and poets. We hope to alert you to new books, test out ideas and hypotheses, share info about events, engage in reading groups, launch new research programs, debate questions both new and old--and much more.

A special thanks to Geoff Holsclaw for his labors as maestro of this conversation. Be sure to sign up for email updates or subscribe to the site feed and become part of the conversation.

churchandpomo: a slow blog



Many of you have probably heard of the [slow food movement](#) (against the fast food industry), and perhaps even a [slow life city](#) (heralding a slow pace, slow education, slow industry, and slow aging). But what about slow blogging, or *slogging*? (Slow + Blogging = Slogging)

If you are looking for the next *microwaved* 'critical theory' with a side of *canned* theology, sprinkled with *cheesy* pop cultural references, then maybe this won't work out for you.

But if you like things to simmer and stew for a bit, if you like chopping up the salad (adding those sugared walnuts), and setting the table with a reasonable argument, then pull up a chair and let's have a conversation.

churchandpomo aims to be, hopes to be, longs to be, a place where we can reason together (and maybe argue a bit, together). And to do that takes a little time. So that is why we hope to be a SLOG, a Slow Blog.

So expect some longer posts that will take a little longer to digest, and take the time to slow down, think, comments, argue, propose, and ponder what the Church might be in this postmodern culture.

And please, just like the churches we might attend, let's make this a pot luck where everyone brings a plate to share, dining from several extravagant cuisines.

(And we're throwing the doors wide open and having our first meal on August 15th around James K.A. Smith's [Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church.](#))

See you then.

Potlucks and Postmodernity



...or, on 'experts' and 'new publishing.'

(last of the preliminaries: doesn't you just hate the first day of class!)

1) Not only is churchandpomo.org hoping to follow the example of [slow food](#), but we also hope to make this a potluck. Instead of sitting down to a handsomely

prepared meal by an expert chef, we are going to gather together and pass some homemade dishes around. Hopefully you will see this through the different perspectives of people engaging Smith's book, as well as in the comments.

What this means is that we are not merely going to interview the experts, or have the 'published' authors answer the questions set before them. Rather, we are all going to ask questions and we are all going to give answers, or at least outline, sketches, or hopes for an answer. So if someone fires off a question/critique, don't wait for the 'expert' to answer it. If you think you have a response, then let's hear it.

2) And this brings me to the final preliminary remark: we are hoping to form an intersection between old publishing (expert based, book medium, off-line) and new publishing (peer based, computer medium, on-line). We are trying to bridge the authors and readers of books, creatively unite an experts (who stands above you) and peer (who stand among you), along with breaking down the theory/praxis distinction. No small order, right?

So we are trying to bring in some old publishing authors (not as experts, but as peers who ought to have our respect) as well as those you are new publishing authors (who are not only our peers, but also have areas of expertise), and glory in the beautiful collision.

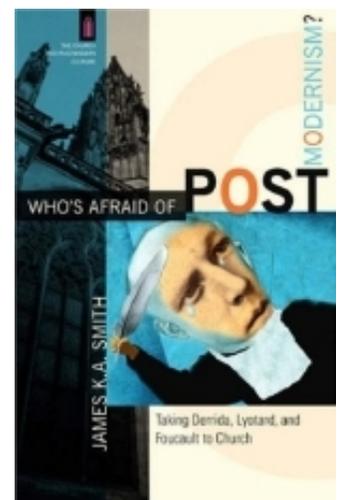
* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: [Potlucks and Postmodernity](#)

Postmodernity vs. the Gospel?

by David Fitch

The first of five engagements around James K.A. Smith's "[Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?](#)" The following is an exchange over "Who's Afraid?" with [David E. Fitch](#), planting pastor of [Life on the Vine](#), the Lindner Chair of Evangelical Theology at [Northern Seminary](#), and author of [The Great Give Away](#).

churchandpomo: In the introduction of the *Church and Postmodern Culture Series*, Smith writes that "the series will provide accessible introductions to postmodern thought with the specific aim of exploring its impact on ecclesial practice." There is a constant criticism made against those who dabble and/or dive into postmodernity, that you



have substituted postmodernity for the gospel. We see this criticism from two different Wilson's: (Douglas) [Wilson](#) on James K.A. Smith, and (Jonathan R.) [Wilson](#) on David E. Fitch. *How do you respond to this critique of your work and Smith's?*

David E. Fitch: When it comes to engaging culture, evangelicals are captivated/horrified by “contextualization.” Whether it is the enduring influence of H. Richard Niebuhr over us, or our endemic modernism which inevitably privatizes our faith and makes it into an idea to be “translated” into a given culture, we evangelicals are obsessed with contextualizing the gospel as a “message” into a particular culture. *To think that the person and work of Jesus Christ demands that we ourselves embody a politic in the form of the church with given social practices that engage society as an embodied presence, is completely alien to the evangelical mind.* Therefore, whenever Jamie or I use the postmodern critique to expose the weaknesses of current church practice as it has been captivated by modernity, evangelical authors automatically assume that we are trying to contextualize the gospel to this new cultural phenomenon - postmodernity. In both our cases, they couldn't be more wrong.

Although I have nothing against contextualization per se, Jamie nor I have this in mind as we present our various takes on postmodernity as a critique of current American church practice. We are both simply trying to unveil what the critique of postmodernity reveals about both our current culture and our current church practice. We are using the postmodern authors to unveil the huge shortcomings of current church practices all because of our indebtedness to modernism and all its manifestations. The response we both offer, however, is not to contextualize a church to postmodernity, but rather to reinvigorate an ecclesiology for our times. As Jamie states “it might just be these Parisians who can help us be the church.” (p.23).

c&p: Smith notes that many practitioners (say within the Emerging Church) give an approving nod to postmodern philosophers, but rarely move beyond slogans or trite summaries. After tipping a hat to philosophy, many claim that everyday life needs attention. *Why is engaging with postmodern philosophy important to you, and how do you see it hitting the roads of 'real' life?*

DF: It is ironic that the church which turns out to be most modern, the church which turns out to carry out protestant liberal strategies in terms of ecclesiology, is the evangelical church, the version of American Christianity from which both Jamie and myself come and remain aligned with. The fact that many evangelicals when they read this may be dumbfounded by that statement is simply the evidence of how little we evangelicals understand about our own indebtedness to modern assumptions, politics and way of life. To me, this confusion extends even to many in the emerging church. As I have said [elsewhere](#), protestant liberalism and evangelical fundamentalism are two sides of the same coin. And so it is odd that many of our emerging church pastors, as well as many of our most modernist mega church pastors, all seek to engage social justice on terms that only make sense in a society where a

modernist politics still make sense. Many of these pastors put forth ideas about kingdom theology, social justice, and engagement with culture that are as old as Tillich, Niebuhr, Raushenbush etc. They somehow present these ideas as new? Yet these are all failed theologies both in terms of practice and in terms of the postmodern philosophers and post foundational theologians we all seem to be reading (and in the case of Jamie, myself, and the emergent writers seem to find benefit from).

This is why it is so important to understand these postmodern philosophers, thinkers and critiques at such a time as this. It is into these situations that I believe the insights of postmodern authors on the issues of subjectivity, the Other, democracy and capitalism, and the nature language and reality are so powerful for understanding the very issues we must engage as a social presence in the world where the modern consensus is heading into an implosion called “late capitalism.” For this reason I believe the emergent authors, the mega church pastors, the Christian church that still exists, has so much to learn and understand from the postmodern critique. This is why what Jamie has done in his own book “Who’s Afraid of PostModernism?” and what he has done in creating this series of books is so important.

c&p: At the end of chapter one, Smith, laying out the contours of his appropriation of postmodernism, notes that we must shift from an apologetics of demonstration (reason) to one of proclamation (through ecclesial witness). *Why do people get so upset with Smith and others for saying that "the church doesn't have an apologetic; it is an apologetic"?*

DF: Many of the “younger evangelicals” are afraid of anything that smacks of withdrawal from culture. They were raised in a brand of fundamentalism that preached “separation” from culture, withdrawal. All culture is bad! They don’t want to go back to anything close to that and I don’t blame them. To say “let the church be the church” as Stanley Hauerwas has made famous and Jamie reiterates here with a new twist in “Who’s Afraid?” scares these ex-evangelicals. They suspect this theological turn could be used as an excuse to withdraw from the culture.

Let me allay any fears. Jamie is not suggesting anything of the sort. Rather he is suggesting, along with myself, and certainly spearheaded by Hauerwas (although Jamie is more Reformed than either Hauerwas or myself) that the church as an embodied presence is the social strategy in the new fragmented worlds of declining modernity. The church becomes the means of a living breathing display of justice from which we engage the world with an all the more compelling justice that comes out of God’s work in the church. From such a social display, our ability to support justice efforts and even know which justice efforts to join hands with is made more possible because we have such an embodied justice to live and discern out of. But by possessing a justice that is a politic of the cross (Yoder), by making justice more than something we do, but indeed something we are, we are able to remove justice from being a mere idea or concept and instead allow justice of God to become part of our way of life in the ways we live and engage the world. In fragmented modernity, this is only possible if we take the church seriously as a politic with integrity of its own.

c&p: *Lastly, do you have any final comments on your reaction to Jamie's book?*

DF: "Postmodern" is easily the most misunderstood word in American church. In addition, postmodern philosophy is largely inaccessible to average pastor or M.Div educated reader. Many authors have written primers for postmodernism that have failed to do anything to alleviate this situation. It is simply hard to find anyone who has intimate familiarity with the primary sources yet will take the time to write in terms that all of us practitioners can understand. Before Jamie's book I thought this was impossible.

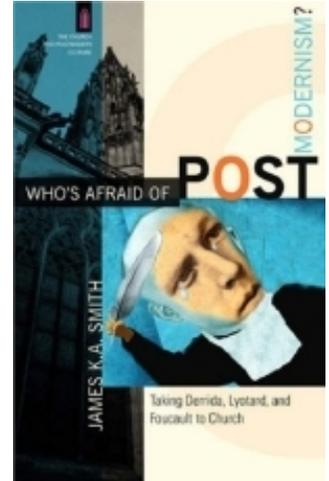
But I say congratulations to Jamie because he has done a marvelous job at introducing Foucault, Lyotard and, yes, Derrida in an accessible way. Since its release, I have used this book in all my classes on church in the postmodern context at Northern Seminary. But Jamie does not stop at helping us understand these three seminal authors of Continental postmodern philosophy. He gives us a wonderful engaging response which helps us see the compelling case postmodernity makes way for, the case for the church to return being the church, a social strategy, an embodied presence in the world, all of which is sadly lacking in the evangelical world from whence both Jamie and I come.

***Disclaimer:* For those sniffing out a publishing conspiracy, we should note that, yes, both David Fitch and James K.A. Smith are authors published by Baker. But I will repeat that churchandpomo.org is not merely a front for pushing Baker books.

** The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here:*
[Postmodernity vs. the Gospel](#)

Whose Rationality? Which Contextualization? by Cynthia Nielsen

This second of five engagements around James K.A. Smith's "[Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?](#)" is by [Cynthia Nielsen](#), an adjunct professor of philosophy at Eastfield Community College where she is pursuing her Ph.D in Philosophy at [University of Dallas](#), and an accomplished jazz musician.



I recently read Smith's book, [Who's Afraid of Postmodernism](#), and found it a helpful contribution to furthering the postmodern conversation, particularly among those within the Church whose default seems to be a wholesale rejection of everything "postmodern." As his subtitle indicates, Smith engages Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault with the desire to show indeed there is much "Egyptian gold" to be mined in Paris. Though there are a number of topics that one might comment on, I shall limit myself to Smith's discussion Lyotard, particularly Lyotard's understanding of metanarrative. Lyotard, of course, is known for his "definition" of postmodernity as "incredulity toward metanarratives ["big stories"]." If Christianity claims to be the metanarrative, then how can postmodernity and Christianity be harmonized? First, we have to rightly understand what Lyotard means by "metanarrative." As Smith points out, "Lyotard very specifically defines metanarratives as universal discourses of legitimation that mask their own particularity; that is, metanarratives deny their narrative ground even as they proceed on it as a basis. [...] The problem with [modern] metanarratives is that they do not own up to their own mythic ground" (Smith, p. 69). Thus, the postmodern critique should be welcomed by Christians because in essence it proclaims that all knowledge is a narrative or myth of some sort. As Smith points out, one expression of the Christian faith, viz., the Dutch Reformed Tradition (and one might add Radical Orthodoxy) working within an Augustine trajectory, has repeatedly rejected the idea of legitimating itself by appealing to "universal, autonomous reason," and instead appeals to "faith (or, to translate, myth or narrative)." In other words, when rightly understood, Lyotard's claims need not be interpreted as discrediting the Christian metanarrative but instead ought to be used by Christians as fertile soil for a "a retrieval of a fundamentally Augustinian epistemology that is attentive to the structural necessity of faith preceding reason" (Smith, pp. 68, 72).

Significantly more could be said, but given time and space constraints, I will close with a few comments and suggestions for future discussion and development.

An area that I would have liked to see more thoroughly developed centers on the concept of *rationality*. It would be extremely helpful to have a more detailed explication of exactly in what a proper Christian rationality consists, and then how a distinctively Christian rationality can be shown to be rational when opposing

narratives reject its fundamental assumptions. And relatedly, a common question to the idea of many narratives (Christianity being one of many) having their own set of privileged presuppositions to which they cling come what may and hence their own “rationalites,” is the following, “How are we not left with either some form of relativism or a situation in which various competing mythoi must simply out-narrate one another?” Given the prevalence of this kind of response, further discussion would benefit Christian apologists, theologians, and philosophers alike, particularly those of the [presuppositional](#) persuasion.

I would offer as a ‘rationality,’ in distinction from a modern view of reason (e.g., Kant) as autonomous, abstract and de-personalized, an Augustinian understanding of reason as heteronomous and deeply personal because in order to function properly, the whole person (which includes one’s reason) must be rightly related to God, who for Augustine is ultimate rationality (and of course much more)—i.e., God is the Light in and by whom we are enabled to “see.”

* *The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here:* [Whose Rationality? Which Contextualization?](#)

The Panopticon of Ecclesial White-ness: Taking Foucault to a Church divided

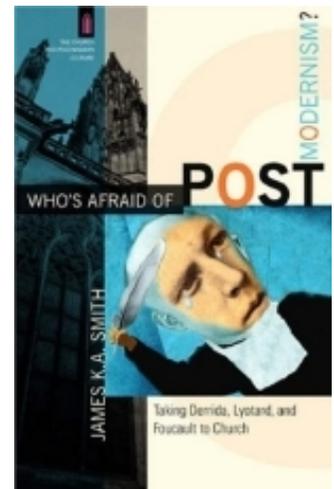
A third of five engagements with James K.A. Smiths "[Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?](#)" by Anthony Smith, a leader of the [Emergent Cohort](#) in Charlette, NC., teaches racial reconciliaton for an inner ministry ([Warehouse 242](#)), is a participant with [Emerging Theologians](#), and blogs at Musings of a [Postmodern Negro](#).

