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## ABOVE ALL EARTHLY POW'RS

A review essay of David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World*. Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005. xiii + 339 pp. \$25.00 (cloth). ISBN: 0-8028-2902-3.

### From Christian Religion to Postmodern Spirituality

**A**BOVE ALL EARTHLY POW'RS, David F. Wells's final volume in his four volume series on the church and contemporary culture, represents both the best and the worst that theology has to offer.<sup>1</sup>

The best of theology is clearly seen when we recognize that Wells writes this book with a pastor's heart. His primary concern is the state of the contemporary evangelical church, which he fears has lost its direction, its mission, and its soul. In order to address this situation, Wells uses this book to sketch a picture of the way in which contemporary evangelicalism has tried to be accommodating to the postmodern culture in which it finds itself. His conclusion is that the church has replaced theology with therapy, Christology with consumerism, and the absolute Truth of the gospel message with the nihilistic tendencies of a market-driven economy. This transformation, he suggests, has effectively deprived Christianity of the ability to claim a unique truth and doctrinal distinctiveness. In an age of ethnic and religious pluralism, Christianity has become just one more option among many and, as such, indistinguishable in substance from alternative spiritualities. Rather than affirming the status of Christ as "Above all Earthly Pow'rs," the contemporary church has bought into the Foucaultian notion that truth is nothing but power-play. What gives a truth claim its force, on this model, is not the extent to which it is an accurate representation of what is the case, but

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<sup>1</sup> The other three volumes are as follows: *No Place for Truth: or, What Ever Happened To Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993); *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994); *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998).

instead simply the political power that it represents and the social power that it can muster.

According to Wells, the Church's attempt to accommodate the mainstream culture is a well-intentioned endeavor. It is the age-old struggle for *relevance*. Unfortunately, this attempt has resulted in the loss of all traditional moorings that would make Christianity a particular faith in the first place. Wells suggests that these moorings are most properly understood as not cultural, but epistemological and metaphysical. For Wells, there is no Christianity without a correspondence theory of truth in which the content of this truth is dependent upon a metaphysical realism where God is a personal being who is supremely good. "Truth," Wells writes, "is what corresponds to reality. It is the faithful and accurate representation of what is 'out there,' be this in the character and the counsels of God, in the created world that he has made, or in the human heart as it has become" (169). Later in his essay, Wells echoes this sentiment and supplements it with a description of the precipice upon which the contemporary church is precariously situated:

If the Church is not in possession of truth, truth as an understanding that corresponds exactly to what is in reality, and corresponds exactly to what is in the will and character of God, then it has been left speechless. It has nothing to say. Without this truth, its private insights are no more believable, no more compelling, and no more desirable than anyone else's. Why, then, has the evangelical Church arranged itself around the marketing dynamic rather than around the truth which is its birthright to proclaim? (314)

The reason Wells offers as for why the church has arranged itself in this way is that it has embraced the postmodern view on which truth is relative to cultural context and, in turn, essentially private. If truth is private it cannot be universal and absolute. Yet, if it is not universal and absolute, Wells adamantly insists, it is *not* truth. Hence, we are faced with the paradoxical situation in which "the more the culture abandons truth and goodness which are absolute, the less the evangelical Church speaks about truth and goodness which are absolute!" (314).

Rather than representing the Christian religion, contemporary churches are becoming indistinguishable from what Wells terms "postmodern spirituality." Whereas religion claims public (read as absolute) truth, professes particular doctrines, and is identifiable by clearly demarcated organizational structures, spirituality is essentially private (read as relativistic), affirms nothing but radically individual mystical experiences, and resists all organizational strictures. The reality, Wells claims, is that "America is tuned in to spiritual matters but not to religious formulations" (119). In the attempt to make Christianity relevant to this spiritual, but not religious, orientation, evangelical churches have

increasingly been reconceived as places for *truth-seeking*, instead of *Truth-affirmation*. Such “seeker churches” are defined by questions rather than answers and hence a particular methodology (characterized by the elimination of classically religious symbols and architecture while implementing technology in as many areas as possible) has replaced a determinate tradition and confessional articulation. “When people are not embedded in a confessional tradition, drift loose from a defining structure of thought, are no longer rooted in communities which have moral and intellectual expectations,” Wells concludes, “almost anything can happen – and it usually does” (267).

