
Academia Nuts

Official Newsletter for the Christian Reformed Campus Minister's Association (CRCMA)

Brock Campus Ministries' Conference on Postmodernism

by André Basson

What is Postmodernism? Does it actually exist, or is it just another word invented by academics in order to justify their research? What does Postmodernism have to do with faith?

These are just some of the questions various papers presented at a recent conference at Brock University on Postmodernism sought to address. Brock Campus Ministries and the Brock Philosophy Society hosted the conference which was focused on two recent books on Postmodernism by the Calvin College philosopher, James K.A. Smith.

Philosophy conferences are dime a dozen these days, so why another one? Isn't the subject of Postmodernism already somewhat passé? One of Smith's books the conference dealt with, namely *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* was written, by the author's own admission, to introduce Postmodernism to a non-specialist audience.

Because contemporary society, including the Church, has in many respects become so thoroughly postmodern and because so little is known about Postmodernism outside the academy (and what is known is often a distortion), Brock Campus Ministries felt the need to present this conference as an opportunity for non-academics to become more familiar with the subject.

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It's certainly a truism that our society is constantly changing, now perhaps more so than ever before. Many of these changes are driven by ideas and philosophies that either have their origin in academia, or are at least the subject of intensive academic research and discussion.

If the Church should choose to ignore these ideas and philosophies because they seem abstruse or irrelevant, it does so at its own peril. For one thing, it will increasingly find it difficult to proclaim the Good News in a way that is relevant to the daily life of rank and file Christians.

Brock Campus Ministries believes it's vital that faith communities – Christian as well as non-Christian – are kept informed about the important issues that concern our society, in order to make responsible decisions and to play a more meaningful role in the world.

The wide range of papers included in the conference program touched on many aspects of Postmodernism that were considered to be of crucial interest especially to people of faith. For example, where does Postmodernism's suspicion of metanarratives and of absolutes leave traditional Christianity with its claim to absolute truth? What does it have to say to the Christian mission in a multi-faith context? To what extent is the so-called "emerging" church a Postmodern phenomenon? What are the aspects of Postmodernism that Christianity should welcome and what aspects of Postmodernism are inimical to faith?

The enormous success of the conference – according to some, one of the best ever held at Brock – convinced the organizers to think of future, biannual, conferences on other topics that would be of interest to congregations and members of the general public.

*André Basson
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Philosophy, Religion and Education

By Andrew Fuyarchuk

The voice of propriety advises me to write that I have been inspired to research revenge and redemption by Ian Buruma's *Murder in Amsterdam: A Lesson in Toleration*; by Charles Taylor's current assignment for which he was awarded the Templeton Prize. But to cede to that

voice would be hypocritical and dishonest. It is, in fact, the encounter with sophistry within institutions of public education that motivates my research at this point. Rather than disclose

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my personal experiences I prefer, and find it useful, to reflect upon the character of liberal democracy and the struggle for spiritual and moral development that is exemplified by Nietzsche's Zarathustra. He goes further than anyone in attempting to redeem himself from revenge and his failure points directly to the Christian alternative.

Since liberal democracies have removed religion, the question of Being, and hence questions of spiritual and moral development, from the public table of discussion (in order, according to John Locke in *A Letter on Toleration* to avoid civil violence) they have not responded to the ramifications of devaluing the spirit that follows, more recently, in the wake of making what is lowest the norm in a commercial society. According to Nietzsche in the *Genealogy of Morals*, the spirit, which I understand to be a divine force of life, is inherently creative. When it is impeded, when, to quote Zarathustra, its divine beings and holy days are assaulted, the spirit turns inward upon itself, creates an "afterworld," or simply fixes upon anything that will justify taking revenge against others and itself. It is but a short step from muting a creative spirit to civil unrest, self-pity, and self-destruction. We can arguably see

them being pursued with daily rigor in a frenzied attack upon the land and air. Frustrated wills are essentially taking revenge upon the forces that remind them of their lost hope – the beauty of creation. Zarathustra exemplifies a redemptive act, and Christianity another, from the spirit of revenge.

Zarathustra attempts to redeem himself from revenge by accepting the inevitability of mediocrity ("the last man" who believes in nothing and is without shame). Rather than oppose the enemy he cannot defeat, anymore than Socrates could silence malicious rumors, Zarathustra attempts to overcome them with a sacred "yes" to everything that "was," meaning that he accepts the inevitability of mediocrity and hence, accepts that it will always return.

Zarathustra hopes thereby to transform his writhing snakes and barking dogs into singing birds; he hopes to destroy his burden and become as innocent and spontaneous as a child.

