

Postmodern Christians

by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [November 22, 2000](#) issue

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Some years ago, the *Modern-day Dictionary of Received Ideas* described the term "postmodernism": "This word has no meaning. Use it as often as possible." While there is a widespread sense that the age of modernity is passing or has passed, there is as yet little consensus on how to characterize and evaluate the present situation and its implications for theology and philosophy. Is postmodernism a nihilistic swirl of relativism, unmasking all intellectual and moral judgments as the subtle stratagems of competing wills to power? Or has it ushered in a new period of humility more receptive to religious perspectives? Is it an implacable enemy of Christian faith or a potential resource for it?

The essays in this collection come out of seminars held in 1997 and 1998 at Calvin College in which Christian and Jewish scholars discussed the possibilities and perils of engagement with postmodern thought. Among the authors are such distinguished participants in postmodern discussions as John Caputo, Walter Lowe, Jean-Luc Marion and Edith Wyschogrod.

Merold Westphal, distinguished professor of philosophy at Fordham University in New York City, has been a pioneer in engaging postmodern philosophy from the perspective of Christian thought. In the introduction to this volume Westphal takes a "gang of five" as representative of postmodern philosophy: Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty. Westphal proposes that Christians can and should appropriate secular postmodern thought in their own ways for their own purposes, even though such usage often runs against the authors' own intentions.

The hermeneutics of suspicion and of finitude that are proposed by postmodern thinkers need not imply a rejection of Christian faith, Westphal suggests, but can open up new ways of understanding creation and sin. Christians need feel no commitment to defending the Western philosophical claims that postmodernists

critique.

Is such appropriation legitimate? In a thoughtful essay Gary Percesepe of the University of Dayton and Wittenberg University argues that appropriation is always an act of violence, a taking possession of someone else, a relationship opposed to friendship. He characterizes Westphal's own appropriation as a double act of violence, beginning with a frank rejection of many postmodern assumptions, followed by a recontextualization, a reading of postmodern thinkers as themselves indebted to earlier religious notions of original sin and prophetic critique. Nonetheless, Percesepe continues, it is impossible not to appropriate; indeed, the history of philosophy is itself a series of appropriations. Thus Christians can proceed with a critical dialogue, accepting some postmodern insights while rejecting their atheistic context.

There is, however, no consensus on this point among the authors, and some are frankly skeptical of the benefits of appropriation. Studying various postmodern novels, Brian Ingrassia finds postmodern thought to be hostile to Christianity, a "leap of unfaith" that rejects Christian hope and offers no positive preparation for faith. Lee Hardy argues that postmodern thinkers like Nietzsche continued to accept many of the assumptions of earlier modern thinkers on consciousness and truth. He also challenges the coherence of postmodernism. Nietzsche argued that "truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions." Hardy raises the question of the self-reflexive paradox: Is Nietzsche's claim itself the truth, or is it an illusion which Nietzsche has forgotten is an illusion--one more expression of a will to power, the result of Nietzsche's own idiosyncratic journey and thus not normative for anyone else? Either response leads to problems of coherence and plausibility for Nietzsche's heirs.

In a more receptive approach to postmodernity, Garrett Green relates the discussion of presence and absence in Derrida to Karl Barth's dialectical theology that presented a revealed and concealed God. Green proposes that Barth's theology of the Word can allow Christians to use Derrida's perspectives to describe the dynamics of language in revelation. Barth himself saw a play of differences between the revelation and the hiddenness of God even in Jesus Christ. Derrida's description of *différance* as a trace that is neither a direct, straightforward presence nor a complete absence can help to clarify Barth's own understanding of revelation as using human words but never being completely captured in them.

John Caputo explores two very different postmodern meditations on Augustine's *Confessions*. The young Martin Heidegger found in Augustine (and more generally in the New Testament) a *Kampfsreligion*, a religion of strife in which the solitary soul struggles with issues of will and control. Augustine's description of this inner conflict shaped Heidegger's own hermeneutics of *Dasein*, but somehow the command to love one's neighbor had little impact on the young German philosopher. Derrida, on the other hand, sees Augustine's journey as dominated by the suffering and death of his mother, Monica, which evokes Derrida's own crisis in relation to his mother and his profound ambivalence about his Jewish identity.

While certainly not the last word on anything, this volume is a refreshing and helpful introduction to many of the issues at stake in the dialogue between postmodern thinkers and Christian faith.