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Getting Spiritual: A Plan for Reaching Conservative Christians with Postmodern Religion

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Abstract

Today I hope to talk about how we can try to have good, constructive, mutually-enriching conversations with conservative Christians. I think two things are required for this that are, perhaps, currently lacking from postmodern theology, but the seeds of which I think are already present there. The first thing that is needed is a common vocabulary that is meaningful and connects well with the traditions of both postmodern and conservative Christians. Second, we need to find places or means by which the two groups can come into contact with each other to engage in conversations: what will draw us together, such that the possibility of organic discussion can arise?

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Comments

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Getting Spiritual:

A Plan for Reaching Conservative Christians with Postmodern Religion

Postmodern religion offers a prophetic critique of North American Christianity, calling it out of its dogmatic doctrinal slumber so as to awaken it to the social, political, and ethical ramifications of religious practice. It's a message that much of North American Christianity needs to hear. Unfortunately, postmodern religion isn't speaking to most North American Christians. Instead, postmodern religion preaches mostly to the (postmodern) choir. We talk *to* those who already think like us *about* those who don't—but we rarely speak constructively with our conservative Other.

Today I hope to talk about how we can try to have good, constructive, mutually-enriching conversations with conservative Christians. I think two things are required for this that are, perhaps, currently lacking from postmodern theology, but the seeds of which I think are already present there. The first thing that is needed is a common vocabulary that is meaningful and connects well with the traditions of both postmodern and conservative Christians. Second, we need to find places or means by which the two groups can come into contact with each other to engage in conversation: what will draw us together, such that the possibility of organic discussion can arise?

Common Vocabulary

To start, then, let's look at the question of common vocabulary. This is important, not just so that we can understand each other's words, but insofar as each group constitutes a distinct community or 'language game' in which the world is rendered meaningful to members of each

group. That is, the search for a common vocabulary cannot just look for words that each side can understand—it has to look for words that each side also cares about and resonates with.[1]

I pursued this question of a common vocabulary at the last *Subverting the Norm* conference in 2013. Central to this common vocabulary, I'd argue, is recovering a more robust notion of the 'spirit'. This word has deep resonances that run long in the tradition of both conservative Christianity (with the emphasis on the Holy Spirit) and postmodern Christianity.

For postmodern Christianity, this resonance may not be as immediately apparent. So let me sketch that out briefly here. If one goes all the way back to Hegel, than the importance of spirit is obvious. Moving forward from Hegel, we see this notion of spirit remain important in the work of the later Husserl (e.g., in the "Vienna Lecture"), who set the stage for much of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and others which, in turn, was influential on the work of Derrida and Caputo. While the language of the 'event' is more common than that of 'spirit' in the pair of Jacks, Caputo himself says that "God is not being or a being but … a very holy spirit" (WG, 9).

In this sense of spirit, then, we mean not a personal entity, and even less a separate world or realm that is opposed to the material world. Rather, by 'spirit' here we mean a *dynamis*, a force that is operative within the world, which both arises out of, but also influences, conditions in that world.

A good parallel here is to think of it along the lines of a cultural *zeitgeist*, a sort of 'spirit of the age' that not only characterizes a certain time and place, but also influences it: think of the

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[1] Failing to recognize this latter part was the grave failure of much of the 'translation' projects into symbolic logic carried out by those sympathetic with logical positivism.

'spirit of free love' that characterized much of America in 1968, or the 'spirit of greed' that characterized that same country in the 1980s.

To think in terms of 'spirits of the age' casts postmodern religion, in large part, as the awareness of the operation of the dominant and the minor spirits at work in our day and age. This analysis of the 'spirits of the age' serves not only as cultural exegesis (Zizek, at least on his good days, is an example here), but more importantly as a way of unmasking or uncovering the radical forces that operate unseen and (often) unacknowledged in the hidden depths of human action. That is, to speak of 'spirits of the age' is not to speak merely metaphorically, but to try to articulate and name those forces that cause phenomena such as white privilege, anthropocentrism and hetero-normativity to be simultaneously ubiquitous and invisible.