Contemporary seeker churches operate on the basis of five views: 1) mainstream culture is driven by spiritual seeking rather than religious devotion (269); 2) evangelicalism “appears not to be growing” (269); 3) the Church is inescapably located within the social/economic marketplace in which options and ideas continue to vie for adherents (270); 4) there have been changes in people’s social habits – “the evolution in the ways people shop, and the ways in which they have adapted to large, impersonal structures in society have all changed what they expect from church” (274); and 5) the old fear that “as society and culture change the Church, at least in its traditional configuration, is beginning to look like a relic, a bit of flotsam from the past” (277). Having embraced postmodernism, seeker churches have become more of a “self-help industry” than a fixed point in an otherwise constant flow of cultural transformation. “What distinguishes the Church from this industry,” Wells maintains, “is truth.” “It is truth about God and about ourselves,” he continues, “that displaces the consumer from his or her current perch of sovereignty in the Church and places God in the place where he should be” (303). In harmony with Francis Schaeffer, Charles Colson, and Douglas Groothuis,<sup>2</sup> Wells argues that rather than participate in cultural accommodation, the Church should realize that Christian proclamation necessarily entails *confronting* mainstream culture (309). Importantly, according to Wells, this confrontation requires a rejection of postmodernism and an extrication of its influence upon both evangelical thinking and practice (316-17).

We are now in a position to understand that it is a pastoral conviction that underlies Wells’s “vantage point” from which the book is written: “There is nothing in the modern world that is a match for the power of God and nothing in

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<sup>2</sup> See Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1968); and *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture*, (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1976); Charles Colson with Anne Morse, *Burden of Truth: Defending Truth in an Age of Unbelief*, (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1997); and with Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1999); Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

modern culture which diminishes our understanding of the greatness of Christ" (11). It is difficult to believe that any thinking Christian could really object to such a claim and have problems with such a conviction. Surely, if the Church has been co-opted in the ways that Wells suggests, then it is correct to call the Church to reevaluate its mode of operation. According to Wells, this reevaluation can occur only within the context of serious theological reflection and scholarship. Those sections of the text where Wells suspends his critique of culture and enters into a substantive theological response to it are the most rewarding of the book. It is in these sections that Wells's theological expertise shines through and yields very persuasive accounts of the biblical narrative. In brief, Wells claims that the theological response to postmodernity will involve three interrelated contentions. First, the self must be shown to be fragmented, but not innocent (164-68). Second, truth must be maintained as public and not private (168-75). Finally, reality must be demonstrated to be personal rather than impersonal (175-76). In place of the hopelessness and meaninglessness of postmodernism, Wells proposes a vision of Christian that necessarily involves a deep conception of eschatology, a central affirmation of Christology, and an understanding of justification (296ff).

When read merely as a contestation of postmodernity as a cultural phenomenon and a suggestion for how the Church can overcome consumerism and theological vacuity, this book overall is very persuasive. Wells's critique of the way in which the Church has become indistinguishable from the secular culture in which it finds itself is cogent and, given that the book seems to be geared towards a generally educated Christian audience and not directly written to scholars, the potential impact that it might have as a corrective to the current situation is significant. However, although reading Wells in this way is not entirely incorrect, it is extremely reductive. As my summary above should indicate, his argument is offered as more than just a *cultural* critique. It is meant as a rejection of not only *postmodernity* as a "popular, social expression" within culture, but also *postmodernism* as the "intellectual formation ... on the high end of culture" (64). In other words, Wells intends to critique not only MTV and Seinfeld, but also such thinkers as Foucault, Derrida, Rorty, Fish, Heidegger, and Camus.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, his book is positioned against those Christian philosophers and theologians who have attempted to incorporate postmodern insights into our understanding of Christian theology itself (e.g., Stanley Grenz, Mark C. Taylor, Don Cupitt, Richard Middleton, Brian Walsh, and Brian McLaren) (see 73, 158n). Wells indicates that this rejection is required because "it is not until the culture has been engaged by biblical truth, the biblical truth by which it is judged, that the Church has discharged its responsibility" (164).