But something goes wrong. In order to accept the inevitability of the smallest/average Zarathustra must ascend to his mountaintop, a position from which to look down upon himself.

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After all, he cannot redeem himself from revenge, and his own nausea before the smallest, unless he surpasses himself and becomes, essentially, a god. Only from such heights, analogous to a position of objectivity, can he forget his affliction and morph into a child.

But this is not really feasible, for on the one hand, he is mortal and cannot transcend himself without a ground truly transcendent to his will. On the other hand, while saying “yes” to his past is an act of reason, i.e., it is a rational way of coping with an obstacle, its redemptive power depends upon the capacity of his imagination to convince him that he can become a god. There is thus a tension, nay, a contradiction, between his reason and fantasy. He cannot respond rationally to time’s “it was” by saying “yes,” and thereby eradicating the past, without at the same time imagining he is a god and thereby completely forgetting himself. His redemptive act is torn between the authority of reason and fantasy, and he goes mad.

At the root of Zarathustra’s inability to achieve redemption is his overblown confidence in himself, specifically in the power of his precious mind. But this confidence is unwarranted; indeed, it is an excuse for a lapse in faith, because, despite appearances to the contrary, he is a coward. He is a coward because he cannot

accept the only basis for overcoming “the last man” and, related to this, the self-transformation he needs; namely, the infinite, because for him it is beyond the control/grasp of his intellect. By parroting Zarathustra’s repudiation of the Divine, as if its denial were a supreme act of enlightenment, our public universities largely perpetuate a sickness that only a few can survive unscathed, providing they happen to be blessed with a passion for God. The question of Being, and the quest implicit to it, that drives even Zarathustra’s desire for redemption, is for the most part not on the academic table of discussion except as a husk, or shadow of its true self.

As a result, passions and virtues run amuck especially amongst those who go furthest down the road toward atheism by “bulkifying” the intellectual shutters to “the Real.” Few will go as far as Zarathustra to redeem themselves without religion; there are simply too many diversions and comforts available to inhibit a descent into “the abyss.” In a sense, this is fortunate. Liberal societies offer a panacea for the very ailment they create.

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By removing questions of moral and spiritual formation from education, be it social or formal, our liberal ethos fosters a spirit of revenge in its highest hopes and thereby contributes to the formation of personal and civil unrest; yet it removes the danger at the same time with narcotics and hence, accomplishes through artifice the forgetfulness Zarathustra could only imagine. The choice is then between either forgetting or remembering God, the decision is a

preference for either ignorance or knowledge; and the result is either an illusory and fragile peace or a genuine community of fellowship in which to experience a higher education.

Andrew Fuyarchuk has been teaching and designing courses in philosophy for a number of years at Ontario colleges and is currently a Phd student at the Institute for Christian Studies.

Guilty by Association

A review of

C. John Sommerville's *The Decline of the Secular University*.
Oxford University Press, 2006.

I picked up this book after it popped up as a "related" book on Amazon. The book raises some interesting points and, if the author is right, has some interesting implications.

The book's main thesis is that the secular university, in pursuing secularization as an ideology (secularism), has marginalized itself. He argues that people continue to have ultimate questions--What does it mean to be human? How can we evaluate different religions and viewpoints in the pluralistic society in which we live? As a practical matter, the questions are

pressing. Also, the questions, though denied over the last century, are at the core of many disciplines, especially the humanities. For example, how can you conceive of practicing medicine without basic discourse about what it means to be human and law without basic discourse of what it means to live together? Marginalize the basic questions, argues Somerville, and marginalize yourself.

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Sommerville further notes that secularism has played itself out. Science as a pursuit of new knowledge has given way to technology—application, innovation, expansion of the known. In the post-secular frame, universities are marketplaces. As in the economic marketplace, fashion rules.

Significantly, post-secular postmodernism is no longer a paradigm shift but a fashionable stance.

In the shift to a post-secular age, there is room for religion and religious discourse to have a greater voice. Religion, as he sees it, is about bringing a perspective to the table. Religion, in the broadest sense is recognition of transcendence and ultimates. Religion can speak most profitably in “connecting knowledge to decision,” which he sees as the real job of the university.

If Somerville’s basic argument is on track, I see two implications. First, if the secular university as we know it is dying, there is a vacuum into which we as Christians can speak. Certainly

what he is suggesting, bringing the perspective of religion (in our case the Christian faith) to the table, as CRC campus ministry has always aimed to do, is more urgent and timely than ever. As a denomination, the CRC needs to own even more fully the vision of campus ministry that we’ve had. Second, has the campus ministry project as a whole been a victim of the failure of the secular university? If the university isn’t the influential institution it once was, the shaper of mores and opinion that it could be, it would follow that campus ministry would have to fight for credibility in the equation. Then perhaps the golden age of campus ministry is yet to come, and sooner than anyone might think.