If you would like to read it over the weekend, please

[Download The Panopticon of Ecclesial Whiteness.doc](#) --g.h.

by Anthony Smith

But what on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it? Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen! - W.E.B. Du Bois



The purpose of this particular engagement is to bring together conversation partners and philosophers [James K. A. Smith](#), [Michel Foucault](#), and [George Yancy](#) to examine the relationship and resonances between the Christian tradition, postmodernity, and race. Specifically this essay focuses on whiteness as an extension of the conversation on race. James Smith has done a great service by bringing to the conversation, the question, for some Christians, as to whether or not postmodernity, as expressed through the work of Continental philosophers (e.g. Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault) as something Christians should be afraid of. Is postmodernity the new Communism, secular humanism, a kind of philosophical or ideational terrorism?

Postmodern French philosopher Michel Foucault teaches us that the operative nature of power has a disciplinary effect on human society. Power relations in societies create dimensions of knowledge and categories of 'truth'. Foucault described this as the power/knowledge nexus.

A few thoughts from Smith on Foucault lay the groundwork.

Foucault. The seemingly disturbing, even Nietzschean claim that "power is knowledge" should push us to realize what MTV learned long ago: (a) the cultural power of formation and discipline, and hence (b) the necessity of the church to enact counterformation by counterdisciplines. In other words, we need to think about discipline as a creational structure that needs proper direction. Foucault has something to tell us about what it means to be a disciple. (*Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* p 23-24)

For Foucault, at the root of our most cherished and central institutions-hospitals, schools, businesses, and yes, prisons-is a network of power relations. The same is true of our most celebrated ideals; at root, Foucault claims, knowledge and justice reduce to power....Foucault's postmodern axiom is that "power is knowledge." However, Foucault himself resists any bumper-stickerization of this notion. As he clarifies, he does not mean that knowledge and power are identical; in stead, he means to emphasize the inextricable relationship between knowledge and power. Knowledge, or what counts as knowledge, is not neutrally determined. Instead, what counts as knowledge, is constituted within networks of power- social, political, and economic (p. 85).

One such *knowledge* or *truth* is the ubiquitous reality of race. Specifically, the ubiquitous reality of whiteness. Entering the conversation is African-American philosopher George Yancy, in an essay "A Foucauldian (Genealogical) Reading of Whiteness" (2004). A contribution from the book *What White Looks Like: African-American philosophers on the Whiteness Question*. Yancey uses the work of Foucault to craft a framework through which to analyze and interrogate race – namely the social reality of whiteness:

My sense is that Foucault has provided a helpful conceptual framework, particularly as developed in *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *The*

History of Sexuality, for coming to terms with how whiteness, as a power/knowledge nexus, is able to produce new forms of knowledge (in this case “knowledge about black people) that are productive of new forms of “subjects” (p. 108).

What I want to explore is how whiteness has disciplined and disciplines church. Yancy waxes Foucauldian-style on the question of “whiteness as the embodiment and production of specific truth claims, claims that are inextricably linked to a (white) regime of truth and modalities of power” (p. 108).

Yancy gives us a genealogical reading of whiteness:

This will involve a process of coming to terms with whiteness’ historical “positionality.” In this way, whiteness, as a presumed “universal” value code, will be shown to consist of an embodied set of practices fueled by a reactive value-creating power. The aim is to call into question the idea that whiteness exists simpliciter. What will be shown is that whiteness creates values, norms, and epistemological frames of reference that unilaterally affirm its many modes of instantiation- political, institutional, aesthetic, and so forth...

I will also explore how whiteness attempts to hide from its historicity and particularity, which I maintain is a function of how whiteness represents itself as “universal.” In short, whiteness masquerades as a universal code of beauty, intelligence, superiority, cleanliness, and purity; it functions as a master sign (p. 108).

This examination of the deep biases that bolster the creation of particular truth-claims is a method defined as ‘genealogy’ or archaeology. “...whose task is to uncover the secret, submerged biases and prejudices that go into shaping what is called the truth. There is no claim to truth that is innocent; there is no knowledge that simply falls into our minds from the sky, pristine and untainted. What might be claimed as obvious or self-evident is, in fact, covertly motivated by other interests-the interest of power.” (*Who's Afraid?* p.86)

What has this to do with the Church and the project that Jamie offers us? My engagement here suggests that race is a disciplinary power in the Church primarily through what I call the panopticon of ecclesial white-ness that has created the knowledge or ‘truth’ that white-ness is norm. Foucault’s image of the panopticon captures the power/knowledge nexus of whiteness and helps me see (apocalypses or unveils) the dominance of the white cultural pole in most of the American Christian aesthetic.

As one who speaks primarily from an Evangelical and Neo-Pentecostal context the white-breaded-ness of Evangelical ecclesial culture often overwhelms me (and much of modern American Christianity...even in some expressions of the Black Church!) and the way it is foisted upon others (think: *The Passion of The Christ*...even

The Da Vinci Code). I remember as a child attending a traditional Black Baptist church with a stained glass mural of white Jesus behind the baptismal pool (a legacy of slave Christianity and racial Constantinianism). Or walking through the “Christian” bookstore (yes, I know, there is usually a black gospel section in the back.). I am also reminded of an episode in a Christian bookstore where I was formerly employed, the manager, by confession, ordered the wrong kind of praying hands. They were black praying hands! He ordered whites ones. He wanted the *right* (*white*) ones. How do I know this? I took the black praying hands and put them up front for display, then, came back to work the next day to find them in the store room out of sight out of mind. What kind of discipleship and formation has this particular Christian gone through?

Of course this is completely anecdotal but it brings out the way space and aesthetics in explicitly Christian spaces tend to primarily express a white racial/cultural pole. Specifically, this exemplifies the ‘knowledge’ of white-ness as ‘norm’ that created through the power nexus of white ecclesial-ness.

Jamie does not escape the panopticon as well. As an example of how the ecclesial habits of white-ness operate I offer a brief comment by Jamie. First, let me put this in context. This brief sentence is found in the middle of a passage about Derrida, text, interpretation, and community. Derrida’s famous axiom: there is nothing outside the text. In other words, interpretation goes all the way down:

To say there is nothing outside the text is to say that there is no aspect of creation to which God’s revelation does not speak. But do we really let the Text govern our seeing of the world? Or have we become more captivated by the stories and texts of a consumerist culture? Is our worldview shaped by the narratives of a hip-hop culture more than the stories of God’s covenantal relationship with his people?

I will give Jamie the benefit of a doubt. Mentioning the “narratives of a hip-hop culture” as opposed to “the stories of God’s covenantal relationship with his people?” suggest that these narratives and traditions have no resonance and are mutually exclusive. Are they mutually exclusive? Are there no traditions within hip-hop that resonate with the stories of God’s redemptive acts in history? Of course this does not mean that Jamie believes this but this sentence make me wonder. Especially, when we read the next sentence:

One of the challenges of Christian discipleship is to make the text of the Scripture the Text outside which nothing stands. As U2’s song “When you Look at the World” attests, this is not always easy; sometimes I “can’t see what You see, when I look at the world.” But the sanctification of the Spirit is aimed at enabling us to see the world through this lens.

Apparently, a song and narrative by U2 best captures, for Jamie, how there is nothing that should be interpreted outside the text of Scripture. Evidently, the

narratives of rock-n-roll, at least U2's, aide us in governing our seeing of the world through the Text of scripture. But not hip-hop? Why not hip-hop? Hip-hop, an artistic expression and tradition (yes, it is a tradition), arose out of the inner city streets of subjugated knowledges and practices. Of course I cannot romanticize hip-hop. It has its expressions that do not resonate with the redemptive narrative of God's Text, just like expressions of Rock-n-roll.

Why even mention this? Not to beat a dead horse but such habits reveal how the panopticon disciplines us according to the normativity of whiteness. According to Jamie, the narratives of hip-hop offer us no guidance toward the Text of God's story. I beg to differ. There are traditions within hip-hop culture too numerous to mention here. Off the top of my head I could come up with a couple of hip-hoppers whose lyrics profoundly point us to elements of God's story. I think about rappers and singers like Common, KRS-ONE, Talib Kweli, Lauryn Hill, Leela James, Public Enemy, etc.

Ignoring white-ness as norm and its disciplinary power within the church frustrates Christians seeking racial-ethnic reconciliation or harmony. Granted, much work has been done in the area, and much of it is to be commended, but it is clear that white-ness remains in the church even as race-ism and the assertion of white privilege operate more subtly. However, Foucault illumines for us that ignoring race as a disciplinary power blinds us to the realities that continue to hinder the church from moving beyond our racial impasse. We can look at our discursive practices in our respective churches and see how we, consciously and unconsciously, give credence to the universal code of beauty that is presumed to be white.

Power is knowledge.

Power structures produce knowledge or truth. They also produce, I believe, 'worlds' that discipline and form individuals into specific kinds of people. In his essay on Foucault, James K.A. Smith describes for us, using Foucault's concepts regarding discipline and formation, how capitalism disciplines, habitualizes, and disciplines people to become consumers:

In other words, marketing capitalizes on fundamental structural human desires for meaning and transcendence and presents products and services as ways to satisfy these human longings. It then utilizes the tools of disciplinary practice to inject these values into the very character of human beings-internalizing the values so that they become part of the person (*Who's Afraid?* p. 104-105).

Smith's description of market culture as disciplinary power that shapes and forms people into consumers provides the categories for us to discuss the power of race and white-ness as norm in particular.

When one studies the history of Christendom, especially during the 16th century, a modern narrative of race emerges. In particular, a racial hierarchy begins to emerge, with white people at the top. Such a world became a part of the DNA of Western Christendom and habits began to form. . One only has to do a genealogy of how the church justified racism with scripture and particular doctrinal formulations (e.g. the curse of Ham). Modern racism, a product of the Enlightenment, gave scientific justification for the hierarchy of races. Christendom, on the other hand, sacralized white-ness. Christendom sacralized or divinized a racial order that emerged out of 16th century Europe. Contextually, this had devastating consequences for how race would play itself out in American church culture. Power relations within Christendom created knowledge or truth that described 'white-ness' as norm or standard and non-whiteness or blackness as deviation or sub-standard.

A recent example of this is the popularity of author Dan Brown's the controversial book turned into movie *The Da Vinci Code*. There were many books, articles, and commentaries written about this movie from leading Christian authors and leaders. Many sermon series preached about how the Code did not pass the historicity test in relation to the story of Christ. Good stuff. But one glaring reality stood out for me. I did not read one major Evangelical or Conservative Christian commentary that pointed out the whiteness question. Brown's Jesus, the one pictured in his book, the *white Jesus*, is guilty of two sins: having male genitalia and using it. Of course in using it his progeny are, what? Europeans, of course! The book has been described as "controversial," but apparently there is nothing controversial about the aesthetic of Brown's Jesus. If we honestly assess the concerns expressed by Evangelical Christians, I have to wonder: Are we really concerned about the historicity of Brown's Jesus?

What this reveals, I believe, is the entrenched narrative or story, albeit conscious or unconscious, of whiteness-as-norm. There is much to say here. Little room. Jamie's engagement with Foucault, I believe, can begin a new area of discussions of the reality of race in the church...and the vision set forth by Christ for us to be 'one' as Father, Son, and Spirit are one.

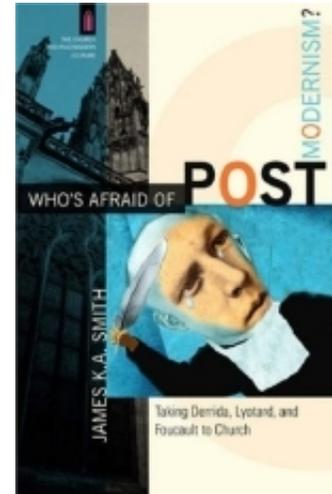
* *The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here:*
[The Panopticon of Ecclesial White-ness: Taking Foucault to a Church divided](#)

Applied Radical Orthodoxy

Here is our fourth of five engagements with James K.A. Smith's "[Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?](#)" by Steve Bush, a Ph.D student at [Princeton](#) and founder of [Generous Orthodoxy](#). Here Steve is focusing on the (mis)place of [Radical Orthodoxy](#) (also excellent articles [here](#) and [here](#) on RO).

Applied Radical Orthodoxy ([Download applied radical orthodoxy.doc](#))

by Steve Bush



Reading *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* confirmed a suspicion that *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy* first instilled in me: Jamie Smith has an unparalleled ability to provide accessible summaries of extremely complex bodies of work. I will be surprised if *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism* and *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy* do not become the standard introductory texts on their respective topics.

In the final chapter of *Who's Afraid*, "Applied Radical Orthodoxy," Smith takes the insights he has gleaned through his critical encounters with Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault and discusses their applicability for contemporary Christian theology, as well as for church organization and practice. His primary advice is that Christians must not neglect the traditions of the church. Modernity was hostile toward tradition and particularity, and in many cases, Christians adopted modern attitudes and sought to downplay their own distinctiveness. But we can learn from the critics of modernity and draw unapologetically from the creeds, from church authority, and from historic Christian rites. Smith bids us to be catholic, Roman or otherwise, and he expounds, with the help of George Weigel's *Letters to a Young Catholic*, a number of the tenets of c/Catholicism he finds especially pertinent. He also turns us toward the theological insights of Radical Orthodoxy. Smith thinks Radical Orthodoxy has much to offer, since it combines stringent criticism of modernity with a deep affirmation of church tradition.

I have little to object to in all this. This is not because I agree with Smith's suggestion that Radical Orthodoxy is the appropriate theology for the contemporary church. Rather, it is because the version of Radical Orthodoxy that Smith presents is innocuous. The Radical Orthodoxy that Smith recommends is confessional, prizes particularity and embodiment, and endorses tradition without falling prey to traditionalism. Many of the features of Radical Orthodoxy that Smith discusses are in fact embraced by other confessional theologies, so it does not become apparent as to why Smith recommends Radical Orthodoxy over and above other creedal theologies.

The features of Radical Orthodoxy that I find most problematic are not on display in *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*, but since Smith is promoting Radical Orthodoxy, I will express some of my reservations about that theological perspective.

Smith quotes Radical Orthodoxy's most important exponent, John Milbank, that "the pathos of modern theology is its false humility." According to Smith and Milbank, theology has conceded too much to non-theological viewpoints. Modern and liberal theologians allowed secular pursuits like science and philosophy to set the standards for intellectual respectability, and then they frantically busied themselves with the task of reconfiguring Christian doctrine and practice to measure up to secular standards, jettisoning whatever didn't pass muster.

This criticism of modern theology is accurate and timely. The problem is that Radical Orthodoxy over-compensates for modern theology's failings. The attitude that pervades Radical Orthodoxy is evident in sentences such as these: "The core of the RO project is the confident claim that only theology can properly understand the world and orient just, charitable practice"; "The event of transubstantiation in the Eucharist is the condition of possibility for all human meaning"; "Only Christian theology now offers a discourse able to position and overcome nihilism itself." One of the principal theses of Radical Orthodoxy is: "Radical Orthodoxy defers to no experts and engages in no 'dialogues,' because it does not recognize other valid points of view outside the theological." (These and other representative sentences from Radical Orthodoxy authors are helpfully presented in Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 166).

