

"Radical Orthodoxy," a few comments on

In his fourth chapter ("The Radical Orthodoxy Project") of *IN THE RUINS OF THE CHURCH* (: Sustaining Faith in an Age of Diminished Christianity [Brazos/02]), R.R. Reno confronts you with a British theological movement you may not have heard of & which you may profit from paying a Thinksheet of attention to.

1 Introducing the chapter to our theology discussion group yesterday, I said "The dominant metaphor of glue is well chosen, for the R.O. mind lacks coherence, & Reno's display of it doesn't hang together: both need glue!" Persuasive philosophies have three Cs: clarity, coherence, & comprehensivity. Fackre agreed, adding "The movement, whatever it is, seems neither radical nor orthodox."

2 Having no other acquaintance with this author, I hasten to add that he seems to me to hang (to be glued) together by his Christian hope; & what he is dealing with is so multifarious & puzzling (as all in our group admit) that his heart-coherence persuades our hearts though his mind-incoherence leaves our minds unpersuaded. The evidence? Discussing the book week by week leaves us feeling more refreshed than depressed.

3 Reno's intellectual style is the exploration/exploitation of metaphors. The book's overarching metaphor is ruin, which he picked up from J.N. Darby (16, 195), an early-19th-c. priest of the Church of England, in which Reno is a layman (195: "D. repeatedly spoke of the church in ruins.") (Darby's glue was a concatenative view of history as a succession of discrete periods, & it was to appear as the dispensationalism of the Scofield Reference Bible.) We are to live in, not abandon, the ruins, faithfully serving toward the coming of a building "not made with hands." Larry Snow, a Methodist in our group, suggested that betrayal is a better, & more biblical, diagnostic metaphor.

Distance is the book's secondary diagnostic metaphor: "The distance that separates us from the gospel is spiritual. Thus the very real difficulty that modern theology senses but misdiagnoses is the challenge of bridging the gap between what we want and what God gives us....[We "protect ourselves" from "the changes promised in Christ" by avoiding "the intellectual, moral, and communal disciplines" by which we could "draw near, overcoming the distance"]." (61)

To repeat, in chap.4 the control-metaphor (& the glue!) is glue. (In today's WASH.POST, an article on the gay-bishop rumpus has this: "The Queen regards Anglicanism as the glue holding together the Commonwealth." A bishop parading his same-sex sexual partner is the latest in a long baleful trajectory [Reno, 76]: "over the last two centuries Anglicanism has been marked by retreat, concession, and diminished confidence," especially in the authority of scripture.) "The Son holds all things together in the Father" (79) reflects Col.1.17 (Gk. "stands together," Lat.vb.form "constant"; but elsewhere in NT, the idea is carried by the only Gk. root for "glue," viz. $\kappa\omicron\lambda\lambda$ - *koll*-, A-S "kl" as in sticky "cl-ay" & in Ger. as an "ag-gl-utinate" language): hiring oneself out [gluing oneself] to an employer [L.15.15]; a husband gluing [Lat. "adhaer-"] himself to his wife [Eph.3.31 [fr.Gn.2.24 LXX, KJV "cl-eave"]]; love "glues us to God" [1Cl.49.5]; a 6th-c. papyrus will of a husband "glued" to his wife; ESV "hold together"; NISB (the latest study-Bible, Abingdon/03), "Christ gives coherence to the universe"; NISB at Col.2.19: "The image of...coherence (cf.1;17) is again used, this time of a human body").

4 Reno's preference for metaphor over concept correlates with his preference for the particularities of classical Christian doctrine over against modernism's & postmodernism's abstractions: not the pluralism of particular religions but the particularities of our religion, the Faith that should be unapologetic in its truth-claims. But the problem with metaphors-as-particulars is that while they have the power to liberate, they have also the drawback that the metaphor's vehicle (its image) limits its tenor (the idea carried in the vehicle). An illustration from politics is Jefferson's "wall of separation between church and state," which by metaphoric power has, in many minds, replaced the pale abstractions of the First Amendment--to misconstruing effects.