I’d be interested in knowing what CRCMA members think of his argument and its implications regarding campus ministry.

Joyce Suh

Urban SPIN (S mall P lot IN tensive) Farming

by Grace Miedema

My mother sent some magazines home with me the last time I visited, (in case I didn't have anything to read, and because worthwhile magazines should be re-used before they are recycled). But this was only an issue of Farm and Ranch Living, so not the most valuable glossy rag on my list. It fell open to "Urban Farmer- he grows crops in other people's backyards" and I was curious. Wally Satzewich and Gail Vandersteen (a hook for this Dutch girl) talked about grossing \$30,000 to \$40,000 on less than an acre per year, (another hook) in the city of Saskatoon. And so I dug in.

This seemed like the perfect fit for those of us who are thinking about supporting the 'eat within 100 miles' concept of feeding the fam, saving the environment, looking for flavour and health, and supporting local farmers.

If it could be done in Saskatoon it can be done almost anywhere, in my mind, since the growing season is pretty short that far north. I googled SPIN Farming and hit the website for the US project for this style of urban farming started in Philadelphia. Roxanne Christensen has begun an Institute for Innovations in Local Farming. "In partnership with the Philadelphia Water Department, the Institute operates Somerton

Tanks Farm, a prototype sub-acre urban farm that serves as the U.S. test bed for the SPIN-FARMING method.

Ms. Christensen contends that the separation of country and city is a bankrupt concept. "As development erodes the rural way of life, agriculture is creeping closer and closer to metropolitan areas. SPIN-FARMING leverages this trend in a positive way – by capitalizing on limited resources and space. Creating Somerton Tanks Farm using the SPIN method required minimal upfront investment, and it keeps operating overhead low." This project has the support of city, state, and national departments for business and environmental issues.

"For aspiring farmers, SPIN eliminates the 2 big barriers to entry – sizeable acreage and substantial startup capital. At the same time, its intensive relay growing techniques and precise revenue targeting formulas push yields to unprecedented levels and result in highly profitable income."

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In 2003, its first year of operation, Somerton Tanks Farm, located in northeast Philadelphia, the fifth largest city in the U.S, produced \$26,100 in gross sales from a half-acre of growing space during a 9 month growing season. In 2005 gross sales increased to \$52,200. So in just three years of operation Somerton Tanks Farm achieved a level of productivity and financial success that many agricultural professionals claimed was impossible. And it is providing a way for independent farmers to once again have a viable role in the food production system that has tipped too much in favor of large scale mass production agriculture.”

What does this have to do with campus ministry? We and most of our contacts live in urban settings. Some of our students have a sense for conservation and growing things. Think of the business, agriculture, sociology, theology, and ecology lessons to be gleaned. Presently when a developer begins a new field of houses he needs to dispose of 75% of the topsoil. That’s a crime against the environment in my books.

Saszetewich (who studied sociology in college, ironically) talks about how to get the land, the soil they need for farming. They rent from others. “Some are older and don’t want the expense or hassle of maintaining their yard, some are landlords who are so happy not to maintain their yards that they give them to us for free When we do pay a fee...it’s either a combination of produce and cash or just cash.”

Grossing \$26,100 in 9 months could be cut back to a profitable summer job as well. Wally’s Urban Garden market has several months off after Christmas. And they can have their Sundays off too! How many student jobs can boast such a luxury?

Check Wally’s Urban Market Garden and check if it fits into kingdom economics.

<http://www.marketgardening.com/wallysmarketgarden/>

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Emerging Deconstruction

(The following is taken out of the middle of a paper I presented at the Jamie Smith conference at Brock last April.)

by Peter Schuurman

On www.churchandpomo.com Carl Raschke defines deconstruction as “reading texts as complex and to a certain extent ‘*chaotic*’ events of *flickering meaning*, not as monolithic architectures of clarified Cartesian certainty.”

So why is the emerging church drawn to deconstruction, and Derrida as their prophet of choice?

1. Interpretation

If texts are chaotic events of flickering meaning, you can never be absolutely certain of your reading. There are always multiple readings that are possible. This challenges the idea that faith is certainty, without doubts or misreadings, and opens up room for questioning the church and theology in emergent conversations. It also resists the idea that literal, objective interpretations of Biblical texts are possible. Finally, it negates the claim of Christianity to be “The Absolute Truth” in some sort of pristine and pure way.

If we agree that everything is interpreted, and there are multiple interpretations possible, there is now freedom for emergent congregations to play and experiment with Biblical texts and theology.