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<sup>3</sup> This list of names is not arbitrary; Wells mentions all of them in the text.

Unfortunately, however, it is difficult to see how such an engagement can occur within the context of Wells's method of thoroughgoing straw-man argumentation. Such a strategy significantly curtails the good theological example that Wells offers both in his sections on the theological alternative to consumer culture and also in his pastoral concerns. It would seem that Christian responsibility itself would entail a deep commitment to understanding one's interlocutors in the most sympathetic way possible in order that Christian Truth can be an actual response to error and not just an unthinking dismissal of other positions. Christianity cannot be suitably defended through simply refusing to really take challenges to its Truth seriously. Due to Wells's superficial reading of postmodern philosophy, his contention that the Church needs to reject such philosophy is not only unconvincing, it is a non-starter. What is truly troubling about Wells's lack of real engagement with those he dismisses is that the book undercuts its potential positive impact on the generally educated church population and emerges as a dangerous example of Christian elitism.

My worry here is that far too many people will believe that they actually understand postmodernism because they have read Wells's book. This belief could then all too quickly lead to a deepening of Christian isolationism and insularity rather than a genuine cultural contestation. That is, if postmodernism is really as bankrupt (and, to be quite honest, as silly) as Wells makes it out to be, then as Christians we should just turn our backs on it and move on. Hence, if the book is read by people who have not already spent time working through postmodern philosophy, then the book appears to be simply trivial. What rational person would actually take postmodernism seriously according to Wells's description? Alternatively, if it is read by scholars, then the book is so weak as a contribution to the literature on postmodernism that it is effectively useless. Either way, it seems that in order for Wells's quite legitimate worries about the direction of the contemporary evangelical Church to be really taken seriously, Wells must take seriously those whom he contests as being in error.

In an attempt at not simply straw-manning Wells's own position, in what follows I will do three things. First, I will briefly consider what Wells really understands postmodernism to be and why his argument regarding the state of the church depends upon a rejection of postmodern epistemology and metaphysics rather than just postmodern cultural expression. Second, I will demonstrate that Wells's conception of postmodernism, although applicable to some thinkers, is actually contested by many postmodern philosophers themselves. Finally, I will offer several suggestions for ways in which postmodern thought, in fact, is extremely helpful for Wells's own project of calling the Church to reevaluate its mode of operation and socio-historical position.

## Building a Straw-Man

*Above All Earthly Pow'rs* begins with a brief discussion of the response to September 11th. Wells claims that this event brought about the “return of evil” to our social discourse and moral imagination (1ff.). However, this return served to illuminate the fact that our social discourse on good and evil had lost all real traction. “Without moral absolutes,” Wells contends, “the business of making moral judgments becomes impossible” (4). Although it is true that September 11<sup>th</sup> exposed the failures in governmental preparedness, criminal intelligence, and national security, it also served to expose the underbelly of moral relativism. When we as a nation needed some sort of moral foundation and absolute Truth, we discovered the grim reality that neglect leads to decay.

This “Truth decay,” as Douglas Groothuis terms it, is the most serious threat to the contemporary Church. As the Word of God continues to be eclipsed in the Church, “a script is being written, however unwittingly, for the Church’s undoing, not in one cataclysmic moment, but in a slow inexorable slide made up of piece by tiny piece of daily dereliction” (9). In the attempt to identify both the causes of and potential solutions to this situation, Wells offers an analysis of the distinctions between the premodern, modern, and postmodern worldviews. As part of his discussion of modernity, Wells distinguishes between the Enlightenment (a movement of ideas – e.g., naturalism, secularism, and individualism) and Modernization (a movement of social organization and development – e.g., the increase of technology, a market driven economy, and a consumeristic perspective) (31). The results of modernization are threefold: 1) the disappearance of God, 2) the disappearance of human nature, and 3) the omniscience of the human being (32). Although modernity celebrated the triumph of human rationality, ingenuity, and social progress, it ultimately “promised too much” (31). Individual freedom gave way to disillusionment and alienation while a belief in progress slid into a simple expression of vanity.