5 As the early Christians outthought their competitors both inside & outside the then-boxes (including NeoPlatonism, which Reno advocates re-exploiting a la Augus-

tine), one of the thought-categories was/is *limits*: what can be discovered, what devised, within the limits of (1) REASON (asked Kant), (2) MODERNISM (asked liberalism), (3) POSTMODERNISM (asks Reno's chap.4 vis-a-vis Radical Orthodoxy). Like life-giving water seeping into voids, the gospel fills & fulfills by showing the emptiness of false claims of fullness--(I add) a process illumined by Plato's myth of the readied receptacle.

The Faith can work **within** Derrida's deconstruction of allegedly power-frozen word-meanings & Foucault's thesis that any society's ethos/customs/habits/structures are (as it were) so many power-frozen icicles (69): "Things can be understood and inhabited across change and difference without the submission to power and domination," countering "the Nietzschean nihilism of foundational violence....by advancing a participatory framework, an analogical poetics, a semiosis of [Augustinian] peace, a metanarrative that does not require the postulate of original violence....hopes to recover Neo-Platonic metaphysics as an explanation for the glue that holds the world together" (We are [only] as real as we emanate from & return to the Real, viz. the One: the philosophical distance-metaphor I use to support my view that created un/embodied wills may choose to distance themselves so far from God as to become unreal, i.e. cease to exist: I am an annihilationist [& so read Jn.3.16].).

6 Radical Orthodoxy is "a theory of identity [i.e. fixity] & meaning based [not on postmodernism's violence & power but] on peace" (70)--peace understood in classical-Christian (Augustinian) terms as historical ("earthly") harmony/order/purpose derivative from & responsive to cosmic ("heavenly"). Dynamic, not rigid (69): "The glue is sticky, but it never dries." In Christian liturgy, person/community are co-intensified; in the Eucharist, we neither "abandon our identity" nor "guard it against divine dominion.": in political & social analog, everything's gathered up "toward a transformed way of living." CHOICE: Either "primal violence" or "God's consummating revelation in Christ."

7 Science? His swimmingpool analogy (71): "The deep end of truth has been ceded to science, while theology swims in the shallow end of 'meaning'," value-sharing, spirituality, transcendence. While both modernism & postmodernism thus yield truth to science, Rad.Orthodoxy claims it for "a metaphysics of participation" rather than (I add, e.g. Darwin) of power & violence: "a comprehensive Christian vision" (I ask, Middle Ages 2?). Instead of merely "driving toward relevance," Christian theology should reclaim the authority of truth (I add, as in the Lord's Prayer): "Christian theology should shape the way we talk about everything. Nothing should be kept at a distance." 64: Against "a false and nihilistic view of reality," Rad.Orthodoxy proposes "a participatory foundation. Things are by virtue of their shared Intimacy."

8 Because my wife's ancestors came from Europe later than did mine, they settled in the Midwest rather than (as mine) the East: Rad.Orthodoxy is trying to occupy open land beyond Anglo-Catholicism, its nearest neighbor on the Anglican trajectory. 76: It "inherits" the Anglo-Catholic "pattern of ideality" (& I say, versions it into philosophy/epistemology/salvation by participation). Not surprising that the three major movers in Rad.Orth. are Cambridge (not Oxford) scholars: New England's religious/intellectual original leadership was (1620-) Cantabridgian Radical Puritanism, not Oxonian Conservative Puritanism (or anti-Puritanism).

9 In chap.4, Reno's at pain to sketch Rad.Orthodoxy appreciatively (as he assumes his readers are unfamiliar with this recent British theological movement), then to use it as a foil for his own vision & sermon. Rad.Orth. has (73) "a general tendency to substitute the creative production of theological theory for the redemptive power of Christ"--by "speculative grasp," to "construct a savior" out of the Gospels, treating their Story as a spiritual metanarrative. The gospel glue of Cross/Resurrection dissolves into "New Being." Through a creative process "which must be God himself" (I add H.N.Wieman's definition of God as "the increase of appreciable awareness" [1941-, in my experience of him]), Jesus' Last Supper becomes "participatory atonement." (Compare Kant's poetic atonement & Hegel's loss of Christ to Spirit.) 75: Rad.Orth. does not escape post/modernity's "allergy to the particular."

10 Reno's CURE (79): We must now re-learn to "dwell in enduring forms of apostolic language and practice," "train our eyes to see the identity of Christ in the witness of Scripture and the practice of the church": "eat the scrolls."