

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](http://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

with a discussion of a recent film as a way of opening up the issue considered in the chapter.

Smith thus turns first to Derrida and the celebrated (or infamous) sound-bite, ‘there is nothing outside the text’. Smith’s chapter deals with Derrida’s contesting of Rousseau’s claim that language is an obstacle that intrudes and obstructs and distorts an immediate apprehension of the world, and discusses the necessarily hermeneutical, interpretative and communal status of all experience. This leads to a discussion of how we learn to see the world through the Word, and the necessity of a global, multi-vocal, inclusive community of interpretation. From there Smith moves on to Lyotard with a discussion of metanarratives, reminding us that for Lyotard a metanarrative is not simply a ‘grand story’ but one that claims to legitimate itself by recourse to universal reason. For Smith this leads to an awareness of the limitations of scientific discourse and the narrative character of our faith, with its distinctive symbols and language. Worship cannot be ‘dumbed down’ in the interests of accessibility, but is characterised by hospitality, ‘orienting itself by ancient, strange practices but in a way that invites not only the faithful but also the searching into the story’s rhythms and cadences’ (p. 79). Thirdly, Smith considers Foucault’s claim that ‘power is knowledge’ and the way in which the individual is shaped and formed by society by covert practices and regimens that are repressive and oppressive. This leads to a consideration of ‘counterformation’ by ‘counterdisciplines’ that direct us to our true *telos* – and again, the place of worship in thus shaping us.

All this take Smith to ‘a proposal for the emerging church’ which he describes as ‘applied radical orthodoxy’, and which succeeds in name-checking Milbank, Pickstock et al. without getting bogged down in the highways and byways of that particularly demanding theological path. Smith’s concern is for a fully incarnational approach to Christian faith and practice, and he concludes with a brief snapshot of what a radically orthodox liturgy might look like.

I find this book readable and refreshing. His conclusions are not particularly original, his positive evaluation of postmodernism

for Christian faith and practice echoes other more weighty works, and there are points where this reviewer would take issue with the theological position that lies behind Smith's proposals. But it is readable and engaging, and for busy ministers who cannot afford the luxury of wading through dense theological and philosophical tomes, it provides a most helpful and constructive insight into that elusive phenomenon known as postmodernism, and how it might be taken to church.

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*Back From the Brink: Stories of Churches Which Refused To Die*, Heather & Pat Wraight, London: Christian Research, 2006, ISBN 9781853211751. £9.95

What a good book for me to read! You see I am not a fan of the technical "how to grow your church" books. Rather do I prefer to hear stories which speak of real churches doing real work; stories that allow me to put flesh on bones, so to speak. And so I enjoyed ten stories of ten churches, all of which had gone through very difficult times but which are now experiencing signs of new life.

The churches whose stories are told here are a very mixed bunch. The collection consists of rural, village, inner-city and estate churches, and represent different theologies and styles of churchmanship. And yet in all that I read, common problems were experienced and common factors shared as these problems were overcome. Indeed it got to the stage that after reading of five or six churches I knew what was to come in the remainder! But this only points us to the facts concerning the difficulty the Church has found itself in in the post-war period, and the on-going decline that has been the experience of the vast majority of churches. And if it be recognised that these ten churches tell the stories of a great number of churches, then perhaps what they have discovered to be the means of injecting new life should be paid attention to.