In general, we could say that Wells stands in agreement with Alasdair MacIntyre’s contention that the Enlightenment project had to fail because of the way in which the project was conceived in the first place.<sup>4</sup> On Wells’s account, postmodernism is both a rejection and extension of modernism. Although it contests the supremacy of reason, it maintains a radical individualism. Even though it rejects foundationalism and universality, it extends the naturalistic and

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<sup>4</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), especially Chapter 5.

secularistic commitments. When attempting to offer a succinct definition for postmodernism, Wells rightly acknowledges the problems of trying to define a movement that contests rigid demarcations and definitional clarity (60-61). Nonetheless, he does admit that there are certain characteristics that accompany all postmodern expressions:

What they have in common is that they all believe that meaning has died. This has to be qualified immediately by the assertion that what has most obviously died is the kind of *rational* meaning which the Enlightenment provided – but postmoderns find no grounds for any other kind. If postmoderns do not want to find any objective realm in which what is true and right finds its validation – and they do not – what other avenues are left open to them but that of nihilism? (67)

Wells supplements this account of postmodernism elsewhere in his essay. He suggests that in postmodernism “there are no fears about inconsistency in style or thought, there is no truth or meaning, and so there is not much depth, either” (72); that “it has few, if any ‘doctrines,’ and makes no truth claims beside the fact that there is no universal truth. And that is universally true!” (75); and that “given the collapse of all metanarratives, postmoderns have no idea if there is a destination or how to discover if there is one” (122).

In response to Wells’s earlier essay, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology*, Millard J. Erickson comments on the way in which Wells’s descriptions can “becom[e] quite repetitious.”<sup>5</sup> The same could rightly be said of *Above All Earthly Pow'rs*. Wells’s descriptions of postmodernism are frequent and always dismissive. In the above passages it can be clearly seen how Wells collapses his exegesis of postmodernism into his dismissal of it. This is nowhere more obvious than in the way in which he repeatedly refers to “Derrida and Foucault” as almost being one and the same person (65, 73, 75, 87). Although Derrida and Foucault are characterized as examples of the “most negative” versions of postmodernism and, along with Lyotard, as offering nothing but views that are “stark and nihilistic” (72), there is never more than a hand-waving mention of them. Consider the fact that, despite such strong claims about the nihilistic and relativistic tendencies in Derrida’s philosophy, no work by Derrida is even listed in the bibliography. Moreover, although Lyotard and Foucault receive bibliographic mention, each is only cited within inset excerpts that stand apart from the actual analysis, or lack thereof, offered by Wells in the body of the essay itself. Further, Sartre and Camus are both provided as examples of the way in which “postmoderns are remarkably nonchalant about the meaninglessness which they experience in life” (177), Sartre and Heidegger are used to illustrate

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<sup>5</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenges of Postmodernism*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 36.

the distinction between fear and anxiety (190), and Sartre, Camus, and Heidegger (along with Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, and Harold Pinter) are all discussed as displaying a “despairing mood” (179). But, Wells never offers anything that even remotely could be considered a sustained engagement with the thought of any of them. In fact, the most extended discussions of postmodern figures are found in the series of two page synopses offered for Camus, Beckett, Kundera, and Rorty (181-88).

Wells writes that, “in its sparest and most unqualified expression, [postmodernism] rejects worldviews, absolute truth, and purpose” (72). Since the qualifications that Wells seems to recognize are never forthcoming, Wells’s *characterizations* emerge as nothing other than *caricatures*. Without a more substantive exegetical analysis of the figures whom he wishes to critique, Wells’s argument against postmodernism lacks evidentiary warrant and emerges as nothing more than a very thinly veiled exercise in question-begging. If Wells could actually demonstrate that 1) the thought of all these figures does indeed entail nihilism and relativism, and that 2) their thought is unified enough to be taken as a coherent expression of postmodernism as a whole, then he would be able to move reasonably from this position to the suggestion that Christianity is antithetical to nihilism and relativism and, as such, antithetical to postmodernism. But, because both of the initial premises are not adequately supported, it is difficult to see how Wells’s conclusion could be accepted if one did not already begin the book by agreeing with it.