It is also to acknowledge that the forces that cause these and similar phenomena are precisely matters of religion—hence, the need for a conference like StN 3 (though I might quibble with the sub-title this year: "*Political* Perspectives on Postmodern theology and Church Practice". Deeming these forces as mere 'perspectives,' and calling them 'political' rather than religious, runs the risk of making them of secondary importance in religious matters. This, in turn, makes taking them seriously that much harder to do in conservative Christian circles, where religion *must* occupy center stage, for anything else is idolatry).

Thinking of postmodern religion in terms of the spirits of the age, then, also helps us reconcile the focus on religious practices, and not merely on theology. For if postmodern religion is the awareness of these operative but invisible forces, then we can see that such awareness requires both analysis of what currently happens, but also careful action so as to effect the production of others of these spirits moving into the future. Given that these spirits arise from material conditions as much as they shape those conditions, being aware of those

requires us not just to understand them, but to alter them: theology and church practice—talking about these religious spirits and enculturating practices that reflect, strengthen and nurture (or oppose, weaken and undermine) these spirits—must go hand in hand.

Spirits of the Age and Conservative Christianity

While my discursus on 'spirits of the age' has, hopefully, made the language of 'spirituality' more comfortable for my postmodern religious friends, has it not done so at the expense of my conservative colleagues? That is, in making the notion of spirituality amenable to postmodernism, have I not made it unpalatable to conservative Christianity, and thereby lost the very commonality of vocabulary I set out to find?

My appeal to phenomena like 'white privilege,' anthropocentrism and heteronormativity certainly seems to do so, given that at least the first and the last of these tend to be downplayed, if not outright denied, by many conservative Christians.[2] But I think that there are several avenues by which such discourses about the spirits of the age can be rendered not only understandable, but meaningful, to conservative Christians. The first such avenue, which I explored at greater length last conference and so won't belabor here, is to develop a greater understanding of the Augustinian and Calvinist notions of the 'heart,' through which various spirits flow. In the contemporary Christian climate, doing so could build on the work of influential pastors like Tim Keller (*Counterfeit Gods*) and Kyle Idleman (*gods at war*), whose work on idolatry is based, explicitly or implicitly, on such an Augustinian/Calvinist notion.

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[2] Critiques of anthropocentrism are actually common to both conservative and postmodern Christianity. The former, however, tends to critique the over-valuing of the human vis-à-vis God, whereas the latter tends to critique the over-valuing of the human vis-à-vis other creatures.

The second avenue taps a tradition that runs even deeper in conservative Christianity than Calvin or Augustine. Before the Bishop of Hippo, there was the author of Ephesians (and Colossians, Romans, and 1 Corinthians). Appealing to Paul's notion of the 'powers'—mentioned at least 9 times in various letters (Romans 8:38ff., I Cor 2:8 and 15:24-26, Eph 1:20 ff., 2:1 ff., 3:10 and 6:12, and Colossians 1:16 and 2:15)—provides a way to reconcile the notion of spirituality, as described here under the rubric of the 'spirits of the age', with a Biblical authority.

Of course, doing so requires a thinking of the Pauline notion of the 'powers' along the lines of our re-thinking of 'spirit' earlier: away from the notion of individual entities, and having nothing to do with any kind of notion of a non-material world that exists somehow separate from the material world. Such a rethought notion of the powers is not actually new, either in the Christian tradition broadly, or in the more fundamentalist, Evangelical tradition that many contemporary conservative Christians currently inhabit. Theologians such as Hendrikus Berkhof, John Howard Yoder, Marva Dawn and Walter Wink have all made similar claims in recent vintage. Similarly, in Evangelical circles, the notion of the 'powers' is being used to refer more and more to 'culture war' themes: those elements of our culture that are aligned against the will and people of God. While conservative Christians tend to focus on the powers as used in Ephesians 6: 12 ("For we do not have to wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the world rules of this darkness, against the evil spirits in heavenly places"), a slight shift in focus to Paul's use of the powers in Colossians (1:16: "For in Him are all things created, which are in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones, dominions, principalities, powers; all things are created through Him and for Him") will help see that the powers are not evil per se, but are part of God's good creation that

continue to abide in Christ (1:17) and will one day be fully reconciled to God through Christ (1:20).[3]

Through a recovery of the Pauline notion of the powers, and in light of the recent shift in understanding of idolatry at work in popular pastors like Keller and Idleman, the notion of 'spirituality' under discussion here should actually be fairly palatable to conservative Christians.