Doctrines like hell, the exclusivity of Christ, various legalisms and literalism are open for re-interpretation. Then friendly relationships with other churches and denominations with “a different interpretation” is also admissible. Even relationships with other religions becomes more acceptable, or at least less “black and white.”

Finally, the mission of the emergent church can proceed to “read” the faith for other generations and cultures, and specifically the postmodern world, in different ways, ways that are more suitable and perhaps seductive for that people group.

2. Love and Justice

Deconstruction, according to Derrida, is ethics. Singular readings of things are always violent, in so far as it is always exclusive of other readings. To find other readings, then, becomes an act of justice and love in so far as it gives room for other voices to be heard.

In this instance, a shift takes place:

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now its not as important (or even possible) to “get the right reading” as it is to “read in a just and loving way”—which means allowing other readings to exist alongside our own. When this comes to institutions, this means emergent people recognize that Christendom, the American Empire, capitalism, patriotism and our own churches can be interpreted in other ways. In fact, in so far as they do not allow for the worlds of others to exist and flourish, they become violent and oppressive institutions. This concern for “the other” drives much of emergent politics and ecclesiology.

3. Messianism

Deconstruction holds that no reading does justice to all, and no reading ever will. The perfect interpretation, the “right reading”, the truly hospitable cultural construction is always “to come” – just like the Hebrew Messiah.

This sounds like the word “emergence” in other terms. There is concern in the emergent crowd to remain open, tentative, evolving, and not name themselves as “this” or “that.” They are emerging, a work in process, a church that is not a church but is rather a church “to come.”

4. Liberation from the Determinate

Deconstruction declares that every particular reading is in a way, “false” and even violent in its exclusiveness. It seeks to live in the dynamic between the readings rather than in any determinate reading. If all interpretations and institutions are oppressive in this way, we can never rest, never think we have arrived. We are free only when we are beyond our particularities.

Although I have quibbles with some of the other connections named above, I want to elaborate a little on a subtle but I believe significant issue with regards to this similarity between deconstruction and the emerging church. Some of this critique comes via Jamie Smith’s writings, specifically, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?*

In so far as some emerging churches (lets call this the “discontinuous emergent” church) shy away from creeds and confessions and posit a radical discontinuity between themselves and the church that has gone on before, they share with Derrida a modern, negative view of freedom. Freedom, in this sense is a freedom *from*, freedom from restraint, particularity, tradition. This is freedom as autonomy, and can come with the non- or anti-denominational label or some sort of primitivist ecclesiology.

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This can be viewed as quintessentially modern, in so far as Immanuel Kant heralded the modern age by calling for a break from the “tutelage” of outside authority (tradition).

I don’t want to “read” too much into these trends, but these are the hard philosophical questions that we can ask. At root, this approach may assume that to be unapologetically particular (ie. connected to the catholic tradition of the faith) in any way is to be necessarily besmirched beyond repair. An emerging church is one that has taken the courage (Kant’s term) to free itself from history, from tradition, and from all the baggage that comes with it.

Smith explains in *The Fall of Interpretation* that this view, at a deep philosophical level, conflates creation and fall. If to be human is to be finite and an interpreting being, and all interpretive traditions are violent, then our humanness is inescapably violent. But if word can become flesh, as it did in the “logic of incarnation” seen in Christ, interpretations can be incarnate in words and institutions that are not inherently violent. In fact, they may bring life. In effect, to unabashedly claim your historic Christian faith is to name your humanity, not to oppress others. We were created

as interpretative beings, and while the fall does twist them in violent ways, in Christ our traditions need not be inescapably malevolent.

I recognize there are other emerging churches that describe themselves as a return to the ancient Christian tradition (lets called these the “ancient-future” emergents). While many of these churches are engaged in a desperately necessary retrieval project, there is potential for these churches to be co-opted by the dark side of postmodern life.

Let me explain it this way. If some ancient-future emergents do not see some sort of continuity with an authentic Christian tradition nor configure their ecclesiology in accountable relationships to a broader body but they selectively appropriate parts of the tradition that they find preferable, they may be assuming another kind of autonomy--one that picks and chooses “from above” as it were. This may operate as much in a consumer framework as otherwise, and as many have said, one common way to be post-modern is to be a consumer self (eg. David Lyon’s introduction entitled *Postmodernity*).