As I indicated above, Wells would be on very solid ground indeed if all he intended to contest were the cultural trends (postmodernity) that are prevalent in popular culture as being detrimental to the Christian Church. However, for Wells, the consumerism and individualism of postmodernity are only reflections of the real problem that lies at the core of postmodernism: anti-foundationalism,<sup>6</sup> anti-realism, and a deflationary/pragmatic account of truth. He makes this clear in the following passage:

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that Wells is a bit ambiguous in addressing foundationalism in general. He does applaud Alvin Plantinga’s contention that we can move beyond a classical foundationalism without giving up the status of religious beliefs as “properly basic” (82). However, Wells reads this as only being non-foundational in the Enlightenment sense, which requires a connection between foundationalism and natural theology. Ultimately, Wells suggests that Plantinga still offers a position in which “God can legitimately be basic and foundational to one’s view of the whole of life” (82). It is very much an open question as to exactly how the terms ‘basic’ and ‘foundational’ are functioning here as in any way different from the way they would function within an Enlightenment framework. That Wells’s interpretation is a correct reading of Plantinga’s reformed epistemological notion is also something that requires significantly more attention than Wells give it.



The problem ... of course, is that if there is no clear starting point, no foundation of basic belief, and most importantly of all, no metaphysical authorization of any truth whatsoever that we can know, formulating belief becomes a matter of trial and error to see what works. Yet none of it has any certain relationship with what is "out there" (81).

Here we see Wells definitively challenging not a particular form of cultural expression, but the content of the thoughts being expressed.

Wells makes explicit that "those who see only the contemporaneity of this [postmodern] spirituality ... usually make tactical maneuvers to win a hearing for their Christian views; those who see its underlying worldview will not" (155-56). Attempting to be relevant is not, of itself, the problem with the Church. It is the fact that relevance seems to be impossible without embracing a framework, which serves to undermine Christianity itself. One final point is worth making here before moving on to the next section. According to Wells's claim above, those who see the underlying postmodern worldview will not make such "tactical maneuvers." However, this would mean that thinkers such as Grenz, Middleton, Walsh, and McLaren just do not see the underlying worldview, which seems highly unlikely.<sup>7</sup> A better suggestion is that they reject either the contention that postmodernism really is nihilistic, or the claim that Christianity necessarily entails a particular epistemological theory and metaphysical framework. These are both options that Wells never even addresses.<sup>8</sup>

### Postmodernists against Postmodernism

Up to this point all that I have demonstrated is that Wells's interpretation of postmodernism lacks the requisite amount of textual engagement in order for it to be convincing. However, this in no way means that his interpretation is, thereby, wrong. Indeed, it may be the case that Wells's contention is accurate in spite of the lack of evidence for it. Although this possibility does remain open, even a quick survey of postmodern thought will show that, on the whole, postmodernists are just as against the consumerism, nihilism, relativism, and egoistic individualism that characterize postmodernity as Wells is.

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<sup>7</sup> Again, I am intentionally using figures that Wells himself mentions as having embraced the postmodern epistemological position (see 73, 158n, and 228n).

<sup>8</sup> We might say that Wells has covered over what Robert C. Greer terms "the dark side of Absolute Truth" (*Mapping Postmodernism: A Survey of Christian Options*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003)).

It is true that postmodernism is a large umbrella and that many very disparate movements and thinkers can rightly be fit underneath it. Of the figures mentioned by Wells, the two who seem to be the most appropriately characterized as relativistic are Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty. Certainly, Foucault does argue that truth and power are inextricably tied to each other, and Rorty does contest all conceptions of correspondence as the basis for truth functionality. Yet, does this apparent relativism actually lead to the sorts of conclusions that Wells contends it does? Not necessarily. Consider that when repeatedly charged with relativism Rorty consistently dissolves such a critique by noting that relativism only makes sense as itself relative to something that is absolute.<sup>9</sup> If all absolutes are challenged then it does not make sense to see relativism as a threat. That is, relativism is merely a descriptive characterization and not a normative chastisement. Just because Rorty has moved away from foundational justification and correspondence theories of truth does not mean that he has abandoned the idea of truth altogether.