The problem with all this is that Radical Orthodoxy rhetorically positions itself as an absolute rival to all alternative perspectives. But Romand Coles exposes the dangers that attend a posture of rivalry: "A tradition committed thus is likely to educate sensibilities in ways that engender a blindness and deafness toward others, a lack of receptivity that is prone to remarkable invulnerability and erring for a long period. For this commitment makes the other a priori a 'rival' first and foremost. And as the energies, passions, and investments of rivalry predominate, our teleological efforts so intensify that our ears fill solely with the bustle of our own motion and become nearly incapable of hearing other voices within and beyond the limits of 'our' community" (*Beyond Gated Politics*, 174).

Now, if we are not to be vulgar relativists, we cannot do away with rivalry altogether. The issue is the manner in which contestation is conducted. When Radical Orthodoxy presents theology as the only valid perspective that can account for morality and meaning, it does so only by systematically ignoring the tenuousness of orthodoxy's core theological claims: that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, that God exists, that God is good, that God is involved in human history, and so on. If we are not so thoroughly socialized into an insulated Christian community that these claims have acquired the status of self-evidency, we have to admit that they are far from obvious. Sometimes they even seem absurd in the face of so much apparently contrary evidence. Even St. Paul thought them foolishness! Radical Orthodoxy's

strategy of debunking all alternative perspectives proceeds only by sheltering their own commitments from critical scrutiny.

Many of us who share space, whether in friendship, family, or classroom, with non-Christians are sensitive to the doubts and questions these have about our Christian commitments. As we attempt to explain to them our religious commitments, our sense of the hiddenness of God is painfully acute. We agree with Lesslie Newbigin's sentiment, which Smith cites, that the church is the apologetic—a leaving, breathing apologetic—for the gospel, but often we worry that the conduct of Christian community is less than convincing. We believe, but pray for help with our unbelief. We persist in Christian practice on the grounds of our real conviction that we have encountered God's grace, but this conviction has a certain fragility to it. We could never sponsor the bombastic claim, so prevalent in Radical Orthodoxy, that no other perspective has plausible answers to life's mysteries.

Pluralism is an unavoidable fact of contemporary society, and Radical Orthodoxy's aggressiveness toward competing perspectives just seems the wrong way to proceed. Milbank is right to chide theologians for false humility, but the opposite of false humility is true humility, not false pride. Or, in Newbigin's terms, "proper confidence," not false confidence.

To return to *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*, one of my few points of disagreement with the explicit contents of chapter 5 concerns Smith's criticism of non-denominational and non-hierarchical forms of church. Smith says these are inspired by modern, liberal notions of freedom-as-autonomy. As a general judgment of non-denominationalism and free church theology, that seems uncharitable to me. Another interpretation would say these churches subscribe not to anti-authoritarianism, but to a conception of the mediation of God's authority that is different from the hierarchalists.

Smith's advocacy of traditional, hierarchical forms of church organization and worship leads him to accuse non-traditional and experimental forms of worship with "ritual-phobia": "The iconoclasm and ritual-phobia of evangelical worship bear affinity with the disenchanting world bequeathed to us by the immanentism of modern science" (136). As an ecclesiological pluralist who welcomes experimentation in worship style and church organization, I find this claim unconvincing. Smith tells us that endorsing traditional worship and hierarchical organization is a matter of embracing history. But to pass contingent and particular forms of traditional worship off as though they are universally binding is not an embrace of history, it is to posit the worship styles as ahistorical, as if they dropped out of heaven with universal legitimacy.

The problem, as Smith's chapter on Derrida and hermeneutics makes clear, is that different people interpret traditional ecclesial symbols differently. For some a traditional ritual conducted within traditional church architecture may communicate the holiness, transcendence, and majesty of God. For others, the same ritual and

setting may communicate that God is a relic of a bygone era. Traditional symbols may evoke associations of the sexism, colonialism, and violence of Church history. Rather than insist that we all interpret the symbols of Christian worship in the same way, I welcome the presence of both traditional patterns of worship and innovative communities that employ novel symbologies in their expression of their creedal faith. "Let a thousand flowers bloom." Innovation, even radical, is not necessarily at odds with tradition. And for those who assume that any deviation from traditional ritual symbols is necessarily consumeristic, we must reply that this is simply mistaken. Members of a traditional church can be as mired in capitalism as anyone, and liturgically innovative churches may fashion exemplary countercultural witnesses against the dominance of global capitalism.

So I don't find in Radical Orthodoxy, hierarchy, or traditional ritual the answers to the challenges that face the contemporary church. Nevertheless, I join with Smith in celebrating a confessional catholicism that prizes particularity and embodiment. I hope, and am confident, that Smith's interactions with Continental philosophy will prove a helpful aid for many as they struggle to understand their faith and their world.

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: [Applied Radical Orthodoxy](#)

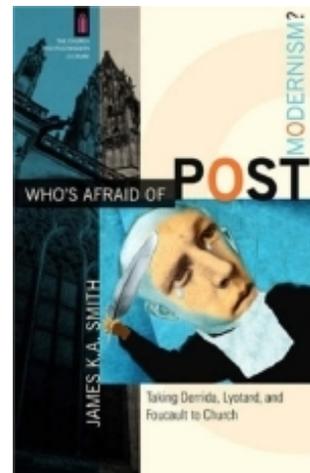
Who's afraid of doubt? Some reflections on purity and corruption

by Pete Rollins

Here is our fifth and final engagement with James K.A. Smith's "[Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?](#)", by [Pete Rollins](#), the founder of [Ikona](#) community in Northern Ireland, and a working philosopher and author of *How (Not) to Speak of God* (a book which we will be working through in similar fashion in October). See also engagements [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), and [4](#).

Smith Who's Afraid of Doubt? Some Reflections on purity and Corruption ([download](#))

Reflections on Chapter 2 – Nothing Outside the Text? Derrida, Deconstruction, and Scripture



By Pete Rollins

In this brief reflection on James K. A. Smith's *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism* I will restrict my main comments to chapter two (the chapter dealing with Derrida) with a few citations and reflections on other parts as necessary. Smith's reading of the much maligned and misunderstood Derridian phrase "there is nothing outside the text" is a clear, concise and faithful introduction to Derrida's wider intellectual project. In short, he points out how Derrida argued that what we experience as reality is always already interpreted and that this interpretation is not something to by-pass,¹ or bemoan with resigned acceptance,² but rather embrace as constitutive of what it means to be a self-conscious being located in a certain place at a certain time. In doing so he helps to clear up the idea of Derrida as a "linguistic idealist" (believing that nothing exists outside language) showing how his approach more subtly helps to reveal the ubiquitous nature of interpretation.

By offering this clear, charitable and faithful interpretation of Derrida (as well as of Lyotard and Foucault) Smith has done the Christian community an important service. However, once the commentary on these central figures comes to an end and the (radically?) Orthodox Smith gets his hands dirty in religious application I, as a heretic of sorts, start to get a little nervous. There are a number of issues I would like to raise (for example the role of the – Catholic – Church in interpretation) however I will restrict my comments to Smith's understanding of the perennial question put to Jesus by Pontius Pilot – the question concerning truth.

In order to do this I wish to pick up on Smith's idea concerning good and true interpretations. On page 44 Smith employs the analogy of a cup to argue that the Derridian affirmation of ubiquitous interpretation does not condemn us to drinking the hemlock of crude relativism. While the idea of a "cup" is already an interpretation rather than some brute fact which we encounter in the world (i.e. to a child our idea of a cup may be interpreted as a drum), he argues that this acknowledgement does not in any way take away from the fact that using this cup to drink liquid is both a good interpretation (the cup is ideally suited to this task) and a true one (this was the original intention that lay behind its creation). He then applies this logic to the crucifixion of Jesus, demonstrating how one person can see it as the mere execution of a criminal while another can experience it as the sacrifice of God by God.

While acknowledging that both of these are interpretations of the same event and that we must allow for the existence of a plurality of interpretations, he takes up a (radicalised) version of Francis Schaeffer's presuppositionalism to argue that the Christian interpretation of such events is good (which, by implication, means better

¹ Which is impossible as the world does not stand between us and a "text" but is itself a type of "text"

² As if some better state beyond interpretation lies behind us in a pre-lapsarian paradise or ahead of us in as a heavenly *telos*

than opposing interpretations) and, because of “regeneration of the heart and mind” combined with “revelation in scriptures” (p48), true. Of course he is clear in pointing out that this truth is not some unmediated, pre-interpretive fact that mirrors the Real and is provable via disinterested empirical observation, for example he writes that “we can’t *know* the gospel is true, *if* by knowledge we mean unmediated objectivity or pure access to ‘the way things are’” (p44, italics his). If we had been witnesses to the crucifixion, for example, there would have been no divine light emanating from the eyes of the crucified Christ or halo around his head to legitimate the Christian reading over all others. No linguistic analysis, DNA testing, or clever detective work would solve the mystery and render it into some scientific “fact”. It is a way of seeing the crucifixion rather than something which is merely seen in it.

The overall trajectory of the book thus affirms the idea that we can talk about truth as *an affirmation of good and true Scriptural interpretation backed up by the regenerated mind and helped along by the interpretive tradition of the Catholic Church*. In short, truth is affirmed, not as some rational, universal fact open to all via the use of our reasoning facilities (truth as universal), but rather is ensured by the idea that God has given us a shake and informed us of the inside line (truth as particular). Here the arrogance of saying “I am right and you are wrong because I have worked things out” is replaced with the supposed humility of “I am right and you are wrong because God told me so”.

Smith is at great pains to reject the moves of modern epistemology and believes that this approach accomplishes this while retaining the notion of truth as a meaningful concept. However, the question must be asked as to whether Smith’s approach is itself still too caught up in the tentacles of Cartesian epistemology.

What is truth?

While Smith seeks to reject the Greek-influenced Cartesian idea of truth as a universal fact that can be indubitably demonstrated by Reason (as true in all places and at all times) he seems content to keep the kernel of this epistemology intact: namely the idea of truth as *knowing what we know*. In other words, central to the Cartesian idea is that we can know (through the application of reason) that our interpretations about certain aspects of reality reflect the nature of things. The reformulation found in *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism* can be described as something like this: we can know (through regeneration, revelation and the Christian tradition) that our interpretations about certain aspects of reality are good and true. Thus there is a rejection of the universal as foundation (Reason) in favour of the particular as foundation (Revelation made clear via regeneration and the church tradition). The problem here is not the move that Smith makes from the universal to the particular, but rather the fact that Smith’s alternative still operates as a type of (floating) foundation designed in such a way as to protect us from the mischief of that joker named doubt.

Smith appears to claim that we can knowingly hold a true interpretation of reality while simultaneously rejecting the Modern claim that we require solid evidence (evidentialism) and rational foundations (foundationalism) in order to sustain such a claim (for the criteria needed for truth are a gift rather than a universal given, p49). The reason for this claim to truth seems to be four-fold, first we have a good and true interpretation of the world because our minds have been regenerated, secondly, because we have access to the revelation of scripture, thirdly, because we are part of a larger interpretive tradition which has already been regenerated and taken the time to study the revelation and fourthly, because Christianity, when presupposed, makes better sense of the world than other narratives.

While each of these is interesting and important I fail to see (1) how these ground our interpretations in such a way that we may call them “good” and “true” and (2) why we would ever need to think that they do.

Here I think that Smith misses the problem with Descartes, the issue is not simply that he mistakenly thought that we can back up truth claims with indubitable evidence and foundations but, perhaps more fundamentally, that he thought we *needed* to ground and legitimate our religious beliefs in truth claims. It is here that Smith’s desire to maintain truth claims (albeit in a more particular and humble way) seems problematic. If Smith is offering a radically different way of understanding truth (which I think must be done) then he fails to outline what that difference is (except to hint at the affirmation of the particular over the universal).

While Smith rightly wants to reject the application of modern epistemology to the area of faith he seems to want to retain the belief that his interpretations, at their best, are good, noble, beautiful and true. Rather I would want to argue that we must relinquish our desire for truth as intellectual understanding attained either via Reason or Revelation and acknowledge that the affirmation of reason, regeneration, revelation and tradition, vital as they are, can never give us a God’s eye view of the world (although Smith may explicitly agree here with what I am saying his work seems to implicitly reject it). Rather I would argue that we must seek a more ancient and religious sense of truth that refers to the event of being caught up in process of soteriological transformation (a transformation that brings healing and salvation to the world). Truth is thus not some system we possess but rather the divine grasp that possess and transforms us.

From demonstration, through proclamation, to transformation

Smith’s understanding of truth claims leads him to take up the somewhat Barthian stance that Christianity “is not then demonstration but rather proclamation” (p28), in other words we should not waste our time trying to show people that Christianity is true (for it is not accessible to Universal Reason) but rather preach that it is true (because we are sure as a result of regeneration, revelation and the teaching of the Church). The thing that each of these ideas share is the Cowboy and Indian conviction that “we” are right and “they” are wrong. However, by listening to

Derrida, I believe we are brought beyond both these positions and carried back to the idea that Christianity is more about entering into a process of transformation (in the world and the self) than either demonstration or proclamation. The advantage that transformation has over and above both demonstration and proclamation concerns the fact that it is not bound into making claims concerning Christianity as a good and true interpretation of reality but rather it is concerned with seeing Christianity as a means of entering into a soteriological rebirth. This is not to say that we don't engage with others intellectually or preach from pulpits (both are important) but rather that we primarily seek to express our faith *in* Christ by attempting to live out the faith of Christ. This does not mean that we have to judge every worldview equally, we can still affirm our own interpretations – the point is simply that we are open to the doubt, complexity and ambiguity which accompanies our interpretations of what we believe is revelation, and thus we are always open to listen and learn from others (something Radical Orthodoxy rejects as correlationist).

Whereas for Smith Revelation seems to be a way of making manifest some divine secret and offering clarity I argue in *How (Not) to Speak of God* that Revelation ought to be understood, not as a foundation which guarantees the purity of our interpretations, but rather evokes a form of doubt, complexity and ambiguity because of its structural form. In this reading religious truth is not overly concerned with whether its dogmas are understood to be good and true interpretations of the Real.

Christianity: good or bad?

In order to understand this let us return to the analogy of the cup. We interpret a cup “well” when we interpret it as a vessel to drink liquid from – we may say that it is both a good interpretation (the cup works well in this capacity) and a true interpretation (the designer had this task in mind when making the cup). So is Christianity analogous to this? Let me change the analogy slightly by saying that one day we go into our back yard and see a cup-like artefact float to the earth and land on the ground. Being short of a glass we take this object into the kitchen and begin to use it as something to drink out of. In this instance one could say that our interpretation of the cup-like artefact is good (as it works as a cup) but not necessarily true – who knows what the original intention of this object was. Let us then change the analogy slightly more and say that this cup-like object has a tendency to spill from time to time. Here we could say that our interpretation of the object as a cup is not really all that good and probably not true.

