
Pro Rege

Volume 28 | Number 3

Article 3

March 2000

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John Van Rys
Dordt College

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Recommended Citation

Van Rys, John (2000) "Regimes of Truth and the Rhetoric of Deceit -- From a Literary Perspective," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 28: No. 3, 18 - 19.

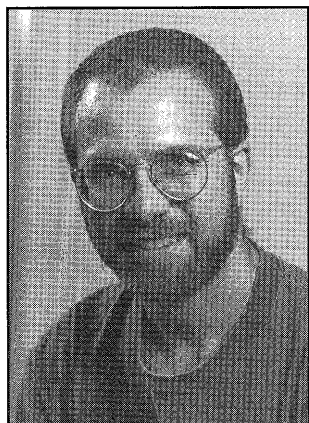
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RESPONSE TO BRIAN WALSH'S

Regimes of Truth and the Rhetoric of Deceit

—FROM A LITERARY PERSPECTIVE



by John Van Rys

An earlier title of Dr. Walsh's lecture—"The Word of Truth or 'Regimes of Truth'?"—implies an either-or choice for contemporary readers of Colossians 2, whether those readers be Christians, postmodern theorists, postmodern Christians, or Christian postmodernists. The question mark in that original title calls into question the either-or choice, specifically the dualistic or antagonistic approach embedded in it. In his new title, Dr. Walsh conjoins truth, lies, language, and power,

Dr. John Van Rys is Associate Professor of English at Dordt College.

hinting at their relationship for readers today of Paul's letter. Having raised some provocative concerns, Dr. Walsh then effectively negotiates in his lecture an orthodox hermeneutics and a post-modern hermeneutics of suspicion by providing an analysis of a Christian hermeneutical practice rooted in shalom. To use a phrase from his lecture, he introduces a divergent voice into the discussion.

First of all, I find compelling Dr. Walsh's critique of both Walter Wilson's discussion of worldview and Michel Foucault's discussion of regimes of truth. If worldview is simply a person's comprehensive, pre-reflective understanding of reality, an understanding that leads one to see constructions as natural and inevitable and to reject as deviant anything at odds with the "natural"—then Walsh is right to characterize this appropriation as "indoctrination," though this is not the word he uses. Similarly, by exploring Foucault's principal statements about regimes of truth, applying these ideas to Paul's Colossian passage, and offering an alternative hermeneutical strategy, Walsh effectively critiques postmodern ideology and praxis while remaining largely in sympathy with its suspicion. In essence, Walsh gets at some of the paradoxes at the heart of postmodernism—that its suspicion of totalizing discourses, its deconstruction of them, its de-mystification are all in some sense alternative forms of mystification exalting indeterminacy, "power plays," and "free agency." As Walsh puts it, the postmodern, deconstructive hermeneutic of violence perpetuates violence—it doesn't solve the problem.

As Walsh proceeds with his analysis of

Colossians 2, he offers a way out of the “regimes of truth” set up by Wilson and Foucault. Walsh’s point, it seems to me, is that a biblical understanding of power, contest, and violence is decidedly different from either Wilson’s orthodox worldview understanding or Foucault’s postmodern, deconstructive understanding. From my perspective as a student of literature, Walsh’s argument makes me think of the Greek dramatic notion of agon—the struggle between protagonist and antagonist at the heart of the play. The notion of agon—of two forces struggling in a contest, in conflict—seems to characterize Greek thought, and this is still the thinking at work in orthodox and deconstructive discourses. To me, what Dr. Walsh seems to be getting at is that a Christian notion of power is radically different from the Greek. This difference, Walsh shows, grows out of radically different teleologies or end goals—ones that he calls the anti-totalizing dimensions or trajectories in the biblical metanarrative, namely, radical sensitivity to suffering and God’s overarching creational intent. What this teleology pulls back into the discussion is flesh and blood human beings, God’s creatures, and the creation—the substance that is made absent by a “natural” orthodoxy and a postmodern focus on disembodied discourse. What this biblical teleology offers is an alternative to the teleology of endless agon—whether the agony of orthodoxy or the agonizing and endless struggle of totalizing discourses.

With this reflection in mind, I simply have some questions for Dr. Walsh on some of these issues:

1. At the beginning of your lecture, you critique Wilson’s description of worldview. By the end of your discussion, have you offered an alternative? What understanding of worldview should replace his? Can you elaborate on your concept of worldview maturity?
2. Do you agree that postmodernism’s de-mystification is in some ways another form of mystification, or do you see something else going on in its critique of regimes of truth?
3. Do the different teleologies of biblical discourse, modernism, and postmodernism function as an irreconcilable difference? What reconciliation is possible?
4. What would you see as the defining characteristics of a biblical understanding of power?
5. You offer radical sensitivity to suffering and God’s overarching creational intent as two anti-totalizing dimensions or trajectories in the biblical metanarrative. Are these dimensions an adequate response to a postmodern critique of biblical discourse. How do we answer critiques of patriarchy, legalism, exclusion, racism, and so on raised by feminism, post-colonialism, etc.?
6. In the end, what are the hermeneutical principles and practices we should embrace as Christians?
7. Can you clarify why you changed the title of your lecture? Does the change signal an important shift?