For Rorty, there is no conception of truth that would make sense except as a judgment offered from within an individual's social context.<sup>10</sup> Hence, according to Rorty, truth is best understood not as an accurate judgment regarding what is the case, but instead as a reflection of the way in which people get along with each other and work together on social projects.<sup>11</sup> As such, truth can never be separated from politics.<sup>12</sup> When it seems that truths have come into conflict with each other, it is in fact a moment when political positions and social visions have come into conflict. This may lead towards a pragmatic behavioral contextualism, but certainly not towards nihilism.<sup>13</sup> Exactly the opposite is the case. Since truth is really about social practice and not about accurate judgment, the real task of human existence is one of ethico-political solidarity.<sup>14</sup> Like Sartre, Camus, and Heidegger before him, Rorty contends that the loss of objective conceptions of truth brings a deepening of responsibility, not an eradication of it. The same could be said of Foucault. When Foucault offers sociological and genealogical

<sup>9</sup> See Rorty's introduction to *Philosophy and Social Hope* entitled "Relativism: Finding and Making," (London: Penguin Books, 1999), xvi-xxxii.

<sup>10</sup> See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> See Richard Rorty, "Truth Without Correspondence to Reality," in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 23-46.

<sup>12</sup> See Richard Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume I*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 175-96; "Philosophy as Science, as Metaphor, as Politics," in *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers Volume II*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 9-26; and *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> See Richard Rorty, "Epistemological Behaviorism and the De-Transcendentalization of Analytic Philosophy," in *Hermeneutics and Praxis*, ed. Robert Hollinger, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), originally published in *Neue Hefte Fur Philosophie* (1978).

<sup>14</sup> See Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 21-34; Chapters 14-20 of *Philosophy and Social Hope*; and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), especially Chapter Nine.

accounts of truth as power he is not eviscerating the weight of truth, but instead increasing our responsibility to be invested in power-play such that the political structures in which we live can be contested and reorganized in light of the way in which they have classically marginalized and occluded numerous others throughout history.<sup>15</sup>

Both Foucault and Rorty can be rightly challenged regarding the practical results of their philosophies. One could contend, legitimately I believe, that in order to argue persuasively for his "liberal utopia" Rorty actually requires the very categories that he has abandoned.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Foucault's deflationist conception of truth does run the risk of simply repeating the political marginalization in the opposite direction. Although both of these critiques require a deep and substantive engagement with the intricacies of each thinker's texts, one would still be hard pressed to understand them as advocating anything of the sort that Wells proposes.

When we bring the thought of Foucault and Rorty together with that of Wittgenstein and Heidegger it becomes nearly impossible to sustain Wells's charge that postmodernism is characterized by "private" truth and radical individualism. The very idea of truth for all of these thinkers is that truth is only possible within the public spaces of human existence. To go even further, it could be argued that the private sphere is only intelligible in light of such public hermeneutic practices. Now, if Wells were to resist the tie between public truth and objective universality then his reading might be more accurate. Certainly he is right to say that in postmodernism truth claims are never able to gain the status of being absolutely objective and ahistorically universal. But, is this really a status that is even possible for truth claims when professed and appropriated by existing humans? When postmodernism resists objectivity and universality this ought to be understood as a rejection of what Thomas Nagel calls the "view from nowhere."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For a concise articulation of Foucault's position see the interview with Foucault conducted by Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino, which was published under the title "Truth and Power," (contained in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980)).

<sup>16</sup> For just a few good critiques of Rorty's position on this front see Richard Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991); "Rorty's Inspirational Liberalism," in Richard Rorty, eds. Charles Guignon and David R. Hiley, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Rebecca Comay, "Interrupting the Conversation: Notes on Rorty," in *Anti-Foundationalism and Practical Reasoning: Conversations Between Hermeneutics and Analysis*, ed. Evan Simpson, (Edmonton: Academic Printing and Publishing, 1987); and Norman Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind: The Ungroundable Liberalism of Richard Rorty*, (London: Verso, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Such a rejection does not necessarily entail a rejection of the Christian God or even the content of Christian revelation. Instead it merely indicates a fundamentally Kierkegaardian point that, as Johannes Climacus writes, "Existence itself is a system – for God, but it cannot be a system for any existing spirit."<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard's stress on subjective appropriation, Heidegger's emphasis on historicity, and Wittgenstein's notion of "language games" are all instances of the realization that there is no way to step outside of one's existence in order to render judgment about that existence.<sup>19</sup> Truth claims are offered from within a socio-historical location. So, the very idea of objectivity requires a step outside of oneself and universality requires a position from which no existing person could speak. The recognition of embeddedness does not immediately involve the rejection of God, only the arrogance with which we claim to "know" God's perspective.<sup>20</sup> With this said, Wells's reading of postmodernism collapses the distinction between subjectivity and subjectivism. As I have all too briefly suggested, stressing the inescapability of the former does not entail affirming the relativity of the latter.