Platforms and Venues for Conversation

If postmodern and conservative Christians can speak meaningfully in the same vocabulary of spirituality—conceived along the lines of dynamic forces at work in the world—then the first step of bridging the gap between the two groups has been made. The second step is to now find places where the two can actually share in conversations that could meaningfully use that vocabulary.

This is where things get more difficult. The immense bifurcation between conservative and postmodern Christians constitutes a mutual exclusion that is mutually enacted by both sides. This exclusion is sometimes purposeful and explicit (public ridicule, claims of heresy, etc.), but most often is, like racial segregation in the North, more implicit and systematic than explicit. That is, the exclusion arises, not always by conscious choice, but by lack of proximity. When people of one group gather to do what they do, how likely are people of the other group to be there? Are radical theologians welcome to worship at Westboro Baptist? Are conservative Evangelicals likely to feel at home (or at church) in ikon transformation art (or, for that matter, at "Subverting the Norm")?

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[3] I strongly recommend Hendrikus Berkhoff, *Christ and the Powers* trans. J.H. Yoder (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1962) for an accessible but thorough introduction to the notion of the powers in Paul.

The reasons for this mutual exclusion are manifold, but I would like to highlight three here, and make brief recommendations for how to begin to deal with these reasons:

1. *In our polarized culture, people increasingly choose to spend their time with people who are 'like' them, rather than those who aren't.*

This isn't new,[4] but it certainly is pertinent. We see this in terms of news sources (are you a Fox or a CNN person? MSNBC? Here, it's more likely Colbert Report or the Daily Show, with some combination of facebook and Twitter added on to stay up-to-the-second). We see it in terms of clothing, look and style (I went to the Q conference: sooo many beards and suspenders! I might have thought I was at a lumberjack convention if not for all the skinny jeans). We see this in terms of recreational choices (sports or 'fine art'), beverages (beer v. wine v. artisanal spirits), food (organic v. 'normal,' fast food v. gourmet, artisanal v. affordable), and so on.

Google doesn't help this situation either. While it has the appearance of merely searching for 'information,' its algorithms are designed to return searches that are tailored to your preferences (based on past searches, clicks, etc.). This ends up confirming the 'normalcy' of my position, and making other positions less plausible, since, when I search, *everyone* thinks what I think.

But regardless of the reasons, people are inclined to hear what they like from people they like. If we want to converse with our conservative colleagues, we will have to avoid overtly or covertly partisan venues (both our own and theirs, because if someone comes to have their views

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[4] Christena Cleveland outlines the reasons for this very well in her book *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that Keep us Apart*.

confirmed, then challenges to that view are not welcomed nor really heard, but ridiculed and dismissed: FoxNews sites are not good places to enter into conversation about religion)—but we will have to be willing to read, hear, and empathize with positions that are not our own. A 'neutral' venue that avoids any divisive topic is not neutral, it's just irrelevant. We have to find venues where people know they will receive stuff that is in line with what they think—but also, perhaps, some stuff that pushes what they think around the edges. I *might* even be willing to take something that isn't in line with what I think, if it comes from a source that has, in the past, said things I agree with. But to truly draw conservative people to a venue, we will have to be willing, not only to *tolerate* the espousal of some conservative claims, but genuinely to see the importance and essentialness of having those views represented (even if we disagree with them).

2. *Everybody likes to be a prophet, but nobody likes to be 'the people.'*

We like to be confirmed in our beliefs and choices, not challenged and condemned. In general, while we tend to like to be 'truth-tellers', we rarely like to hear hard truths from others. We are inclined to become defensive when people point out our shortcomings, and to either lash out at the speaker or just retreat from the conversation as a result.

To overcome this, we cannot simply avoid saying hard things. This is not the recipe for conversation, but for hypocrisy. Rather, we have to ensure that our conversations are genuinely interested in what is best for the other person (not just myself). Ideally, and most effectively, we find a common goal so that what is best for you is also what is best for me. And if we feel we are working toward the same goal, then it is sometimes easier to hear hard words from a friend (or at least a peer) than from an enemy.

So, I recommend that we approach our conservative others (not merely ridicule or ignore them), and we do so, not so as to change them or 'convert' them, but to learn from them. What can we learn from conservative Christianity that can help us as postmodern Christians? Frankly, many conservative Christians are much better than I am at living spiritual lives, and being comfortable doing so. Perhaps this is a place to start.