So how do we apply this to our interpretations of scripture? In many ways we could say that our religious interpretations (as individuals and the church) oscillate between the second and the third examples of this analogy. Sometimes our interpretations seem to work well and sometimes they don't seem to fit at all with the world of our experience. When faced with the latter we may try to look at the world differently, adapt our thinking or live with the tension. The point is that our religious interpretation of the world sometimes falls short, like all interpretations of the world. Unlike the claims of the religious presuppositionalists, Christianity does not

necessarily offer a wholly coherent and consistent view of the world, at least from our human, all too human, perspective. Thus our faith can often seem like anything but a good interpretation, yet we do not give it up because of this.

Christianity – true or untrue?

Returning to the analogy above, the cup-like artefact is to some extent divorced from the idea of truth for we have no direct access to its source. This is not a rejection of the fact that something happened (an object descending from the sky) or that there is a source, but simply an acknowledgement that all our interpretations, whether good or bad, are exactly that: interpretations. With Kierkegaard we ought to reject those who would speak of the Christ event merely as something distant in terms of a temporal event and near to us in terms of our ability to grasp and rather affirm its nearness in terms of time (an event which transforms us right here, right now) and its immense distance in terms of the gulf between the occurrence of the event and our understanding of it. This is thus no modern liberal rejection of particularity (for we affirm the happening) but neither is it a pre-modern conservative embrace of exclusionary revelation (for the happening is not colonised with absolute claims). In other words, we do not deny the sense in which we have been overcome by the event of Revelation; we only claim that we cannot gain a God's eye view of it. This does not mean that we are unable to make certain claims concerning God but rather that we must always acknowledge the falsehood in their truth, or, in different words, the lie embedded in every belief (for example in the Lord's Prayer God is named as "Father" and then we are immediately told that God is holy, thus saying that God is set apart from all our names and thus not limited to our understanding of Fatherhood).

So, in line with Kierkegaard, we could say that our religious interpretations are sometimes experienced as *bad* and *untrue* but that this does not require that we abandon them (I am thinking here of Abraham's experience). Sometimes our interpretations may seem good and true, and sometimes they may seem bad and profoundly untrue (never reaching that which they intend toward), but this is beside the point, for the Christian affirms Christ with deep fidelity despite the ebbs and flows of our certainty and doubt.

Religion without religion

Here we must embrace precisely that which Smith rejects as a "sanctified version of religious skepticism" (p116), namely a (scriptural) *religion without religion* that sacrifices itself to its beloved without care for the type of certainty that still lurks as a shadow in Smith's thought. A faith that loves but which questions that which it loves in the midst of its love.

We overcome the problems of modern epistemology in the church not by claiming correct understanding by other means but rather by seeing through the claim that we must affirm some correct understanding in the first place (while Smith seems to acknowledge this at times, it is muddled by his desire to have a heavenly hermeneutic

gained via revelation, regeneration and tradition). The love of God does not require that we have a good and true interpretation of the world gained via the teaching of the (Catholic) Church, the love of God requires only the love of God: for a lover the only criteria is love and the only door to the beloved is seduction. Such a faith tentatively embraces the ideas of reason, regeneration, revelation and tradition, but more as tools that help us approach and bask in the mystery of God rather than exposing it. In Latin “love alone” and “seduction alone” could be rendered (with my terrible Latin) *Sola Amor, Sola corruptio*. Perhaps these phrases betray the fact that a hermeneutics directed by love and the seduction of God will never be pure but will always, of necessity, be a gloriously corrupt one.

* *The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here:*
[Who's Afraid of Doubt? Some Reflections on Purity and Corruption](#)

Events: 'Belief and Metaphysics' conference, a diary by Eric Lee



Geoff and Jamie have kindly asked me to provide an account of my time at the ['Belief and Metaphysics'](#) conference which took place last month in Granada, Spain. Below is a slightly altered cross-post of what originally appeared [here](#).

See also Jamie Smith's [pictures](#) from last year's conference, as well as his "Dispatches from Spain" - [part 1](#), [part 2](#), & [part 3](#).

Back in March of this year, [Conor Cunningham](#) invited me to attend a conference in Granada, Spain called ['Belief and Metaphysics'](#). A short time after, he invited me to present a paper there. After a little deliberation (i.e. "I am no where *near* being close to the same league as them"), I accepted.



[Photo credit: Peter Candler]

After some rather horrible travel incidents (lost passport, lost luggage, but found both), my wife Tiana and I arrived around 6:30pm, Granada time. Due to our luggage being lost, retrieving it made me late for my own presentation at 3:45, but Guillermo Peris, a professor at the [seminary](#) where the conference is hosted, was rather kind and took care of rescheduling me with Conor to a later time. At 7:30, I presented my paper called "From Copenhagen to Cambrai: Paradoxes of Faith in Kierkegaard and de Lubac." John Milbank chaired it, and he was very gracious and complimentary towards me about it, saying it was "very good" (I will be posting my paper on my own [blog](#) later with more comments from Milbank, for those who are interested).

Concerning the conference itself, the people attending, the papers presented, the fellowship, and the food, the whole event was, in my opinion, wonderful. Conor Cunningham and [Peter Candler](#), [Tony Baker](#), [Robert Miner](#), [Oliva Blanchette](#), among others, were very welcoming of me-- me being perhaps the most uneducated person attending the conference.

The topic of the conference was, as the title suggests, 'Belief and Metaphysics.' And, the quotation used to also set the topical stage was one by [Paul Churchland](#): '**Could it turn out that nobody has ever believed anything?**' On the second day of the conference, John Milbank's paper on 'Ontology, Religion and Terror', prefixed by a very long 'prolegomena' the evening before, offered a guiding contour to the proceedings. Before him, Louis Dupré's paper was excellent as well. Also, quite importantly, Conor Cunningham's paper called 'Trying my Very Best to Believe Darwin: The Supernaturalistic Fallacy: From Is to Nought' spoke to the above Churchland quotation.



While it would be ridiculous to provide summaries of all the presentations I attended (just see [the program](#) to get a feel of the breadth and diversity of the crowd), I would like to offer snapshots of part of John Milbank's talk, Conor Cunningham's paper, as well as the last section of Merold Westphal's presentation. John Milbank's paper was quite good, but I would have to

[Photo credit:
Peter Candler]

hear (or read it) again to do any justice to providing any kind of summary (I remember he dealt a lot with Scotus). But, a comment he provided in the question and answer session would be a good place to start.

After Milbank had read his paper, somebody in the crowd stood up and posed a question that expressed a nagging confusion about what the whole 'Radical Orthodoxy' thing is all about. By his own admission, he had come to the conference largely in part to figure out what Radical Orthodoxy is, and after a day and a half of presentations, and after listening to Milbank -- Dr. Radical Orthodoxy himself -- said commenter was still confused (I apologize for I never caught his name). He also asked a question about Aquinas I'm far to ill-informed about to repeat or remember, but Milbank's response contained something like this: "[Henri] de Lubac is my hero in this regard. I never want to have a theology without metaphysics, nor a metaphysics without transcendence" (rough paraphrase). His implication is that he would much rather not be either a 'revelational positivist' on the one hand or a philosopher of pure immanence on the other; thus, a kind of 'suspended' theology and philosophy. [During Milbank's lecture, he made a good handful of wry comments: see the picture below of Oliva and Louis smirking.]



Conor Cunningham's paper on Darwin was extremely well-done. In sum, he believes that it is perfectly fine--even good!--for Christians to agree with many of Darwin's observations and some of his conclusions, but he wants to stay clear away from many of Darwin's followers who have taken his logic and twisted Darwin's descriptive work into an acidic prescription for all reality.

Also, against Darwin's disciples who have taken his ideas to an extreme, consider the following: One may observe a scene of a woman pouring tea into a cup on a table, and one may proceed to analyze the table and cup by breaking it up into its molecular and atomic parts, but one must not apply the same investigation to the woman for the purpose of explaining why she is pouring the coffee, who she really is, or if she has any beliefs about anything and why she believes them to be so. Hence, Churchland's question, 'Could it turn out that nobody has ever believed anything' reflects that the methods of the science lab have overflowed into the halls of the whole building of reality, like an acid consuming every bit of life so that all is reducible to its natural,

accidental parts. In this view, no one really has believed anything, for beliefs are mere theoretic constructs produced by brainwaves, etc. [See below, a picture of Conor 'trying his very best to believe Darwin']



[Merold Westphal](#) also gave an excellent paper called 'The Use and Abuse of Metaphysics for the Life of Faith.' In it he discussed Marion and refuted parts of a critique of him by Milbank, but the main part that I remembered (it was the part I retold to Tiana, anyway!), was an example of 'overcoming metaphysics' (in the sense, I imagine, of pure metaphysics, or perhaps along the lines of his *Overcoming Onto-Theology*). Westphal's example begins by talking about when he was in college, and he met this girl who he found quite attractive. They took a class together, and he would often position himself across the classroom from her so that he could 'observe' her while also appearing to pay attention to the professor. They dated a little bit during the fall, and he wondered if he would ever fall for her. In the spring, he did--and he fell, *hard*. They started seriously dating, thus entering into a real relationship, and she was no longer that observed, objectified person from across the room; now, after 44 years of marriage, of participating in a sacramental union with one another, he had, in a sense, 'overcome metaphysics.' I thought this was a wonderful example, and Westphal --of course-- narrated his own story much better than I ever could (like many of the papers at the conference, I would love to get a copy of his!).



Craig Keen

I also had the pleasure of meeting Craig and Elesha Keen. Craig used to teach at Olivet Nazarene, but now teaches at Azusa. I had briefly met him before at a Wesleyan conference at [my school](#), so it was good to hear him present another paper and to share a few meals with him. He used to teach at PLNU in the late 70's, filling in for Dr. Herb Prince at one point (I *think* this is right). He moved on to other schools, and now his daughter Heather Ross is teaching in the fulltime position at PLNU now that Dr. Prince has retired. It was also fun to hear about Tony Baker's connection with him as a student of Dr. Keen's at Olivet. They were reading through Milbank's *The Word Made Strange* (it had just come out), and then

Tony went on to study under Milbank at the University of Virginia (Milbank has since [moved on](#)).

The second night of the conference, there was a very nice banquet held in one of the courtyards of the seminary. We were treated to multiple courses as well as a wonderful flamenco show. We were told by the Archbishop that this was more authentic than what tourists usually see on the streets. What a great show! We didn't want it to end.



Beyond the content of the papers, as the Archbishop Javier Martínez pointed out in his concluding remarks, Conor Cunningham did an excellent job of organizing a conference of great theological, philosophical, and even denominational variety. Continental, analytic philosophers; Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, and a Nazarene (me!); evolutionary biologists, critical theorists/psychoanalysts, political theorists, and perhaps a nihilist or two (although Conor, in his ever confessional mode, would say, "we're all nihilists!"). The discussions after the papers and into the evenings were a wealth of fun and intellectual rigor. When he gave his paper during the latter half of the conference, one brilliant Derridian/Kierkegaardian scholar even altered the shape of his paper after engaging in discussions sparked by the work of others during the first half of the conference.



Archbishop Javier Martínez

When our stay in Granada came to an end, we spent a couple days in Málaga to check out the Picasso museums and see the attractions there before heading home and recovering from jetlag and illnesses we contracted about halfway through the trip. The actual *travelling* part of the trip contained some of the most annoying and difficult things we have ever had to deal with, but during our actual stay in Granada and Málaga, we had a wonderful time. The people were extremely hospitable, and for that, we were both thankful.

The 'Belief and Metaphysics' conference provided a wonderful place for dialogue, intellectual sharpening, and perhaps most of all, friendship. I consider myself very blessed to have been a part of the proceedings. I would like to extend a special thanks to Conor Cunningham for the invite; to Point Loma Nazarene University for the warm encouragement and financial help to make the flight over there; and most of all, to Tiana for all of her support and patience through all the craziness of the travels. The rumor is that next year is in Venice!

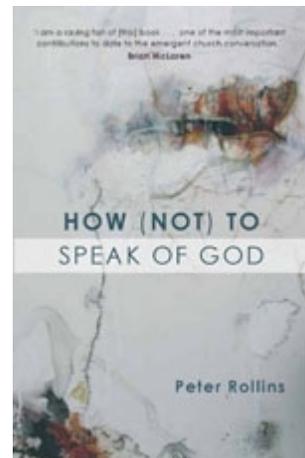
* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: [‘Belief and Metaphysics Conference,’ a diary](#)

How (Not) to Speak of God

by Adele Sakler

Here is the first of four engagements around Pete Rollins' [How \(Not\) to Speak of God](#). It is by Adele Sakler, who lives in Richmond, VA, and is pursuing Doctoral work in Theology & Philosophy at [George Fox Seminary](#). Adele can also be found at [existential punk](#).

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"How (Not) To Speak Of God" by Peter Rollins, SPCK, London, England, 2006. The purpose of this piece is to enlighten readers to my interaction with this book. I am offering a summary, my observations, what I believe the author is attempting to communicate, my doubts and objections, and finally, an assessment of the book. My hope is that this will whet the reader's appetite and that they will then read the book for themselves with an open mind.

On the back cover Jonny Bakers states "This book brings together Christian mysticism, postmodern philosophy, and the practices and liturgies of an alternative

worship community trying to make sense of Christianity in a postmodern environment. The results are stunning - original, provocative, and creative." Rollins' book is divided between two parts: Part One is a philosophical and theological treatise of Rollins' thoughts and contributions to the emerging conversation from his academic days at Queens University in Belfast. Part Two contains this learned knowledge in praxis and experimentation in an emerging project Rollins found in Belfast called Ikon. As people read Rollins book for themselves, they need to remember Rollins' conclusion as "...the territory I thought I was helping to chart was actually discovered a long time ago by my ancestors. It is both frustrating and comforting that no matter how fast I run, those who have long since died have already arrived at where I am attempting to go." (Rollins, xv) This humility, in my opinion, helps the reader to more ably roll with the punches of some uncomfortable and "scary" ideas that will definitely push buttons and quite possibly cause some readers to be pushed to the edge.