Finally, perhaps Wells's most troubling attribution is that postmodernism brings with it the superficiality and materialism of contemporary consumerism. The most striking resistance to this can be seen in the postmodern ethics of Derrida and Levinas. For both of these philosophers, subjectivity is defined by a constitutive obligation to and for the other person. Nowhere is there a more sustained challenge to the complacency and indifference that accompanies contemporary consumerism than in this ethics that demands that the other person receive even the bread from my own mouth.<sup>21</sup> For Derrida and Levinas there is no limitation to this infinite responsibility that defines selfhood.<sup>22</sup> For both thinkers, it is impossible to ever do enough to excuse or eliminate the continued call of the Other. With this in view, it seems difficult to conclude that

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<sup>18</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 118.

<sup>19</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); and Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> See Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1997), 74.

<sup>22</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), especially Chapter Four entitled "Tout Autre Est Tout Autre;" Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethical Subjectivity," "The Ethical Relationship as a Departure from Ontology," and "The Extra-Ordinary Subjectivity of Responsibility," all in *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Chapter Four of *Otherwise than Being*, entitled "Substitution;" and *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), especially Chapter Eight.

postmodernism would entail the abuses and indifference of market capitalism. If anything, we should read Derrida's claim that "deconstruction is justice" as a rejection of the excesses that characterize contemporary society.<sup>23</sup> That our churches have been caring more about incorporating the latest technology into the worship service instead of continuing to struggle on behalf of the "least of these"<sup>24</sup> is as much a problem for Derrida as it is for Wells. Similarly, it is difficult to see how the *mysterium tremendum* that Derrida discusses in *The Gift of Death* and the trace of God that Levinas locates in the Face of the Other could be confused with the superficiality that Wells rightly finds to be all too pervasive in postmodern culture.

We can now see how difficult it is to go along with Wells's suggestion that the postmodern "mood" is characterized by 1) no worldviews, 2) no truth, and 3) no purpose (73). I grant that the idea of a postmodern worldview requires a rethinking of how to construct worldviews without sliding into the problematic subject/object dualism that phenomenology has attempted to overcome.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, postmodern truth is not going to be a straightforward correspondence theory, but instead will include a conception of how truth is a process of *making* rather than merely *finding*. And, a postmodern purpose will be more of a claim to constitutive responsibility than to a determinate teleology. Yet, in all three aspects, the abuses and excesses of contemporary cultural postmodernity are substantively contested rather than implicitly supported. If Wells were to recognize this possible convergence between his own thought and postmodernism, he would be better able to then offer his suggestions for how the Church can overcome its current vacuous superficiality without simply throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

I readily admit that there are always aspects of secular culture (whether high or low culture) that are threatening to Christian distinctiveness. However, despite these dangers, it is impossible to conceptualize and practice Christianity outside of its particular cultural location. Wells is right to claim that "we should not make peace with postmodernity and ... to do so carries the liability of losing Christian authenticity" (248) because to make peace with any cultural location is to forget that Christianity is always meant to serve as a challenge to all locations short of the *eschaton*. Nonetheless, the way in which Wells is right is not in the way he thinks. His claim is correct in that it consistently resists an identification

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<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds., Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3-67, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 25:40, *Holy Bible*.

<sup>25</sup> For a suggestion for how to rethink worldviews in a postmodern context see J. Aaron Simmons, "Finding Uses for Used-Up Words: Thinking *Weltanschauung* 'After' Heidegger," *Philosophy Today* 50, no. 1 (Summer 2006): 156-69.

between Christianity and any particular social manifestation – for such an identification would result in nothing but a political triumphalism that rightly has no place in the Church. Yet, it is wrong as an outright rejection of postmodernism itself and overlooks the way in which postmodernism is a remarkable tool for challenging the arrogance and elitism that accompanies all forms of complacency (whether religious or political).