3. *We increasingly view identity as opposed to difference.*

We seem to live in a society in which you're either 100% with me, or you are 100% against me. To be with me is to align with me on all the important issues. To dispute one of these issues is not merely to critique a position, but to critique the whole of my (group) identity. As such, criticisms are perceived as personal attacks, and not merely ponderings in a rational conversation. If my identity is established by a set of claims or other markers, than any criticisms of those claims is, de facto, a critique of my very identity.

This seems to be as true for people who favor difference as it is for those who favor identity. Perhaps I exaggerate the point, but I know many conservative colleagues who are genuinely afraid to critique any element of oppression theory for fear that they will be deemed 'racist' or 'sexist'. Putting aside the fact that they probably *are* racist or sexist (at least in the structural sense), this suggests that those of us in the 'postmodern' camp also tend to either feel personally offended or simply shut down when confronted with people who criticize the inherent goodness of plurality and difference, or who suggest that a strong America really *is* the best hope for the advancement of freedom around the world (or, for that matter, to those who think that advancing freedom is the obvious main purpose of human living). At least in my courses, anyway, I realize that I am not very sympathetic (to put it nicely) to modernism and to Enlightenment goals and principles (a student recently asked me "Wittgenstien, he's more

'analytic' right?" When I said yes, she said "Ok, but that's confusing, because I thought Analytic just meant 'uninteresting', but Wittgenstein is interesting." Clearly, I'm not the most even-handed portrayer of Analytic philosophy!).

What is needed, I think, is for us to cultivate an understanding of identity as a coherence-amidst-diversity. Overemphasizing diversity threatens to end up in ghettoism, isolationism, and neglect; overemphasizing coherence threatens to end up in imperialism, paternalism and terror (in Lyotard or Baudrillard's sense). But neither side is helped by equating coherence with identity, for if identity is opposed to difference, then every difference is, inherently, a challenge to my very identity. Every disagreement really is a personal attack.

Bearing these points in mind, if we want to find a venue where postmodern and conservative Christians can both feel comfortable—a precursor, I'm assuming,[5] to meaningful conversation—we will need to find venues that: a) espouse views that are sometimes conservative and sometimes postmodern b) in a way that is not seeking to 'teach' or 'correct,' but to learn or to explain while c) seeking a coherence amidst this diversity of views that is not premised on identity.

What might such a venue look like? I've made an attempt to do this at in All things. The site is somewhere between an online publication and a blog. It is multi-authored (very multi—at this point, we have over 100 different authors in our first 13 months of existence), so as to both affirm difference, as well as get people who genuinely believe a position to be the descriptors or

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[5] It is worth asking whether feeling comfortable is, in fact, a precursor to meaningful conversation. Hopefully those of you more familiar than I am with diversity training scenarios will be able to weigh in on that in the Q & A.

explainers of that position. It posts content that is sometimes quite 'post-modern' and other times quite conservative, but often somewhere in between there. It tries to encourage conversation in the comments (though not always successfully), and the comments are moderated by multiple people to help cultivate the type of 'tone' we are looking for ("we help you with how to think, we don't tell you what to think"). The site is consciously and purposefully based on a particular elaboration of the Augustinian/Calvinist notion of the heart, and deals regularly (though usually implicitly) with a version of spirituality like the one I'm discussing here.

I admit that the site does not have a consistent voice (that's almost inevitable, with so many authors). The quality varies (though I don't think it's ever downright bad). Readers will often fail to read an article if it's by a particular person who they have come to know is not usually consistent with their viewpoints. But every now and then, we'll get a conservative to read something that is fairly postmodern, and to join a conversation about it that is aimed at building understanding, not merely name-calling or identity-protecting. More rarely, we'll get a postmodern person to comment favorably on a conservative piece. But sometimes we do get that conversation going.

In All things is my attempt at a venue where conservative and postmodern Christians can meet, and be mutually enriched. But I'm curious what other things people have tried, or what other options—of whatever sort—are out there, or you think would/could/should be out there.

My hope is that my presentation opens a dialogue on how we can build places for conservatives and postmoderns to come together for meaningful conversation, and trying to come up with concrete strategies and tactics to achieve this. Let's start talking.