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This is why Smith charges the emerging church with not being postmodern enough. He keeps positing a more persistent or proper postmodernism that takes us beyond the desire for autonomy and into a community of thought and practice that stretches through time and space, in other words, a particular embodied tradition and its institutions. This is, in fact, the “catholic” Christian faith of creeds and confessional Trinitarian dogma, the sacraments, and even hierarchy. This is a call beyond both a spiritual nomadic life and the spiritual fortress of fundamentalism, and towards a sojourning with the Spirit in catholic association, en route to the City of God. We might call this third kind of emergent “catholic emergent churches.” (small “c”!) Its not just “the same old church” but “the same old church in a new context,” which is genuinely ancient-future.

The more particular you are, it has been said, the more universal you become—in so far as to be human is to be particular. There are no generic, universal human beings, any more than there is generic universal reason.

I would say to students on university campus: the more respectfully and unapologetically you express your particular Christian identity rather

than slide into generic cultural codes that obscure it, the more you free others to also express their deep particular self. It is permission giving. For we are all much more deep than we reveal in North American cultural life. The mass cultural amnesia that Jane Jacobs talked about in her last book *Dark Age Ahead* is what threatens us the most, not the scandal of our particularities (although, of course, particularities are not sacrosanct or salvific in themselves). The fear of particularity, as Smith says, is a negation of our finiteness, and therefore a negation of our humanity, and becomes a continuation of the disenchanting dehumanizing aspects of modernity.

We would do better to embrace as well a freedom *to* and *with*. There is also a freedom that comes when one is empowered by deep commitments and covenants, by submission to authority and accountability. This freedom is not historically a part of the American Way, but it may be the secret to its healing.

Peter Schuurman

Tom O, My Mentor

By Shiao Chong,

Christian Reformed Chaplain serving at York University, Toronto, Canada

This article is mainly composed of excerpts from Chong's published essay, "Pastors as Mentors: Growing Leaders Through Relationships" in Speaking of Pastors: Parishioners Tell Their Stories, ed. James Schaap (CRCNA, 2006) pp. 59-67.

In tribute to Tom Oosterhuis' many years of excellent and faithful service as Christian Reformed Campus Minister at the University of Alberta, I wish to share with you some insights in mentoring from the years Tom was my mentor when I was a student there.

Getting Along

There's a saying: "People won't *go* along with you if they can't *get* along with you".

Relationships are at the heart of the mentoring process. Tom and I got along famously. We joked and teased each other. We dialogued and discussed everything from heavy theological and philosophical issues to light hearted topics such as Edmonton Oilers hockey. We played pool together and we prayed together. In short, Tom opened his life to me.

Reciprocity

Although Tom was my mentor, it was not a one-way relationship. Intellectual fertilization and feedback flowed in both directions. Tom would not only welcome my thoughts and feedback but, at times, intentionally asked for it. Often, he would share his drafts of articles or speeches or even sermons that he was working on and welcomed my thoughts or comments. It was clear to me that he cherished and valued my thoughts, contributions and help. I felt that I was needed. I gave as much as I received.

Sharing Visions

It's no secret what Tom is passionate about: the Reformed world-and-life view of Creation, Fall, and Redemption, the integration of faith with all of life, the Lordship of Christ, as well as proper biblical exegesis. These visions were embodied in his ministry, in his priorities, in who he is. Tom consistently taught, acted and lived out of his deeply held beliefs, whether it was expository sermons or discussion groups on faith and technology.

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Modeling

I saw Tom in action, up close. And those moments were important training sessions for my ministry today. Imitation may be the best form of flattery but in the Renaissance imitation was also seen as a necessary form of learning. I did not catalogue a list of do's and don'ts from observing Tom in action. Rather, certain moments of ministry get stuck in my mind as vignettes and become paradigmatic lessons that I carry into my present work.

Giving Responsibilities

Finally, one of the most important things in mentoring leaders is giving responsibilities. Potential leaders need to be given opportunities to lead, to do ministry. Tom published a monthly newsletter, *Eikon* (Greek for image or icon), and encouraged students to be the editors and to write articles. I was encouraged to start writing some articles for *Eikon*. Eventually, I also became one of its editors. Writing for *Eikon* gave me confidence in my writing abilities. I can quite safely say that if it wasn't for that opportunity in writing for Tom's newsletter, my writing ministry may never have taken off.

In summary:

- 1. Get along with your potential leaders, so that they may go along with you.**
- 2. Receive from them as much as you give.**
- 3. Share your dreams and visions, your passions in life, so they may catch it.**
- 4. Model your best for them to observe and, perhaps, imitate.**
- 5. Give them responsibilities, opportunities and freedom to succeed. These are some of the mentoring themes I learned from Tom.**

Thanks Tom for your years of faithful service both to the U of Alberta and to the CRCMA. As you enter retirement, we will miss your collegiality but we will remember your legacy.

Shiao Chong

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