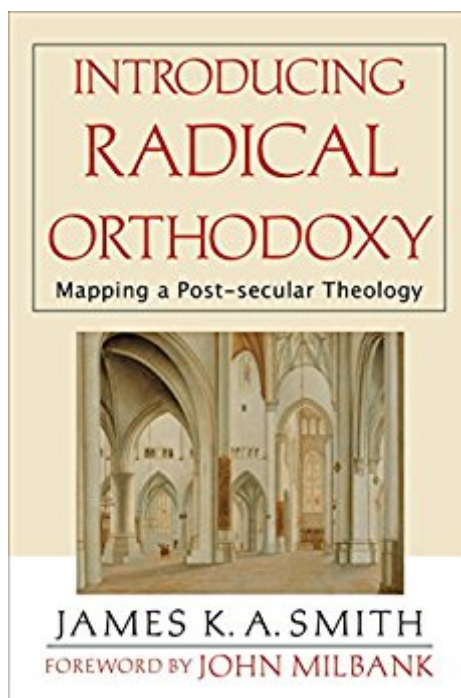


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Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping A Post-secular Theology



Synopsis

Although God is making a comeback in our society, popular culture still takes its orders from the Enlightenment, a movement that denied faith a prominent role in society. Today, many are questioning this elevation of reason over faith. How should Christians respond to a secular world that continues to push faith to the margins? While there is still no consensus concerning what a postmodern society should look like, James K. A. Smith suggests that the answer is a reaffirmation of the belief that Jesus is Lord over all. Smith traces the trends and directions of Radical Orthodoxy, proposing that it can provide an old-but-new theology for a new generation of Christians. This book will challenge and encourage pastors and thoughtful laypeople interested in learning more about currents in contemporary theology.

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Customer Reviews

It is always interesting to find "coincidences" in theological movements. That is, when group A arrives at a theological position/conclusion that looks eerily similar to what group B believes. It is even stranger to find that they never borrowed from the same sources or even interacted. Such it is

with the rise of Radical Orthodoxy (hereafter RO) and its critique of modernity. Introduction RO is a group of theologians who saw the bankruptcy of modernity, and the inability of post modernity to answer the tough questions, thus positing a critique that seeks to avoid both secularism and pre-modernity. It is similar to a Parisian Augustine. RO is sensitive to post-modernity's critiques of secularism. The book offers a multi-angled critique of secularism: epistemological, ontological, and ecclesiological. Once Upon a Time there was Plato RO's epistemological critique of secularism is a retelling of the story of Western philosophy. According to RO, philosophy took a fatal turn with Duns Scotus. Scotus posited a univocity of being stating there is only one kind of being in everything real, though infinite in the case of God and finite in the case of creatures. According to RO, this flattened ontology, removing the transcendent and giving us a metaphysics of immanence. Smith writes, "The created, immanent order no longer participates in the divine and thus is no longer characterized by the depth of that which is stretched toward the transcendent (93)." In other words, man is now able to interpret reality apart from God or any notion of the transcendent. This opened the door to secularism. The antidote to Scotus, then, is Plato. If Scotus unhooked ontology, Plato (or his Christian disciples) can reconnect it. In short and in contrast with modernity, RO offers, not a univocity of being, but a participatory metaphysics. Popular opinion on Plato is that Plato denigrated the material in favor of the spiritual (I will resist applications to some Reformers--never mind). But RO suggests, on the other hand, that it is nihilism, with its denial of the transcendent that denigrates the material. But can Platonism make the claim that it values the material? RO inverts Platonism on this point. Following Phaedrus, RO argues that when the material participates in the spiritual, the physical is rightly energized and affirmed. For example, the physical embodiment of beauty excites the soul's desire such that its wings sprout and are nourished." On one hand I agree. I value the material very much (almost too much), but is this an accurate reading of Plato? I really can't (and neither can Smith) follow their reconstruction of Plato. Plato spoke often of soma sema: the body is a prison for the soul. But we need not accept their reading of Plato to grasp their point. Ontology: Unfolding Reality This was arguably the toughest section of the book. And the most surprising. Smith reintroduced Dooyeweerd to the Reformed and academic scene. If nihilism/modernity flattened their epistemology, it also flattened its ontology. Secular ontologies, according to RO, "claim to fully define the conditions" for reality (187). This section will be shorter since the same critique of epistemology will be used for ontology. RO counters the secular ontology with a new move on RO's part: an Incarnational or participatory ontology. In rephrasing RO's ontology, Smith uses the arcane philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd, particularly his modal scheme.

I read this book two years ago during the summer before my senior year of college, and I found it utterly fascinating. Even at the level of learning I was at then (three years of college philosophy and theology courses), the book was rather difficult at times, so it's definitely only for those at advanced undergraduate or graduate levels. That said, it's still infinitely easier to read than any of John Milbank's own writings, so anyone wanting a relatively easy introduction to the thought of Milbank and other RO thinkers should definitely start here before picking up any of the source texts themselves. For those unfamiliar with RO, it is a movement combining the best of contemporary Christian theology, Continental and postmodern philosophy, and ancient and medieval thought, creating a new "post-secular" theology that doesn't simply parrot the findings of the social sciences and secular philosophy, but recasts them in a distinctively Christian mould. For those who, like myself, have looked for something in Continental philosophy of religion that doesn't end up with results that look disappointingly unorthodox, RO definitely merits a look.

James Smith assumes too much of the uninitiated, namely that they will understand his short hand way of referencing various theologians as a means to having to avoid the long winded and harder work of actually explaining what he is meaning. It takes a while to move into the book's actual thesis (which I'm still coming to as I write this review). I happen to have enjoyed majoring in the theologians of the 20th Century, esp K Barth, but even I have found it heavy going, so you will also need to have a dictionary of theology at your fingertips to get the best out of this book. You will also need to have read a primer on Post-Modernism of some sort to gain an introduction to the major players in this world/cultural analysis before tackling "Introduction to Radical Orthodoxy". I suspect that RO's attempt to reinstate an Augustinian epistemology as normative is not likely to succeed simply because I don't think they really show evidence of understanding Augustine. Furthermore, the grand Reformed vision of an integrated system of theology which constructs a Christian worldview in which politics, economics, theology and church are integrated into a unified narrative is one which is a perpetual dream and unlikely to succeed except in a small, isolated and 'godly commonwealth.' I suspect that the only group which will achieve this dream is Islam and that it will, in a Post-Modern Western context, be the most likely theology to become a metanarrative that silences all other dissenting voices and fills the void of both rationalism, the failures of Modernity and secularism. Overall, this book although interesting, is really a heated argument within a coterie of theologians who need to leave their lounge or pub and return to the kitchen and take care of washing the dishes for their wives!

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