Today more than ever, especially in the United States, there is a great polarization, whether in politics or religion, that is fighting tooth and nail to push an agenda. Especially in matters of faith for the Christian right there is a fight to keep absolutes at the forefront and a plot to squelch relativism. Chapter 1, *God rid me of God*, explores this theme. Rollins sees the emerging church moving beyond these polarities of absolutism and relativism as he views both of these extremes as idolatrous. (p. 2) The idea is to move away from our western way of seeing, viewing and being Christian and recapture our eastern, Hebraic roots. Rollins, through his work in this book wants us to see "...the orthodox Christian as one who believes in the right way - that is, believing in a loving, sacrificial and Christlike [sic] manner." (Pp. 2-3) In other words, by believing in the right way versus having right beliefs, we can move beyond meaninglessness and relativism. For Rollins, relativism is "self-contradictory because to say there is no meaning in the universe is itself a meaningful statement." (p. 11)

In Chapter 2, *The Aftermath of theology*, Rollins discusses two different ways in which we approach religious tradition. One way is admitting God exists and acknowledging that we can be in a loving relationship with God yet recognizing our ability to fully grasp God is limited. In other words, "God cannot be reduced to our understanding of that relationship." (p.20) The second way in which we approach this religious tradition is by squeezing tightly onto our dogmatic belief systems and therefore, thinking we have God figured out. This form of boxing God in is a violent handling of God and brings about violence to God's children. This is "...a type of idolatrous relation in which we believe that our ideas actually represent the way that God and the world really operate." (p. 20-21) This is nothing more than Pharisaical pride that Jesus always spoke against. Instead of white knuckling the laws, we need to let go and allow God to overtake us and free us to be who God wants us to be. As people of God we "...must speak and yet we must maintain our silence, we must maintain distance amidst proximity of God, and we must worship while being careful not to make God into the object of our worship." (p. 30) God is not an object to be grasped but rather seduces and transforms us as evidenced in real living examples of

transformed lives that have encountered God in authentic relationship instead of lofty ideals.

Within Chapter 3, *A/theology as icon* and Chapter 4, *Inhabiting the God-shaped hole*, I see real arguments arising from US American evangelical right wing Christians who view Christianity through modern lenses. There is much they would pick apart with their seasoned answers throughout the entire book, but my focus will remain within these two chapters. Rollins states that "This emerging a/theology can thus be described as a genuinely ecumenical device, for by unsettling and decentring [sic] any idea of a one true interpretation held by one group over and against all the others, a network of bridges is formed between different interpretative communities who acknowledge that we are all engaged in an interpretive process which can never do justice to the revelation itself." (p. 31) By reading this, these modern thinking Christians feel they have their point proven that postmodern thought is relativistic and that it is this kind of thinking that enables theology to accommodate culture in the wrong ways.

Another place in Chapter 3 where I see Rollins ruffling feathers is his idea of evangelism. Most evangelical Christians view evangelism as a persuasive means of communicating Biblical truth in order to give someone an answer. For Rollins, evangelism means "...we must have faith to believe that those who seek will find for themselves...If this is true, then the job of the Church is not to provide an answer - for the answer is not a phrase or doctrine - but rather to help encourage the religious question to arise." (Pp. 40-41) In other words, we are to be an aroma of God to people. This is a really radical paradigm shift in thinking and, once the dust settles, can either offer an epiphany or burning anger and heartburn. For those who have all their ducks in a row, all their answers neatly packaged, this will seem absurd and ungodly. For those open to rethinking these things, then it will take what Kierkegaard calls a "leap of faith" into the absurd as when Abraham obeyed God to sacrifice Isaac. God commanded that we shall not commit murder but then asks Abraham to do the unthinkable - kill his son. Why didn't Abraham question God about this because it certainly was absurd? Yet, Abraham took a leap of faith into the absurd to be faithful to God.

A place in Chapter 4 where I believe Rollins will find some critique is the idea of death bringing us into more authentic beings. Philosopher Martin Heidegger believed "it is only in realizing that we are moving towards death that we can become authentic human beings, for once we realize that we are going to die, we take more responsibility for our life." (p. 47) Many Christians believe they are already authentic by being true to God and the Bible. People who are not followers of Christ I believe are searching for authenticity but I would beg to differ that people are thinking about death. They are in love with the here and now of their lives and thus, are already taking responsibility for their lives. Thinking about death is a spiritual issue and many people are not spiritual in the sense that Christians define spiritual.

I really enjoyed this book and found it to be well thought out, researched, and scholarly. My belief is that Rollins genuinely knows the pulse of this emerging generation and offers valid and comprehensible thought and praxis. He understands the difference between religion and faith, where religion is a human attempt to define God, and faith is a place of holding our ideas of God loosely. "A true seeking after God results from an experience of God which one falls in love with for no other reason other than finding God irresistibly lovable" (p. 50). This is my prayer for myself and brings to mind a parable I once found on Ikon's web site:

Whoever shall lose their life

There is an ancient story, passed down through the generations that tells of a group of unknown disciples who witnessed the bloody crucifixion of Christ.

Not able to stay another moment in the place where their Messiah had just been crucified they packed their few belongings and left for a distant shore. With great sorrow they turned their back on the place of their birth, never to return. Instead they founded an isolated community far away from Jerusalem. On the first night that they set up camp each disciple vowed to keep the ground holy, they promised that as long as they were permitted to live they would keep the memory of Christ alive and endeavour to follow the way that he had once taught.

The community lived in great solitude for over a hundred years, spending their days reflecting upon the life of Jesus and attempting to remain faithful to his ways. All this despite the overwhelming sorrow in their hearts and the harrowing sacrifices that such a dedicated life required.

Endless days passed until at dawn one morning, a small band of missionaries stumbled upon the isolated settlement. These preachers of the Word were amazed by the community that they found, they were startled by the fact that these dedicated disciples of Christ had no knowledge of his resurrection and ascension. Without hesitation the missionaries gathered together the entire community and taught them about the events that had transpired after the horrific crucifixion of their Lord, telling them of His victory over sin and death and the subsequent rewards we can partake of because of this.

That evening there was a great celebration in the camp. Yet, as the night grew dark, one of the younger missionaries noticed that the leader of the community was absent. This bothered the young man and so he set out to look for the elder. After some time he eventually found the leader kneeling in the corner of a small hut, on the fringe of the village, praying and weeping.

"Why are you in such sorrow", asked the missionary in amazement "for now is the hour for great celebration".

”Indeed” replied the elder, who was all the while crouched on the floor, ‘this is an hour for rejoicing, but it is also a time for great sorrow”.

“For over a hundred years we have followed the ways taught to us by Christ. We emulated his teachings faithfully even though it cost us deeply, and we remained resolute despite the belief that death had defeated Him and would one day defeat us also”.

The elder slowly got to his feet and looked the missionary compassionately in the face.

”Each day we have forsaken our very lives for Him. Why? Because we judge Him wholly worthy of the sacrifice, wholly worthy of our being. You find me now, praying for myself and for my future generations, for I am fearful that we may one day follow him not because we love Him and believe him to be worthy of that love, but rather because we love ourselves and want the treasures of eternal life that he offers”. After offering these thoughts to the young missionary, the elder left the hut and made his way to the celebration, leaving the teacher on his knees in quiet contemplation.” (Adapted from an Islamic story)

May we all continually become aware of God and our need for God indwelling every fiber of our being. Amen!

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: [How \(Not\) To Speak of God](#)

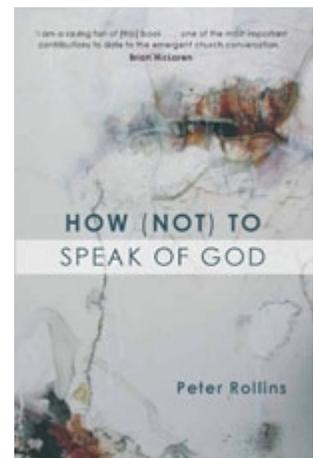
De-scribing Theology

by Christopher Roussel

Here is the second of four engagements around Pete Rollins' [How \(Not\) to Speak of God](#). It is by Christopher Roussel, who currently lives in Denver, CO and is pursuing a Master's degree in Religious Studies at the University of Denver. Christopher can also be found at [impleri](#).

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The disaster, unexperienced. It is what escapes the very possibility of experience—it is the limit of writing. This must be repeated: the disaster de-scribes. Which does not mean that the disaster, as the



force of writing, is excluded from it, is beyond the pale of writing or extratextual.
Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

In the introduction to his book, Pete Rollins mentions that "the only people who seemed to be taking this subject [the mystical approach] seriously were the supposedly nihilistic postmodern philosophers" (p xiii). In many ways, this is exactly the current situation in theological discourses. Is it even possible to find a seminary/divinity school/school of theology/whatever it is that produces theologians that espouses a "traditional," "orthodox" theology while also engaging with either the mystical approach or the postmodern philosophers? I know that I haven't been able to find one that actively claims such a position. With that in mind, I thought it would be worthwhile to highlight/point out/draw connections between Rollins and some of the postmodern philosophers. I am not sure how accurate these connections truly are (i.e. I'm not sure Rollins will agree with me), but I see similarities in *How (Not) to Speak of God* and two philosophers in particular Jack Caputo and Mark C. Taylor. So, I think we have here some good groups of thought that will be painted together to give a more robust picture of what Rollins throws into the term of "heretical orthodoxy."

A/theology isn't something new. Mark C. Taylor seems to have first used the word in 1982 and subsequently used in his title for his 1984 book *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*. The term combines the words "theology" and "atheism" to get a definition that floats around "we must still speak of God (theology, as traditionally understood) while also recognizing that this speech fails to define God (a/theology)" (p 21). Ultimately, this leads to a separation between what some (many?) now call onto-theology and this "new" discourse (cf Merold Westphal, John Caputo, & James Marsh in *Modernity and its Discontents*, Westphal's *Overcoming Onto-theology*, and Stan Grenz's *The Named God and the Question of Being*, to name a few). I use "new" rather loosely because the proponents of a/theology suggest that they are returning to the pre-Enlightenment, pre-Medieval theology that had been distorted through those two ages. Through this rejection of a "view from nowhere," Rollins and others (re)paints theology/revelation as concealment in which God reveals God through a mystical/experiential way.

One of the primary foci in this a/theology movement is that of the event. The main point of this foci is that to conceive of God as some **Be-ing**³--as some ontological entity. Caputo writes in his *Weakness of God* (WoG for short) that by rejecting this depiction of God as a being, he "disconnects the energy source that supplies power to the debate about whether there is or is not an entity called God somewhere, up above or here below, inside or outside, here and now or up ahead" (p 10). By this disconnection, we are able to appreciate more fully Zizek's theory in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* that "what we should learn from his [Jesus'] death on the cross is that there is

³ Here, I want to allude to Heidegger in his *Besinnung* (Band 66 of Heidegger's Complete Works, H11-H12) in which he relates the clearing of Be-ing with the Being of insanity. While there is a hot-off-the-press English translation ([Mindfulness](#)), this particular translation was done by me in 2004.

no Big Other to save us" (WoG, 43) because there is no thing to be a Big Other. There is no ontological entity beyond what we already experience because God is not a being. To put this in highly radical terms, "there is no God"--because there is no God to be. This idea may also paint another interpretation of Jesus' crucifixion: it was an end to onto-theology. Jesus, as the only ontological instantiation of God, dies and removes the possibility of an ontological God. This may not be something Rollins is actively pursuing, but his statement that "speaking of God is never speaking of God but only ever speaking about our understanding of God" (p 32) has this in its trajectory. This redefining of God as an event cleans up many dilemmas currently facing theology (e.g. the problem of evil, omniscience and future actions, self-certainty in orthodoxy), but also creates new problems.

Easter an important part of theology and one of these problems. "Classical" theologians seemed to have tossed aside half of it (that God dies) for the other (that Jesus rose again). Mark C. Taylor notes in *Erring* that at the cross, "not only God dies; the self also disappears" (p 33). This comes as a conclusion to a brief look at Nietzsche's "death of God" and project of nihilism in which Taylor draws heavily on Derrida. Taylor uses Derrida (in *Writing and Difference*) to interpret Heidegger by saying: "God is this the proper name of that which deprives us of our nature, of our own birth; consequently he will always have spoken before us, on the sly. He is the difference which insinuates itself between myself and myself as death" (p 23). By experiencing God through the cross, one experiences not only the death of God but also the death of one's self. That is, this experience leads one face to face with one's own "extraneousness to himself" (Lacan, *Language of the Self*, 136). Here, we can begin to see theology as an "interplay of presence/absence and identity/difference" (*Erring* 15). It is through this interplay that one can affirm Rollins when he writes "[i]f one loses one's life only because one believes that this is the way to find it, then one gives up nothing; to truly lose one's life, one must lay down that life without regard to whether or not one finds it" (p 34). This trajectory through Rollins, Derrida, and Taylor give us a twist on Heidegger: it is through this acknowledgment of the death of God and self that authenticity is revealed and we find genuine Christianity. Here, we can acknowledge, in Žižek's words, the "dark underbelly of Christianity" because we are able to look at the crucifixion for what it is in its moments: the death of God and the subsequent death of the self. Hence we can find in Vattimo, "salvation is an event in which kenosis, the abasement of God, is realized more and more fully and so undermines the wisdom of the world, the metaphysical dreams of natural reason which conceive God as absolute, omnipotent and transcendent, as ipsum esse (metaphysicum) subsistens (*Belief*, 49-50). In other words, a/theology is a soteriological event that "understands that God is testified to in the transformed lives of believers rather than in some abstract doctrinal system" (Rollins, 40).

It is through this trajectory of stringing together theology and postmodern philosophy that we find the trajectory towards a "new" theology.

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here:
[De-scribing Theology](#)

If the Lord is Risen, why can't we see Him? by Geoff Holsclaw

Here is the third of five engagements around Pete Rollins' [How \(Not\) to Speak of God](#). It is by Geoff Holsclaw, co-pastor of [Life on the Vine](#), who is preparing for a Ph.D in theology and ethics, investigating the intersection of liturgical theology and far left political theory. Geoff can also be found at [for the time being](#).

[Download If the Lord is Risen, why can't we see Him](#)

“If the Lord is Risen, why can’t we see Him?” ...From Post-Metaphysical to Sacramental Theology

by Geoffrey J.D. Holsclaw

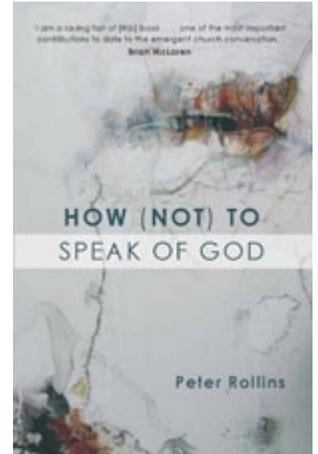
I don’t know about you, but I like it when people just tell me where we are going. So here it is. After an appreciative summary of Pete argument in Part One of How (Not) to Speak of God, I will offer an immanent critique (a critique internal to his presuppositions) of his project. After this I will outline what I see as a continuation of his project by other means, via sacramental theology, attempting to answer the question implicit in the story of the Road to Emmaus, “If the Lord is Risen, why can’t we see Him?”

Appreciative Summary

beyond the conceptual idol

At the very beginning, Pete offers this summary of the contours and trajectory of his book, making a distinction between “right believing” and “believing in the right way.”

“Instead of following the Greek-influence idea of orthodoxy as right belief, these chapters show that the emerging community is helping us to rediscover the more Hebraic and mystical notion of the orthodox Christian as one who believes in the right way—that is, believing in a loving, sacrificial and Christlike manner...Thus orthodoxy is no longer (mis)understood as the opposite of heresy but rather is understood as a term that signals a way of being in the world rather than a means of believing things about the world.” (2-3).



