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Book Review

Jesuit Postmodern: Scholarship, Vocation, and Identity in the 21st Century

Francis X. Clooney, S.J. (ed.)

Lexington Books (Rowman & Littlefield), 2006. 220 pp. $24.95.

By Ronald Modras

Like Tertullian, who asked, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" the reader may ask, what does Jesuit have to do with postmodernism? Unlike Tertullian, whose answer was a terse *nothing*, the contributors to this collection answer with an extended conversation. Conversation about their personal and professional lives and about their identity as Jesuits and scholars in an era, quite different they argue, from that of even forty years ago. Conversations about mission and identity are commonplace on Jesuit campuses these days, and most readers of this journal have engaged in them at one time or another. But few of us have done so with the critical intensity and soul-searching of the authors represented in *Jesuit Postmodern*.

It all began around 1990, when Ronald Anderson and Francis X. Clooney invited fellow Jesuits in and around Boston College to grapple with the meaning of their "intellectual apostolate" in a situation in which Jesuits work in institutions no longer their own and in "worlds markedly different from those of previous generations of Jesuits." That invitation initiated a project entitled "Jesuit scholarship in a Postmodern Age," a series of conversations lasting several years whose purpose was to spell out and explore some of the implications of postmodernism for Jesuit scholars and Jesuit education.

Eight of the essays in this collection originated out of that conversation, one written by an English professor, four by philosophers, and three by theologians. A ninth consists of a rejoinder by a sympathetic but critical non-participant at Saint Louis University, William Rehg, who assures readers in an epilogue that none of his fellow Jesuit contributors is tainted with the full-blown skepticism that is usually associated with postmodernism. Rehg's critique comes as a good turn in a time when the antennae of Vatican censors are sensitive to the slightest intimation of relativism.

Why the authors describe themselves as postmodern is not argued so much as demonstrated by the diversity of their personal and professional lives and perspectives. Their emphasis is on the particulars and a particularity that, as Clooney maintains in his introduction, make it difficult if not impossible to speak of a shared purpose that rises above platitudes. Does "educating men and women for others" require hiring faculty cognizant of Catholic social teaching for courses in business or economics, he asks. (Why not? this reviewer responded.)

Certainly Clooney is correct in pointing out that our institutional mission statements no longer include the classical Ignatian objective of helping our students to save their souls. A widely respected scholar of Hinduism, Clooney is also painfully aware of how "other" he has become from his patron saint and subsequent Jesuit forebears, whose conversations with non-Christians were conversionary in intent and whose study of other religions was for the sake of an apologetic one-upmanship. But he also perceives a disconnect between the postmodern participants in this conversation and the administrators and public relations officers who represent Jesuit education to the public, sensing that the two groups, though friendly enough,

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Rev. Jeffrey von Arx, S.J. reads to students at the Bryant School in Bridgeport, CT . Fairfield University staff and students were part of the Read Aloud Day at Bryant School.

are "vaguely disappointing to one another."

In an endnote (no less!), theologian Roger Haight sums up the warrant for the postmodern self-descriptive. In contrast to universal reason admired by Enlightenment modernity, postmodernism views all ideas and values as tied to a particular time in history. Modern philosophy focused on the abstract individual subject, whereas postmodernism is much more attentive to the sociology of knowledge and group bias. Postmodern respect for perspective threatens universal claims made for overarching essences (like nature and natural law) just as globalization threatens the local standards and norms of traditional cultures compelled to rub up against and interact with one another. Haight also explains how the autobiographical references in all the narratives can be more persuasive than a logical argument in accounting for a position; biography permits the authors to make general claims by appealing to the reader's analogous experiences, all the while allowing other views to also claim some truth.

Arthur Madigan and William Stempsey are both philosophers, but Madigan asks questions out of his Aristotelian studies instead of laying down definitive conclusions; Stempsey reflects on the peculiarity of his position as a Jesuit physician and philosopher who thinks about the value judgments that go into a medical diagnosis. In "A Tale of Two Comings Out," English literature professor Thomas Brennan discusses how teaching a text, he himself can become a text.

Liturgist Bruce Merrill reminisces about how attending Mass in a massive 1850s neo-gothic church as a youngster charged his nascent faith-life with a sense of tragedy and beauty; both qualities now characterize how he sees theology and liturgy amidst the "ruins" of pre-Vatican II cultural Catholicism. As someone who grew up in a German-Jewish neighborhood in northern Manhattan, James Bernauer reflects on the Nazi persecution of Jewish and gay people, the inaction (complicity?) of Catholic leadership, and the call G.C. 34 made for Jesuit participation in Jewish-Christian dialogue. Ronald Anderson connects his émigré experiences leaving first New Zealand and then Australia with his negotiation of Jesuit spirituality with the study of particle physics.

The diversity suggested by even these brief descriptions demonstrate the point the authors wish to make. Yet, despite their apparent lack of coherence, there is a motif that runs through all of them. As Rehg points out in his epilogue, all the narratives exemplify the commitment to dialogue, articulated at G.C. 34 as critical to Jesuit mission and identity, dialogue with other religions and dialogue with contemporary culture.

Jesuit Postmodern is worth a read, especially by Jesuit faculty and administrators but by their non-Jesuit colleagues as well. Mission and identity officers might also want to suggest making it the topic of a campus conversation. If ours is a postmodern culture, we need to talk about it. Postmodernism does not have to be relativistic, but it definitely is dialogic. ■