## A Strange Harmony

Before concluding, I want to offer several other positive suggestions for how a recognition of postmodernism as a resource rather than a threat would actually go a long way towards furthering Well's own worries about the way in which the Church seems to have lost its distinctive presence in and impact on the world.

### 1. Christianity According to Its Own Standards

Wells recognizes that, although there are risks involved, the collapse of the Enlightenment project is a promising development for theology. This claim stands in direct harmony with Gianni Vattimo's position in *After Christianity* that postmodernism is precisely the space in which Christian Truth can once again be confronted in an authentic way – i.e., as advocating the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and not the God of modern philosophy.<sup>26</sup>

### 2. Grace and the Gift

Supposing that postmodernism is tantamount to reducing meaning to personal, private whim, Wells asserts that “meaning comes from God alone” (230). I want to suggest that the discussions of the gift in contemporary phenomenology are extremely helpful for considering how such an offering and reception of meaning could be possible.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D'Isanto, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). See also Vattimo's *Belief*, trans. Luca D'Isanto and David Webb, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> See John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Robyn Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001); Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); Alan D. Schrift, ed., *The Logic of Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, (New York: Routledge, 1997); Edith Wyschogrod, Jean-Joseph Goux, and Eric Boynton, eds., *The Enigma of Gift*

### 3. A Kenotic God

Resisting the idea that Christ is just one more path to self-enlightenment, Wells emphatically writes that "Christ was not only God in human flesh but what we see is the God of self-effacing, self-giving, self-sacrificing love. Here is *Agape* love incarnate" (217). Again, understanding incarnational theology as an expression of absolute love is not rejected by postmodernism, but actually appropriated and deeply engaged by such thinkers as Gianni Vattimo, Jean-Luc Marion, Søren Kierkegaard, and Richard Kearney.<sup>28</sup>

### 4. Christianity and The Political

The consumerism of the contemporary Church is not just a spiritual problem, it is a political one. On this point, Wells would do well to see the resonance between his own thinking and that of Slavoj Žižek. For Žižek, Christianity is best suited to a radical revolutionary politics that consistently challenges the status quo.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

Although I have suggested several ways in which postmodernism is amenable to Wells's critique of the contemporary Church, I do not want to give the indication that what I have termed a "strange harmony" is, thereby, an *easy* one. Despite these particular resonances, there is much in postmodern thought that should give Christians pause. For instance, Wells's worry about the loss of Christian doctrine will not be assuaged by Derrida's notions of "religion without religion" and the "messianic."<sup>30</sup> However, as all philosophy majors know, of course, an

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*and Sacrifice*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002); and Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>28</sup> For Vattimo see *Belief and After Christianity*. Marion's most extensive discussion of this theme occurs in *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991). This idea is best seen in Kierkegaard with the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is read alongside *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), but can also be found in *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), and section II of *Judge for Yourself!* (in *For Self-Examination / Judge for Yourself!*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). For Kearney's position see *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute – Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?*, (London: Verso, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> Yet, even these ideas are not straightforwardly against the content of Christian doctrine. Rather, they are more appropriately viewed as structural aspects of the temporality of human existence. With this in mind, the real question is how to understand Christianity as not being overthrown by

argument against a position is most successful when it is directed at the best possible interpretation of the position in question. If Wells would not be so resistant to postmodernism, I contend that he would actually find a deep strain of support for his quite substantive critique of the contemporary evangelical Church. Ultimately, such a conversation might allow Wells to be more willing to recognize that it is only from *within* "Earthly Pow'rs" (whether postmodern or not) that we constantly stand and affirm Christ's position "*Above*" them.

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such structural conceptions, but reinvigorated by them. See Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar, (New York: Routledge, 2001); and *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, (New York: Routledge, 1994). For good commentaries on Derrida's understanding of religion see Chapter Six of *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, (ed. John D. Caputo, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997)) and also John D. Caputo's *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).