



Reviews



Habermas and Theology, Nicholas Adams, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. ix, 278, ISBN 0521681146. £17.99

Nick Adams' first book is sensible and obvious – a compliment of no short order in a theology market cluttered with supercilious and often obscure works that are culturally irrelevant. The book's strength lies in its refusal to jump on the recent bandwagon of many eponymous "radical" or "orthodox" movements. Adams takes into serious account the need for inter-religious discourse in the public sphere, particularly amongst the three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in a world shaped post 9/11. It is, at least, zeitgeist. His suggestion to "scriptural reasoning" tries to assess the difficulties of reconciling irreducible and fundamental differences that inform all traditions. His engagement and analysis of Habermas' texts is measured, judicious, yet not uncritical. Accordingly, Adams has not so much tried to write *about* Habermas as he has tried to write *with* Habermas in trying to explicate the critical promise of communicative action and the ideal speech situation. Adams' project can be seen as beginning where Habermas signs off.

In wrestling with the contradictions of competing realities, Adams systematically undermines some of Habermas' arguments, especially those which outline the irrationality and efficacy of religious thought in the public sphere. In many ways, Adams can be appreciated as providing the Christian account of pragmatism and its programmatic dimensions *vis-à-vis* Jeffrey Stout's much vaunted *Democracy and Tradition*. It is Adams' position that religious language in general, and churchly language in particular, remains surprisingly forthright, rich, and undiminished. Thus Adams reflects, "Habermas is interested in a generalized account of rationalization. The speculative narrative about religion, which is barely defended, is a wholly secondary matter" (p. 152). Adams contends that ethical positions of different religious groups and their concomitant traditions and customs evolve through ongoing disagreements rather than by a stable unchanging morality.

Such public discourse necessarily requires differing traditions to learn the other's patterns of disagreement. Accordingly, Adams rejects Habermas' position that we abandon our deep reasoning in public discourse. Religious traditions must 'publicly reason' just to the extent Habermas overestimates the stability of religious traditions.

However, Adams does not view scriptural reasoning as an invitation to over-indulge in assertions precisely because assertions are not meant to end the conversation. Rather, assertions are intertwined in a manner that hopefully shows why, faced with the reality of competing realities, all we can do is proclaim only from where we are so situated. Assertion is the speech required by the public sphere, but the issues being discussed should clarify why the assertions are required if what we say is to be considered true. In short, assertive speech can only invite further inquiry. But Adams' attempt to constantly back-track and 'over'-qualify his assertions at times leads to a sort of "over-the-shoulder theology" – symptomatic of so many theologians trained at Cambridge – which can try even the most sympathetic reader.

In chapter 10 ('Narrative and Argument'), Adams argues that many are misled in thinking that narrative is about world-disclosure and argument is about problem solving. He believes that this is a false choice. The lines are too clean to be trusted. To put it crudely, the distinction should be made not between wholly separate practices but between different aspects of the use of language *by* subjects. Chapter 2 ('The Ideal Speech Situation') is also important as it unpacks some of Habermas' difficult texts and traces how the primary forces of Kant and Hegel have influenced Habermas' development as a philosophical and political thinker.

Adams quotes Habermas from 1973: "The anticipation (*Vorgriff*) of the ideal speech situation has the significance of a constitutive appearance which is at the same time the foreshadowing (*Vorschein*) of a form of life. Naturally, we cannot know *a priori* whether that foreshadowing is just a delusion (*Vorspiegelung*) or subreption – however unavoidable the suppositions from which it arises – or whether the empirical conditions for the realisation (if only approximate) of the supposed

form of life can practically be brought about. From this point of view, the fundamental norms of rational speech built into universal pragmatics contain a practical hypothesis” (pp. 30-31).

That is to say, Adams argues that neither the subject nor language is prior: the language and subject both begin simultaneously. If Adams is anything close to being right, then it seems that such reasoning gives us the means by which argumentation and narrative are subsumed by a more complex, more determinative practice of argumentative narrative. It would also allow different traditions with diverging narratives to meet peacefully in the public domain in order to argue with, and not kill each other. Adams’ argument is predicated on the notion that there does not need to be metaphysical grounding for there to be argument; there simply needs to be concurrence at a level more fundamental than the topic currently being discussed. In this way, even rhetoric privileged by a specific narrative can be viewed as argument which functions because participants share a tacit agreement about matters more fundamental than the issues being considered. As such, Adams concludes that this presupposes an already-existing practice over which its participants neither have nor seek power, and which can serve as an example on which to reflect.

It is not Adams’ contention that speech or scriptural reasoning is exhaustive and definitive. He tries to avoid such generalizations and sweeping claims. But he does note that it is very irregular for Christians to defend their claims as a ‘matter of faith’. Rather, such faith is almost always embedded and displayed in reference to scriptures and sacred texts. Finally, Adams believes that we must transcend the pitfalls of ‘overlapping consensus’ generated by liberalism by being able to wholly rely on already existing commitments within one tradition. He makes this point via a conceit. He writes, “The problem with the cosmopolitan project was not that such a language was never found – one might argue that the new imperialism of spoken English or the dominance of computer languages like C or Java come close to universality – but that it fails *a priori* to house the thick things in life like kinship rules, eating practices, poetry, folk songs, and the languages of elusive desire” (p. 253). Adams insists that in order to

speak of such ‘thick things’ – a term surely borrowed from Geertz – a capacious theology in the public forum must walk the tightrope between narratability and argumentation. In avoiding the sweeping gesture though, Adam’s method of ‘repair’ through scriptural reasoning awaits further narration. Insofar as this, his last chapter, ‘Scriptural Difference and Scriptural Reasoning’ is, in a way, a beginning.

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Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church, by James K. A. Smith, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006, pp. 156, ISBN 080102918X. £11.99

Within church circles, and outside the rarefied confines of academic circles, reference to ‘postmodernism’ often provokes two reactions. Firstly, that it all has to do with obscure and wilfully opaque French philosophical posturings that are beyond the comprehension of ordinary people; and secondly that it all has to do with rampant relativism and the abandonment of ‘absolute truth’, and is therefore an enemy of the Christian faith. James K. A. Smith challenges both of these assumptions in this commendably short and readable book, part of ‘The Church and Postmodern Culture’ series (see www.churchandpomo.org). Smith seeks to take certain core ideas that lie at the heart of three philosophers generally described as ‘postmodern’ – Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault – and to show how they cohere with and illuminate ancient, pre-modern traditions and convictions long held dear by the Christian church. In so doing of course he shows how captive the church has become to modernity and its assumptions and how stifling that is. But in so doing he simplifies and clarifies the issues that lie at the heart of these three thinkers, rendering them meaningful and significant for church practice – especially liturgy. And in the interests of clarity, and recognising the power of film as ‘the new lingua franca’ of global culture (p. 24), each chapter begins