Pete makes this distinction because he is concerned not only with *what* we believe, but also *how* we believe it, taking sides with what he construes as the more Hebraic 'how' of belief against the more Greek 'what' of belief.

He makes this distinction as way of acknowledging the important postmodern critique of knowledge supplied by the hermeneutics of suspicion and the 'critique of ideology' (spurred on by the works of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud). With this critique of knowledge we have come to better see that all our reasoning is culturally situated/mediated rather than objectively neutral, and this includes our conceptions of God. In the wake of this critique emerge two side of the same coin: there is either the conservative reaction denying the mediated status of knowledge/belief, asserting the objective nature of truth, or the liberal reaction of giving up on all God-talk as merely the echoes of the human voice. Pete hopes to offer a third alternative.

Pete hooks up this ideology critique to the biblical critique of idolatry, which includes both the visible fashioning of God in an image and the invisible representation of God in a concept. By this Pete reminds us that this type of critique is internal to our own biblical narrative, and ought to be taken seriously not only as a check against theological speculation, but also as a resource of faith, spurring us beyond our cognitive complacency into a vital relationship with God, because "the God we are in relationship with is bigger, better and different than our understanding of that God" (19). .

beyond metaphysics

With the dual blades of Ideology and Idolatry, Pete hopes to cut through the thicket of metaphysical speculation, opening a space from a true encounter with God. As Pete says, theological discourse comes on the scene in the aftermath of God. Theology comes into the clearing after God has been there, attempting to speak about that which speech cannot contain, because God can never become a mere object for language or comprehension, but rather is always excessive of language and thought. Because the encounter of God is always excessive, theology is properly *a/theological* as the site of speaking of God while recognizing that speech fails to define God (21).

Pete outlines several ways our God-talk is *a/theological*. 1) *God is always Subject, never Object*: Our theological discourse can make God into an object. But because God can never be a mere object of reflection, but rather is a subject of interaction with whom we relate, our discourse is inevitable atheological, a misspeaking of God. Because God is always a Subject, our object based discourse must therefore be *a/theological*. 2) *God as hyper-present*: Against the theological discourse that attempts to make God *present* in concepts and representations, and against the atheological discourse postulating the absolute *absence/death* of God, *a/theology* speaks of the hyper-presence of God. God is not absent, but excessively present, for "God not only overflows and overwhelms our understanding but also overflows and overwhelms our experience" (23), exploding the opposition between a fundamentalist reduction to conceptual presence and a liberal resignation to absence. 3) *God as hypernymous*: We

do not lack information concerning God's identity, making God anonymous. Rather we are overflowing with information and sensation of the God who is both utterly transcendent yet immanent in all we do/have/are. God as the hyper-present, hypernymous, and always Subject, is therefore the God beyond metaphysics, exceeding the comprehension, articulations, and definitions of human intellect.

a/theist

In this a/theological discourse affirm we "our view of God while at the same time realizing that that view is inadequate." So consequently,

"we act as both theist and atheist. This a/theist is not some agnostic middle point hovering hesitantly between theism and atheism but, rather, actively embraces both out of profound faith..." (25). "This a/theism is thus a deeply religious and faith-filled form of cynical discourse, one which captures how faith operates in an oscillation between understanding and unknowing" (26). "The point is not that our beliefs are inherently problematic but only that they become problematic when held in a manner that would claim more than some provisional, pragmatic response to that which transcends conceptualization" (26).

This a/theistic approach does not exclude or undermine faith, but rather allows us to maintain an unflinching belief *in* God (as one believes in a person one trusts) while maintaining humility when attempting to describe *what* exactly God is" (26).

transformation of truth

All of this leads back to Pete's central concern regarding the need for a transformative relationship through "believing in the right way" over merely "believing the right thing." This "believing in the right way" leads Pete to reformulate the typical understanding of truth as "descriptive claims concerning the Real or reality" with the more "Judeo-Christian view of truth is concerned with having a relationship with the Real (God) that results in us transforming reality. The emphasis is thus not on description but on transformation... To know the Truth is thus to be known and transformed by the Truth" (56).

Immanent Critique: all too metaphysical?

Now it is quite fashionable these days that when you are attempting to refute someone, you point out how they are really participating in the discourse they are attempting to escape. This is the typical deconstructive moment. And I confess I am going to continue this gesture, but not to simply refute, but to move through and farther. I am sincerely grateful for Pete's articulation of this position (which I think has been rightfully helpful to many people) and I hope that the space he has cleared for a new theological discussion will be fruitfully filled by many voices who not only speak *of* God, but *through* whom God speaks.

Critique #1: As Heidegger said of Sartre, and Derrida said of Levinas, to negate a metaphysical statement is still to make a metaphysical statement. Or, to speak against the Greeks is still to be speaking Greek. I raise this critique not because I think it is overwhelming, but to highlight the difficulty and awkwardness of attempting to overcome metaphysics through the use of superlatives (hyper-, excessive, overwhelming, overflowing). And setting up a polemic between Greek (*what* to believe) and Hebrew (*how* to believe) mentalities does not really help the situation. “What” to believe and “how” to believe it are inescapably related. But more importantly...

Critique #2: Through his book Pete opts for the Hebrew side of the Greek/Hebrew polemic, yet I would suggest that he reads his Hebrew mentality through Greek conceptions. We can see this in his coupling of ‘ideology’ and ‘idolatry’. Pete does this by linking the Greek usage of **ideology** as the (conceptual) speaking/*logos* of the essence/*eidos*, with **idolatry** as the (aesthetic) showing of the essence of God (I2). But in this Pete reads the Hebrew thru the Greek, making everything about concepts and representation, which seems to be against his project of returning from the Babylonian captivity of Greek metaphysics to a Hebraic relationality. Pete puts the emphasis of idolatry on *speaking/showing* rather than *relating/worshipping*. Emphasizing the latter instead of the former would be the more adequate reading of Hebrew idolatry. Idolatry happens in two ways: worshipping a false god, or worshipping the true God falsely. The issue is that of praise/worship, not merely of thinking/seeing. The ‘essential’ issue from the Hebraic perspective is not merely that one cannot (ought not) conceptualize God, but rather that one ought not worship God wrongly, which puts us squarely on the inter-subjective (recognition) plane rather than the merely informational (cognition) plane. Of course, I think this is the very point that Pete hopes to make, but his post-metaphysic polemic obscures it.

This emphasis on worship leads me to my last concern.

Critique #3: The opposition that Pete sets up between the Greek “right belief” and the Hebraic “believing in the right way” is centered on his rendering of ‘orthodox’ according to the Greek etymology of *ortho-* as ‘right’, and *-doxa* as ‘opinion’ or ‘belief’. Therefore, ‘orthodoxy’ is about “right belief.” Seems simple enough, right?

But the problem is this excludes any kind of Hebraic appropriation of the word ‘orthodoxy’, and instead reads the Greek etymology *into* the Hebrew *usage*. Instead, we need to read the Greek *through* the Hebrew. If we do this, then we look at the Greek translations of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), and notice that *doxa* is consistently used to translate the Hebrew word *kabod*, which means “glory”, typically in reference to YHWH’s glorious, and Theophanous, presence (see passages such as “the *kabod*/glory of God was on Mt. Sinai” or the “*kabod*/glory of God passed by Moses in the cleft of the rock”, Ex. 24:16, 33:22). *Doxa* in this Hebrew usage, is always about the terrible, overwhelming, Event of God’s nearest, manifested here on Earth. Or, to continue, we could look at the more common word *doxology* which in Christian liturgy signals the saying of high praise at the end of a service (“Praise God

from whom all blessings flow...”) and which literally means “glorious (*doxa*) words (*logos*).”

The real problem that I see (as expressed in both critiques #2 & #3) is that Pete makes the problem of theology principally about “belief” coupled with a concern for knowledge and definitions, instead of flowing from a more inter-subjective perspective of prayer and worship (...and I think Pete’s goal is really to get us back to prayer). Pete argues from a rejection of “right belief” toward a “belief in the right way”, but both of these take “belief” as their normative components rather than being conditioned by ‘right worship/praise/prayer.’

Now, I offer these critiques not because I want to show that the “emperor has no clothes” and go my merrily way, congratulating myself on how smart I am. I offer them because I generally like Pete’s theological wardrobe, but, being the conscientious consumer that I am, I’m concerned that some items might have been made in sweatshops rather than in fair trade factories, and that we need to be discerning about how we dress ourselves.

But moving on...

From Post-Metaphysical to Sacramental Theology

Now what I want to briefly suggest below is not a refutation by any means, but a pushing farther into what I believe are implicit trajectories in Pete’s thought, especially the concern to move from an informational/descriptive perspective to a personal/transformational perspective concerning theology. **Concisely put: Instead of making the transition from informational descriptions to interpersonal encounter culminate in an apophatic, mystical theology, we should attend to the resources already found in Christian liturgies and sacramental theology. To do this I will rely on the sacramental theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet, in *Symbol and Sacrament*.**

Symbolic Order

Briefly stated, Chauvet fully embraced the critique of ontotheology as expressed in the works of Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida. Part One of his book outlines the shift he hopes to accomplish from a *metaphysical* sacramental theology to a *symbolic* understanding of sacramental theology. His book is over 500 pages long, so I will just hit the highlights.

Along with Rollins, Chauvet accepts 1) the critique of ontotheology, 2) the view that reality is always already mediated through language and culture, 3) and that language both builds a ‘reality’ to live into and also alienates us from the ‘Real.’ All of this Chauvet calls the ‘symbolic order’:

This *symbolic order* designates the system of connections between the different elements and levels of a culture (economic, social, political, ideological—ethics,

philosophy, religion...), a system forming a coherent whole that allows the social group and individuals to orient themselves in space, find their place in time, and in general situate themselves in the world in a significant way. (84)

But lest you think this is all so rosy, Chauvet also pulls on board the typically post-structuralist move that the ‘symbolic order’ simultaneously generates the ‘person/subject’ (as in give her a place to talk about reality, articulate relationships and events, narrate histories and so forth), all the while being the place of utter alienation from oneself. This alienation is constitutive because we can never escape mediation, there is always a gap between who “I” say I am, and who I really am; I can never become myself. Because of this essential mediation, the “person” is never completed or finished, but is always in a state of becoming. The human “subject” is always in a process of becoming itself, consenting to the presence of the absence, and persisting in a mode of perpetual mourning.

But, “the condition of being always on the way, which is the fate of the human subject, is not an aimless wondering in a desert waste without landmarks” (99). The emergence of human subjectivity (the ability to inhabit a world and relate to other subjects) is essentially an inter-subjective process, which has a type of logic to it.

Symbolic Exchange

To elucidate this process we must make a distinction within language between **cognition** and **recognition**. On the level of cognition, language is used to refer to objects, assigning them traits and definition, always moving toward a certain level exactitude. This use of language is exemplified by scientific discourse. However, on the level of recognition, the “function of language is not to designate an object or to transmit information—which all language also does—but first to *assign a place to the subject* in its relation to others” (119). Or again, “every discourse can be read on two different levels: either on the level of the symbol, as a language of “recognition,” foundation of the identity of the group and individual, and agent of cohesion...between subjects within their cultural world, or on the level of sign, as a language of “cognition,” aiming at delivering information and at passing judgments.” So the language at the level of cognition concern “things,” while at the level of recognition concerns “persons.”

The emergence of the ‘subject’ is within this level of ‘recognition,’ which is that of the ‘symbolic order.’ This emergence happens through a process of ‘symbolic exchange.’ Against an understanding of ‘market exchanges’ based on the value of things and objects traded to meet needs and desires (which exists on the level of cognition), there is the place of ‘symbolic exchange’ where “the true objects being exchanged are the subjects themselves...[In this exchange] subjects weave or reweave alliances, they recognize themselves as full members of the tribe, where they find their identity in showing themselves in their proper place, and in putting others in their ‘proper place’” (106).

the symbol made flesh

Now all of this might sound extremely abstract, but Chauvet wants to emphasize that it is not, but in fact the 'symbolic order' (and the 'symbolic exchange' which constitutes us as human persons) is as close to us as our very own skin, our own bodies. Again, drawing on cultural anthropology as well as Heidegger and Derrida, Chauvet outlines that there is an essential corporality of the 'symbolic order' which unites our very bodies with cultural and cosmic existence. Each person's body exists only as woven, inhabited, or spoken by the triple body of culture/society, tradition/ancestral, and natural/cosmic. Our daily existence with our own bodies is an intersection of these three bodies (cultural/traditional/cosmic) integrating and situating the whole person within a network or relationship with their own *selves*, other people, the tradition of their parent/ancestors, and with the gods. (And, men, if you don't think any of this is applicable, then just ask a woman about the issues she or her friends have with their own bodies.)

From Symbol to Sacrament

Everything I have laid out so far is in a sense merely prolegomena for Chauvet. But it is a theoretical approach, which when augmenting Pete's project, help clarify issues and moves forward, issues which I will outline in a second. From this anthropological perspective Chauvet begins his theological reflection concerning the sacraments which I will only briefly outline using his reflections on the stories called The Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) and the "Necrotic" temptation (the temptation find the dead body of Christ).

The basic question of this story is, "If the Lord is Risen, why can't we see Him?" The answer of the text is that Jesus is found in the stories and gestures of the community he began. At the beginning of the story the disciples cannot see Jesus, something is preventing them. Yet Jesus opens up the scriptures to them and explains how the Christ must suffer before entering into his glory. But it was not merely with scripture that Christ revealed himself to them, but around the table, the Eucharistic table. Only when they entered into his gestures and practices (his ministry of table fellowship) that he had invested with his own body ("This is my Body), did they SEE him. But then he vanishes. Christ is no longer present with them. But he is not exactly absent either.

As we saw above, just as the human subject is always in a process of becoming because of the essential mediation of language/culture (the Symbolic Order), so too the Christian is always in a process of becoming, of coming into faith. And this process is not accomplished without mediation, but through the symbolic saturation of sacramental practices, which is principally in the Church, the primal sacrament, which is the symbolic body of Christ.

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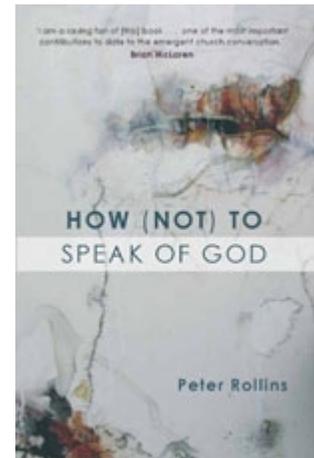
I could go on and on (as we all could I suppose), but I will end it here. My basic suggestion is that while we certainly must be suspicious of language that seeks to make God into an object, merely on the level of cognition, but must embrace that language functions not merely as a medium of relation between “things,” but more importantly is a medium of recognition between persons. This medium in which we persisting in the perpetual process of coming into belief through participation in the symbolic exchange of recognition principally within the Eucharist, and generally in the sacraments, where the presence of the Absent One nourishes us.

