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Ideas Have a History: Perspectives on the Western Search for Truth (Book Review)

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Ideas Have a History: Perspectives on the Western Search for Truth by Frederika Oosterhoff. Lanham: University Press of America, 2001. xviii + 355 pages. ISBN: 0-7618-2031-0. Price: \$ 44.00. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, Associate Professor of History, Dordt College.

In spite of Frederika Oosterhoff's title, is *Ideas Have a History: Perspectives on the Western Search for Truth*, it is not clear that her objectives in this book are specifically historical. Her retrospective vision is laden with explicitly contemporary philosophical intent. Oosterhoff is most definitely part of the contemporary rejection of enlightenment rationalism and modern materialism. Her objective is to criticize certain features of the postmodern critique of modernism, while giving prominence to well known figures such as Michael Polanyi in order to contextualize her own advocacy of key neo-Calvinist figures such as Abraham Kuypers and Herman Dooyeweerd. The book commences with two quotations from Abraham Kuypers and Michael Polanyi. There is something problematic about this procedure, and notwithstanding disclaimers the work does manage to exhibit some of the questionable features of the postmodern manner and style, even as it also at times partakes of enlightenment a-historicity.

Although the word "history" is mentioned in the title, this work is not a history in the generally accepted sense of the word. It is a series of vignettes presented in roughly chronological order. These vignettes vary somewhat in quality, not always exhibiting a familiarity with the relevant scholarship. Among the best are the discussions of John Locke (101-109), David Hume (124-130) and Herbert Spencer (156-157). Others are less successful. For example, that of Adam Smith apparently neglects the importance of his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759, sixth edition 1790) in assessing his thought (142, 144). The attention paid to Karl Popper, surely one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century, is amazingly scant (270), perhaps because Oosterhoff is more interested in utilizing features of Thomas S. Kuhn's thought on "paradigm change" than in placing Kuhn in the context of his relations to the positivist tradition (231f.). Yet it might be argued that these criticisms are just plain wrong, because historical understanding is not what we are after here at all, at least not as a first priority. Let the reader judge.

Much is adumbrated in the opening paragraphs of Oosterhoff's "Introduction." Here she says that her purpose is "not to provide a systematic account of our intellectual past, but rather to draw attention to those ideas that have a close connection with the dominant belief systems of today." This purpose would seem to carry us away from an authentically historical approach to the history of ideas and to establish a definitely present-minded agenda—notwithstanding the accompanying dangers of anachronism. Perhaps this is why the author proceeds to offer the

following qualification: "... description has been combined with interpretation ... I trace the origin and development of selected ideas and attempt to explain them with reference to the historical period wherein they arose." Such statements inevitably raise key prolegomenal considerations. Is it ever possible to describe without interpreting? And does not this reference to explanation with regard to historical context imply a fundamental problem with the project as initially formulated? Oosterhoff seems to be aware of this problem, because she then immediately qualifies her qualification by adding that this work's "goal, however, is constantly kept in mind, and that ... is to help us to understand our own times." (iv).

An understanding of the past definitely helps us to understand contemporary culture. Even periods as remote as the medieval and classical continue to be relevant. Nevertheless, if we are to avoid finding ourselves arguing in a huge circle, using the whole of the past to ratify our viewpoint of contemporary thought and culture, our understanding of past episodes and eras needs to be genuinely historical. Past events and now discarded ideas—as well as transitional phases between major turning points—should not be omitted because they seem now to have no genuine relevance for us.

So while Oosterhoff deals with much that is in the past, her discussion can be curiously unhistorical, not always confronting key issues. For example, her passages on Plato and Augustine do not address the Platonism of the latter and its implications (20, 28, cf. 31-33, 42). Oosterhoff glances at the problem, but slides past it too easily. Yet it would be misleading to suggest that everything here is wrong. For example, the Calvinian view of "natural religion" is well represented (43-5, 97). Her opposition to reductionism is deeply reformed (204-206). She is right to consider the role of renaissance Hermeticism in early modern science—and the suggestion that this is important in coming to grips with Bacon is fruitful (65-68). And of course the Reformers did not intend their emphasis on divine transcendence to contribute to the rise of deism (84 85).

Yet Oosterhoff's discussion sometimes verges on disorder, because it is not genuinely historical. Having reached Calvin, she backtracks to the high middle ages and Tempier's 1277 condemnation of Aristotelian theses (47, 55, 82—see also 272-274 for another misplacement of contextual material). The *Schola Augustiniana Moderna* is curiously under-discussed (62f.). Her real quarry is the rationalism of the "enlightenment project," especially as exemplified by materialistic "scientism."

Perhaps this is why we have the sense that the author really gets in her stride once she turns to discuss Descartes and Locke (89-109). It is here that her quarry—the “enlightenment project”—at last comes clearly into view.

However, Oosterhoff seems unaware that her statement “Postmodern enemies of the enlightenment have criticized the enlightenment’s habit of decontextualizing whatever it touched and have shown the destructiveness of that approach” (117) might in some respects also apply to her own work. Moreover, Oosterhoff does not enhance her own critique of enlightenment a-historicism by informing us at a later stage that to “describe the causes and nature of the shift” to postmodernism “would be beyond the scope of this book” (257).

Perhaps some light may be thrown on the methodological problems exhibited by this book by turning to its own discussion of historicism and historical relativism. Here Oosterhoff acknowledges that the historical movement of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made great strides in the achievement of genuine historical understanding (171). History ceased to be philosophy teaching by examples. And she rightly points to the dangers of relativism, but does not stress that insisting that past events be placed in context does not necessarily entail moral relativism (cf. 175), even though elsewhere she is clear that cultural contextualization does not necessarily imply reductionism (220, 232).

In other words, this is a work of introductory philo-

sophical discussion that moves in and out of historical focus. The author endorses the vision of Kuyper and the philosophical labors of Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd (277-8, 282-91). However these neo-Calvinist thinkers are too easily bracketed with the broad spectrum of postmodernist thinkers party to the late twentieth-century criticism of the “enlightenment project.” The neo-Calvinist thinkers seem to ride in on Polanyi’s coat tails (295-309). Oosterhoff is definitely aware of the dangers of postmodern skepticism and irrationalism, and it is with these perils fully in view that she calls for a new epistemology (322f.).

I am sure that Oosterhoff’s call should be heeded. However, her apparent suggestion that we are all locked into our latter day versions of the medieval realist-nominalist debate (50), especially when coupled with her concluding *en passant* commendation of the so-called reformed epistemology, suggests that she is far from free of the false alternatives she discusses (326). Students and other readers will doubtless find this book’s brief discussions of many thinkers and issues helpful and suggestive. But we need something more. We need works in which neo-Calvinistic insight functions integrally, rather than having Kuyper and Dooyeweerd recommended to us at the end of a more or less conventional telling of the story—like rabbits pulled out of a hat at the end of a conjuring trick. The re-forming of our thinking is an integral task, and much work is yet to be done.