* *The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here:*
[If the Lord is Risen, Why Can't We See Him?](#)

Rethinking the Familiar

by Will Samson

Here is the fourth of five engagements around Pete Rollins' [How \(Not\) to Speak of God](#). It is by Will Samson, the co-author of the upcoming book, *Justice in the Burbs*, published by Baker Publishing. He is a PhD student in sociology at the [University of Kentucky](#), a founder of the [Emerging Theologians](#) project and a member of an intentional Christian community in Lexington, KY.



Review of *How (Not) To Speak About God*
by Will Samson

I am not a philosopher. I am an emerging theologian and an aspiring sociologist and, on my better days, an organic intellectual, to use Gramsci's⁴ description. In reviewing Peter Rollins' book, *How (Not) To Speak About God*, these are the perspectives I bring. In this way, I see this book raising important questions about how we speak about God, how we live as people of God and what impact those concerns will have on the organized church.

First, allow me to address the book from a theological perspective. One of the most important contributions of the postmodern turn has been to cause those of us who think of God to be more critical of the words we use in our reflection. While Richard Rorty and his text, *The Linguistic Turn*, were influencing a generation of philosophers,

⁴ Said, Edward W. *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*. (New York, NY: First Vintage Books, 1996), 67.

George Lindbeck was appropriating the works of Wittgenstein to create a post-liberal linguistic framework for our understanding of God. Nancey Murphy was arguably doing similar work in post-conservative scholarship.

Rollins appropriates well both the theological and philosophical traditions of linguistic evaluation. In Rollins' hands, or perhaps keyboard, doubt becomes a virtue, Christianity is viewed through an a/theistic lens and orthodoxy is allowed to be "heretical." This linguistic play allows Rollins to finish the first chapter by quoting Meister Eckhart's famous phrase, "God rid me of God," and acknowledge that "the God we are in relationship with is bigger, better and different than our understanding."

Throughout the book the author reflects on the difference between the language we have used to construct an understanding of God and the ways that language may differ from God. This is particularly seen in his notion of God as other. Consider, for example, his discussion of "YHWH," a name that, through its absence of vowels, "preserves the mystery of God."

This is an important corrective for the Western Church. Rollins' observations come from, at least in part, his work in philosophy. It also could flow from his context, which is a missional community named Ikon in the heart of Belfast. Ireland has been torn apart over generations by theological differences, each side battling to be right. In this setting, it is no surprise that Rollin's is suspicious of what Plantinga calls the "creeping certitude"⁵ of modernity and wants to mess with the language that has brought about a false sense of certainty in Western Christianity.

This brings me to my second point, which is the social implication of this book. It is difficult to imagine that many in the Western Church would be willing to trust God boldly enough that they might, for example, spend time with people from faith traditions outside of Christianity and expect to be "evangelized" through those traditions, hoping to find a more faithful understanding of God as revealed in Christ. Yet this is precisely what Rollins both advocates in the book and inhabits as a spiritual discipline within the Ikon community.

And this perhaps forms both my greatest critique and my strongest love for the book. This is a book written for the emerging church, those who, at the least, have entered into a liminal space between how they have historically understood God and the place to where God might be taking them as they deconstruct from the Church that modernity built. Make no mistake: this will be perceived as a dangerous book to a mind seeking certainty within the Christian faith. Rollins' steady theme is that the revelation of God displays a being that is not wholly knowable.

As I mentioned, however, this is also what I loved the most about the book, because it addresses where I find myself and where a large segment of the

⁵ Plantinga, Alvin.

contemporary Church is also. We have left a foundationalist understanding of God, namely that God can be understood through a syllogistic formula or that we can form an argument for God through our experience. We are anxious to find new language for the God who exists above the level of scientific validation.

Yet, the implications for the kind of questioning Rollins is willing to pursue are vast. Years ago McLuhan spoke of the “moral panic”⁶ that comes from questioning our use of language. Imagine if we were to question a basic ontological plank of the Western view of God, the notion that continued searching reveals answers about God. What if the answer waiting at the end of our struggle is a mystery, something undiscoverable?

This is an important philosophical question for the Church. As I read this book, though, I wondered if Rollins acts more in the role of an organic intellectual than a philosopher. Have no doubt – he is messing with our categories and quoting philosophers to do so. But a read through the second half of the book, the part that contains the liturgies, seems to demonstrate Rollin’s desire to shake up our religious understandings. It seems to advance an agenda of deconstruction.

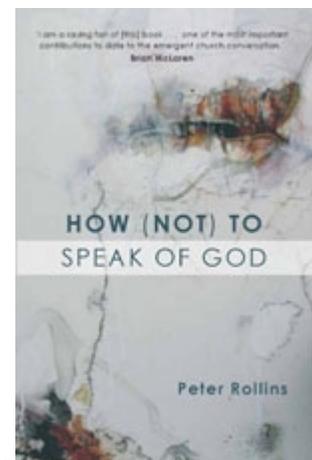
I have participated in two of these liturgies (*Prodigal* and *Sins of the Father*). These are powerful services that force a rethinking of the familiar. And that is precisely what *How (Not) To Speak About God* does. Through an analysis of the way in which we speak about God and through a peek into the kinds of liturgies that come from that thinking, Rollins has invited the reader on a journey to discover a God who is most certainly beyond the certain.

* *The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here:*
[Rethinking the Familiar](#)

Is the Future Catholic?

by James K.A. Smith

Pete Rollins' [How \(Not\) To Speak of God](#) hovers in that strange space between the academy and the church--between the conversations of the scholarly guild and the lived practice of faith. It's not trying to be a "scholarly" book (e.g., it doesn't tend



⁶ McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 1966), 85.

to the boring, tedious matters of secondary literature, etc.), but it is very much a learned book. It's kind of a riff on high level theory (Derrida, Marion) but always with an eye on the practice of faith (and doubt!) in community. So it seems to me that the "money" section of the book is Part 2, where Pete shares with us how liturgy looks different after working through some of the tough questions articulated in Part 1. Indeed, he names the task of Part 2 as one of "bringing theory to church"--a crucial task, I think, and exactly the desire that animates the "Church and Postmodern Culture" Series.

So I would like to briefly engage a theme or two from Part 2 of the book. Of course, there's much that could be discussed regarding Pete's "Heretical Orthodoxy" in Part 1. And I share a lot of interest in the core questions that Pete is grappling with there (in fact, I wrote [an article on "How \(Not\) To Speak of God"](#) a while back, and my earlier book [Speech and Theology](#) takes up the same themes, though with very different conclusions). If we were in a more academic setting, I'd want to take up the thematics of the "secret" and consider why I think this organizing metaphor is still locked into a Kantian problematic (or what [Etienne Gilson](#) described as a "negative" concept of "mystery") and thus, rather than exhibiting an "incarnational logic," tends to a "[logic of determination](#)" we find in Derrida. I tried to articulate a brief critique of this in chapter 5 of [Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?](#)

But that's the sort of thing we can talk about when all we tenured radicals gather at a conference. Here I'd like to consider a theme related to Part 2. I very much appreciate the creativity and liturgical imagination that we find in Part 2. There is an intentionality about worship here that is revolutionary and laudable. However... (you knew that was coming right?)

I had the opportunity to "experience" a version of one of these services in Geneva (Service 10, "Queer"). This was going to be my first "emerging" worship experience, so I came with much anticipation. And I was not disappointed (I still have the shard of broken tile I took from the service). However, I was struck by one thing: the service was remarkably *Protestant*. By that I don't just mean to toss out an epithet or a label. I mean it as a shorthand. By describing the service as "Protestant," I only mean to say that I was surprised at how "heady" the service was, and how text-driven and text-centered the worship was. (Granted, we were just a few yards from John Calvin's church, so maybe the sermon-centric vibes of the Reformation had wafted over.) While the service included key affective elements (the man's body being marked by epithets, the very tangible pieces of broken rocks and tiles we could touch), this was happening around a very textual, cognitive, rather sermonic center. Granted, this wasn't your grandpa's "three point" sermon or anything, but it still required the sorts of cognitive processing that characterizes text-centered Protestant worship.

Now, why does this matter? Why focus on this point? Well, I think one of the key paradigm shifts that took place in modernity (particularly after Descartes) was the adoption of a new model of the human person that considered the human to be primarily and essentially a "thinking thing"--primarily a cognitive mind that,

regrettably and contingently, inhabits a meaty body. As a result, the primary and most important activity that thinking things can undertake is, you guessed it, *thinking*. This shift manifests itself in the life of the church with the Reformation, which displaced the centrality of the Eucharist (a very tactile, affective, sensual mode of worship) and put the sermon (the Word) at the center. The heart of worship becomes "teaching," and the shape of worship becomes driven by very cognitive, basically rationalist tendencies. This develops to the point of caricature in the evangelical worship service centered around bullet points on the PowerPoint presentation.

Despite the "postmodern" critiques of religion offered by Derrida, Caputo, et. al., I find that they continue to exhibit this modernist paradigm insofar as they still think that religion comes down to a matter of *knowledge* (or rather, *not* knowing). And I wonder if we don't see the lingering effects of this in the liturgies sketched in Part 2 of *How (Not) to Speak of God*. Granted, this isn't a pure rationalism--there are aspects of affective embodiment, and they are 'liturgies,' after all; but I do wonder whether they're still not primarily "driven" by quite heady, cognitive, didactic concerns. In this way, they tend to reflect the kinds of wrestlings and wranglings of a certain class who have had the opportunity to get to have such doubts.

Perhaps I can put a point on this: for me, one of the tests of whether worship is properly "holistic" (and thus animated by a holistic, non-rationalist model of the human person) is the extent to which my *children* can enter in to worship. (Because of a certain worshiping community I've been a part of, I'm also attentive to the degree to which mentally-challenged adults can participate in worship as a criterion.) In the "Queer" service, my kids--who are, I think, pretty sharp--would have had a hard time 'keeping up,' had a hard time understanding what was going on. They would have been intrigued by the curiosities of the "marked man," etc., but there was ALOT of words to process and they would have been lost in a sea of ideas.

I would contrast this to the affective simplicity of a traditional Tenebrae service on Good Friday (a "service of shadows"). While the service is organized by Christ's seven sayings from the cross, there is not much else text or commentary. Instead, there is the simple amalgam of words, candles being gradually snuffed, sounds and silence. My children, from when they were little, sit enraptured by this service. Its affective simplicity testifies, I think, to a pre-modern understanding of the person as an affective, embodied creature--rational, sure, but not *primarily* rational.

This is why I wonder whether, for the future of the church, we really need to invent something new, or rather *creatively* retrieve premodern sources. While some are trying to imagine a new future for the church "after" modernity, I'm betting that the future is Catholic.

* *The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here:*

Events: Christianity: Tragedy or Comedy?



Geoff Holsclaw's notes from [Slavoj Zizek](#) (an atheist Protestant) "Only an Atheist Can Believe: Politics between Fear and Trembling" given at Calvin College on November, 10th, 2006.

Streaming video is available in Real Audio format here:

<http://www.calvinseminary.edu/lectures/archive2144.ram>

For those of you who have never read anything by Zizek, well, his lectures are exactly the same: entertainingly full of pop-cultural references, able to keep capture the attention of the ADHD generation through frequent (if not confusing) jumps in topic; and simultaneously keeping things light, yet able to sustain a certain gravity to the issues discussed.

It would take too long to summarize all the twists and turns of Zizek's presentation, so instead I will focus on the themes of tragedy and comedy.

As fate would have it, just before hearing Zizek's lecture, my wife and I saw "Stranger than Fiction," a film about a woman writing a book, but the main character is a real person who hears her narrating his life. Eventually ending up at the door of a literary professor, he is told that the main thing is to find out if his story is a tragedy or a comedy. The professor explains that comedies affirm the continuity of Life and end in a wedding, but that tragedies express the inevitability of Death, ending with the demise of the hero.

So the question before us concerns whether Christianity is a tragedy or a comedy.

Zizek began his lecture interrogating two recent films concerning the events of 9/11: Oliver Stone's [World Trade Center](#) and also *United 93*.

The problem that Zizek has with these films is that they are terribly apolitical, both avoiding the context and situation of the event, and resisting the horror of their actual occurrence. Instead these seek to inspire the audience, to bring out the best in the American people. Zizek claims these films (as with most catastrophe movies) offer us an implicit "Blessing in Disguise" theology. What he means by this is that they seek to inspire us by giving these tragedies a redemptive meaning. But for Zizek this attempt at giving disaster a meaning is ultimately a pagan aspiration of inscribing everything into a unified whole.

But for Žižek, Christianity is not about giving tragedy a meaning. Žižek turns initially to the Biblical story of Job to confront the pagan political theology of “blessing in disguise.” You can always tell a story to inspire and make sense of things, and this is exactly what Job’s friend attempt to do. But Job refuses to make sense of it all. He refuses to give an understandable meaning to his circumstances. Giving meaning to everything, even the disasters, is a pagan process of bringing the universe into a unified totality, even if through the tragic perspective. It brings the excessiveness of the human situation back into an understandable frame of reference. The gesture of Job is to refuse to fall into this pagan discourse.

So for Žižek, Christianity is not a Tragedy, attempting to reinsert a minimal order and meaning, but instead, as revealed on the Cross, the God of transcendent Order, giving meaning from above to our darkest hours, dies. The Cross reveals that there is no One to give reasons beyond humanity, beyond the God working within human history and freedom.

Excursus on Fundamentalism:

The problem with Fundamentalism is that it, like Tragedy, attempts of giving a clear meaning to everything. It attempts to fill in all the Gaps. But Belief is full of gaps. That is what makes it faith, not certainty. Belief is never belief concerning the facts, but rather between the facts, or rather is itself counter-factual. The problem with fundamentalism is that it obliterates all the gaps, or rather fills them all in, such that there is utter continuity between faith and facts. But this really ends up being the end of faith, the end of belief. Usually this loss of faith is manifest in a believers life in a moment of disaster where they realize they haven’t had faith for a long time. Fundamentalism, for Fact-amentalism destroys the gaps within which faith grows.

Fundamentalism is congruous with the films such as *World Trade Center* and *United 93* because they are seek to give a definite meaning to all circumstances, which even in its tragic form, is a return to pagan universal holism (everything has its place). In this we can see how it is that conservative evangelical theology falls in line with Bush administration politics.

But if Christianity is not a Tragedy, then it must be a Comedy right? Well, yes, but not like you might think. According to *Stranger than Fiction*, a Comedy is life affirming, and doesn’t the Book of Revelation end with the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. Sounds like a Comedy to me.

But for Žižek, Comedy is not merely life affirming. While Tragedy pretends to stare straight into the horror of death, ultimately it turns away from the meaninglessness of Death, replacing it with a reason, a “blessing is disguise.” But for Žižek, Comedy is an indirect means of looking into the meaningless of death, and the horrors of life. He draws our attention to movies of the holocaust. A movie, a tragedy, which brought us right into the life and death of the concentration camp

would be profane. How could a movie really attempt to portray the “blessing in disguise” of the death camps. Impossible! But a Comedy could depict this meaninglessness, even if indirectly, where we laugh to keep us from crying.

Now there was quite a bit more that Zizek discussed, but I will finish here with Zizek’s suggestion that Christianity offers a political theology, not of the pagan variety bringing meaning into the disaster, but rather a political theology of Christian Comedy, able to look at the horrors of life, not demeaning them by giving them meaning, and thereby offering a particularly powerful position for bringing about change in all areas of life.

Asides (from Q/A session):

1) The prohibition not to make idols in OT is not meant to lead to mysticism (lacking conceptual/aesthetic form), but rather to point us always back to the truth that God is found within humanity in the face of the neighbor. The image of God is found in the redeemed community, it is not a denial of cognitive or aesthetic representations.

2) Zizek the Protestant: Zizek is against Eastern Orthodox view of theosis and its attempt at union with God. How could an atheist ever buy into that? But he is also against Catholicism because of its “symbolic exchange”. That’s what he said and I have no idea what he means by this. He says that Protestantism expresses what Christianity always was. It is the true rendering of Christianity.

Geoff’s Thoughts: I’m not sure what to make of it that an atheist could feel so secure with Protestantism. Does that mean we are already so far off the path that an atheist finds it so inviting, or just that its picture of redemption is so compelling an atheist can’t resist it?

3) Predestination is Right On!: Asked by an astute, and very Reformed student, how Zizek’s account of freedom might relate to predestination, Zizek responded, “Yes, salvation is not about good deeds. It is predestination!” The predestinational paradox that our salvation is already decided, we just don’t know it, that it is a type of retroactive constitution of necessity, is very appealing to Zizek. Or as he says, “True Freedom is about choosing your necessity. True Freedom is not a choice between deserts (cake or brownies), but a compulsion of destinies (to join the freedom fighter, the civil rights movement, acting justly).”

* *The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here:*
[Christianity: Tragedy or Comedy?](#)

Aesthetic Practice and the Postmodern Church

by Daniel A. Siedell

Daniel A. Siedell has an M.A. from SUNY-Stony Brook and Ph.D. from The University of Iowa in modern and contemporary art, art criticism, and theory. He has for ten years worked as chief curator of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Nebraska and is currently writing a book on contemporary art and the Christian faith to be published by Baker Academic.



Aesthetic Practice and the Postmodern Church.

[Nietzsche](#) once wrote that the extent to which one should be a philosopher was embodied by the old women in the market in Turin who looked to find for him the sweetest grapes ([Ecco Homo](#), II). The traditions of the ancient church in the East and the West understood this. The postmodern church needs to get out of the seminar room (even if that room is in a bar or coffee house) and into the market looking for the sweetest grapes. Everything, it seems, turns on the aesthetic, on what you see, touch, and taste. Let me suggest that despite its effective and necessary critique of Enlightenment, Modern, and Reformational thinking, the postmodern church remains firmly Western, Modern, and Protestant in its aesthetics and this limits its effectiveness. This might seem counter-intuitive, for the postmodern church, particularly those emerging communities, like Peter Rollins's *Ikon*, the arts are embraced like none other. But I think this is deceptive. Both Jamie Smith in *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism* and Peter Rollins in *How (Not) to Speak of God* believe that the Church, in order to be fully postmodern, must go back, must embrace the ancient practices and traditions of the undivided Church. This is as true of art and aesthetics as it is of theology and practice. In *Crossing the Visible* (Stanford, 2004), [Jean-Luc Marion](#) makes this observation:

The image-affirming doctrine of the Second Council of Nicaea concerns not only nor first of all a point in the history of ideas, nor even a decision of Christian dogma: it formulates above all an—perhaps the only—alternative to the contemporary disaster of the image. In the icon, the visible and the invisible embrace each other from a fire that no longer destroys but rather lights up the divine face for humanity (87).

Since coming across Marion's enigmatic comment, I have been much occupied with its implications for my work as an art critic and curator of contemporary art. [The Second Council of Nicaea](#) of 787, the seventh and last of the Ecumenical Councils, declared that the veneration of icons was not merely to be tolerated, but was the necessary practice of orthodox dogma. However, and this is where I believe Marion was going, it also clarified the implications of the incarnation of the Word for

all image-making and aesthetic form, of which icons were simply the most fundamental or explicit part, given its role in the Divine Liturgy, which is the Church's aesthetics and poetics and, I would argue, thus the ground for all aesthetic and poetic work.

The Western Church was largely uncomfortable with the declaration of this Council, preferring to tolerate icons for their educational value and not as an object of veneration, such as touching and kissing, and thus not as a means of communion. This only became intensified with the Reformation, as Luther tolerated images only as tools for communication and education, stripping images of the remaining vestiges of mysticism that they might have still had in the Medieval Church. And the Reformed and Anabaptist communities rid their churches of all images.

An icon is not simply a tool of "communication," a visual illustration of a thought, message, or doctrine. It is a means of communion through contemplation. The icon, through its distinctive manner of "forming" the spiritual, thus can "work" on us in different ways, toward different ends. There is thus not a single "meaning" that is communicated by the image to all in the same way. And that is precisely what bothered the Reformers. As a means of communication, the icon, and by extension, art, is unreliable. Read Joseph Leo Koerner's book, *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago, 2004) for an excellent study of the transformation of visual imagery in the Lutheran Reformation, and its influence on modernity.

This is all, I hope, relevant for my observations Rollins' book. Despite Jamie living and working and having his being in a confessionally (Reformed) Protestant community, his is a position that is not exclusively Protestant. In contrast, despite his own claims that it is neither Protestant nor Catholic (as if the Eastern Orthodox Church doesn't exist), Rollins's is, to quote Jamie's comment on the Queer service, "remarkably Protestant." Smith finds it in the intellectualism of the service and, given his description of the service and Rollins's discussion of it, I suggest that it is "remarkably Protestant" because of the way that the aesthetic is used, used in the service of the intellectual, used to decorate the ideas. That is quintessentially Western, Modern, and Protestant, despite Rollins's interest in mysticism, which he seems unaware that the Eastern Church has had a long and robust tradition of mysticism as well as offering a stringent critique of Western rationalism and scholasticism. And that the emerging church and its adjacent communities must not merely develop a different way of thinking philosophically, but also of living aesthetically. **I am tempted to suggest another version of Jamie's book: one that features the work of three artists rather than three philosophers.**

Let me suggest that while we continue to plumb the depths of contemporary philosophical discourse, we do the same with the visual arts, really take them seriously. After touring the *Ikon* website, I have to admit that it to me bears much resemblance to the savvy look of any other evangelical ministry that uses a certain aesthetic "look" to brand itself as "arty" and thus progressive. Like Marion, I believe that it is only by exploring the implications of the Second Council of Nicaea that

these currents will be sufficiently understood. But they must be understood, for the postmodern church must re-think its art while it re-thinks its philosophy. Unless it takes the aesthetic as seriously as did the Church of the Seven Councils, the postmodern church will never be anything but a footnote to the Western, Modern, and Protestant tradition. But it is only in the emerging church, whatever and wherever it is, that such a possibility even exists.

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: [Aesthetic Practice and the Postmodern Church](#)

Emancipation and Advent: The Future of Freedom

by Geoff Holsclaw



The Future is always with us, bearing down through our hopes and our fears. The Future walks alongside the Present, even if only in our projections, imaginations, dreams, and designs. How does Advent specifically, and Christian worship generally, reconfigure our understanding of the Present as we journey toward an emancipated Future?

The recent issue of [New Left Review](#) contains an [article](#), by Erik Olin Wright, outlining an emancipatory social theory offering an alternative to both capitalism and statist socialism. While there are several interesting portions of this article, the part that jumped out at me was how Wright described the three tasks of emancipatory social theory: 1) the critique of society tells us why we want to leave the world in which we live; 2) the theory of alternatives tells us where we want to go; 3) and the theory of transformation tells us how to get from here to there. The **first** task is the diagnosis and critique of the Present. The **second** offers a utopian view of the Future. The third, and really the goal of emancipatory social theory, is to offer an account of the “journey from the present to a possible future.”

My initial reaction was to think how nicely a Christian understanding of salvation fits into this emancipatory social theory. First there is the critique and declaration of the Present world as “Lost in Sin.” Second is the utopian paradise of a Future glory with God. Third is (*insert your preferred understanding of Salvation...i.e. Penal Substitution, Christus Victor, Theosis, etc.*) which Bridges the first (*sin/death*) and the second (*pardon/eternal life*).

But then I realized the Gospel narrative does not agree with this temporal trajectory. Gospel Emancipation does not move from the Present into the Future as a

humanist social theory must. It is not progress, building from the here and now into the Future. Gospel Emancipation does not wait for a Future event (revolution). **The revolution has begun; the Comforter has Come.** With Mary we sing (not in the Future tense, but the Past tense):

*He has put down the proud hearted;
He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty.
[from Luke 1:46-55](#)*

But not only with the Gospel does emancipation flow from the Past into the Present. Emancipation is **actually** getting the Future into the Present. Let us consider Communion, the Memorial of our Redemption which seems to be oriented toward the Past. A nearly universal portion of the liturgy of the Communion has the leader and/or congregation proclaiming this mystery: **Christ has died, Christ is Risen, Christ will come again** ([BCP, 363](#)). Noting the tense of each phrase (past=*has died*, present=*is Risen*, future=*will come again*), we see each task of emancipatory social theory. **Christ has died** is the critique of the work that the wages of sin is death. **Christ will come again** our 'utopian' hope of final community of peace. And **Christ is Risen** is the mean of getting from death to life, as we participate in His resurrected life. Joining this resurrected life of Christ, this first fruit of the *eschaton*, is living as if the Future had already come. Or as [Jean-Yves Lacoste](#) says, we live "from the future onward."

The consequences of this are that we should not rely on a modern, progressivist perspective on human emancipation, neither in its conservative/fundamentalist guise (i.e. we will build God's Kingdom of democracy and capitalism) nor its far left/radical guise (i.e. we must topple the state in a socialist revolution). But neither should we settle for an infinite deferral of the *eschaton* (a la a perpetual deconstructive *to come*) as a shield against fundamentalism. Instead the Church should recommit to being the foretaste of freedom, and the aroma of emancipation. Emancipation is Now, in the Present, because while we cannot **make** the Future, the Future is **making** us. For Christ has Come; Emmanuel, God with us. The Advent of Emancipation has come; the Advent of Emancipation is Coming.

* *The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here:*
[Emancipation and Advent: The Future of Freedom](#)

Revolution and Advent: Christ Transforming Culture

by Geoff Holsclaw



In light of Emmanuel, the coming of God with us, the [Emancipation that has Come](#), how are we to live so that this emancipatory potential might spread?

[How Should We Then Live?](#) is the question posed by Francis Schaeffer's influential book in the '70's. For Schaeffer the answer was relatively simple. Live according to the compelling worldview of Biblical (which for him was somewhat conservative Reformed) Christianity. If enough individual Christians would again interact with life and culture from a Christian worldview, then the crumbling towers of Western Civilization would be rebuilt again, and the emancipatory potential of the Gospel will be unleashed with transformative power.

But, for many, Schaeffer's proposal is found wanting. Perhaps it is too intellectual in its orientation. Or too simplistic in its individualist perspective, lacking an adequate ecclesiology. Or too naive concerning actual cultural and political processes, needing to be supplemented by a more robust political program. But we should ask again Schaeffer's question. Assuming for the moment the Church should indeed engage in a project of cultural transformation, **what might it look like?**

Let's return to [Erik Olin Wright's](#) outline of an emancipatory social theory, particularly where he indicates the "sort of collective strategies [which] will help us move in the direction of social emancipation." Wright notes three typical strategies of transformation: ruptural, interstitial, and symbiotic. The first, **ruptural**, is what most immediately comes to mind when we think of emancipation. The revolutionary overthrow. The sudden dissolution of the previous order and the emergence of something new. The sharp, and often violent, breaking of the chains holding us back. This is both the dream of radicals and the nightmare of conservatives, and as such gets the most press (especially in the movies: think [V for Vendetta](#)). The ruptural strategy seeks to "**Smash the State.**" The second strategy, **interstitial**, "seeks to build new forms of social empowerment in the niches, spaces and margins" of the old order. This strategy is deeply embedded in life practices of daily living, falling below the radar of the power that be. It "aims to get on with the business of building an alternative world inside the old from the bottom up," seeking to "**Ignore the State.**" Lastly, the **symbiotic** strategy attempts to tip the balance of power slowly through strategic alliances and hybrid forms within existing structures. Its stance is to "**Use the State.**"

Now, turning to the Advent narratives, we see each of these transformational strategies. The **ruptural** strategy is noted in Herod's response to the wise men and his killing of all the young boys. The threat of another king (of the Jews) to Roman power did not go unnoticed. Of course Mary's song lends itself to a ruptural orientation, as do many of the Old Testament passages speaking of the Messiah. We

might even say that the Virgin Birth is a type of rupture of natural processes (although you could say that the incarnation is equally symbiotic using the old to create the new). We can note the **symbiotic** strategy in the genealogies linking the birth of Jesus to the Davidic dynasty, as well as Bethlehem as his birthplace. Also, both a priest and prophetess bless the child at the Temple. Elaborative on this, the book of [Hebrews](#) ascribes the titles Prophet, Priest, and King, putting Jesus in a symbiotic position to all of the power centers of Jewish life. But there is also strong **interstitial** orientation in the narratives. The gypsy-like shepherds, marginalized in Jewish society, receive the announcement from the angels, not the kings or priests. It is a lowly girl who bears the Savior, who is not from a prominent place in Israel, but from Nazareth (from which nothing good comes). All these indicate a disregard for established power centers, and a willingness for God to begin again in the cracks of human life.

So what?

Why this belabored tour through Gospel narratives and political theory, you might be asking? Well, it is certainly not so that we can choose the best possible strategy based on the birth of Christ. In fact my intension is the opposite. We need to remember again the multitude of ways in which God interacts with culture. In recent discourse around church-state relations (and missiology, but I won't go into that) it seems that people argue for an exclusive approach: either a symbiotic perspective (Reformed and/or Protestant Liberal), a ruptural (fundamentalist, evangelical, conservative, although it is ruptural in rhetoric only while in practices it is symbiotic, but that is for another post), or interstitial (Anabaptists, Hauerwasians).

But here is my contention. Within Christendom and after, witnessed in the Religious Right's attempt at taking over public policy (and being used sorely by Republicans), and the Religious Left's effective ministry of civil religion (Democrats welcome all the help they can get), that transformative strategy is all too focused on "Using the State" as the means of cultural transformation. Instead of this we need to again imagine an ecclesiology and political action within both the ruptural and interstitial orientations. The Church in West (for this is where I am speaking from) must again be willing to "Smash the State" as well as "Ignore the State," not so it can ignore political action and social justice (in a pietistic and other-worldly contemplation), but in order to effectively engage in the activities which might extend the presence of Advent and the practice of Incarnation.

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