

although not in a mechanical process. The process of recovery has to be a process of Christian faith: 'At its simplest, being followers of Jesus Christ is the best way to heal a marriage' (p. 204). Storkey argues that this change in faith and culture can happen in the lives of individuals and couples, but can also be reflected in the media, economics and law.

Marriage and its Modern Crisis helps readers to see the world with new eyes. It stimulates readers to wholesome thinking (and living) as the author uncovers the lies surrounding marriage and marital breakdown in our culture and invites us to see our world from God's perspective. The healthy combination of theoretical reflections about the nature of modern marriage with practical reflections about its outworking, makes this book one of the best about marriage I have come across. Its very readable style is a further asset. I therefore recommend this book warmly not only to people whose marriage is in a crisis, but also to those who want to keep their marriage fresh and healthy and to those who are about to enter into married life.

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Truth is Stranger Than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age

**J. Richard Middleton and
Brian J. Walsh**

London: SPCK, 1995, 250 pp. pb. £12.99
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RÉSUMÉ

Middleton et Walsh analysent ce qu'ils appellent la vision du monde moderne, la vision post-moderne et la vision chrétienne. Ils décrivent une culture en crise, tourbillonnant dans les rapides d'un changement d'époque. Les certitudes de progrès du projet moderne ont été abandonnées et remplacées par le spectacle fatal du carnaval hyper-réel. Middleton et Walsh soulignent avec raison le caractère narratif des opinions du monde, l'importance des relations humaines et de la dimension communautaire, ainsi que l'importance éthique de la compassion. Ils racontent une histoire poignante, faisant grand usage de la littérature, de la musique, du théâtre et des films contemporains, et vont fouiller dans les

travaux des biblistes récents pour imaginer un christianisme désirant ardemment être accessible au monde post-moderne, sensible à la souffrance, enraciné dans le projet de Dieu pour la création et soulignant l'ouverture illimitée de la Bible. Trois thèmes forment la trame du livre *La Vérité* est plus étrangère qu'autrefois: une historiographie de la crise, une célébration de la marginalité et une éthique de l'improvisation. En dépit de son style agréable et de son exégèse stimulante, le livre n'échappe pas à une certaine confusion quant à l'histoire contemporaine, il élude la question de la nature de l'autorité biblique et le cœur éthique de la pratique chrétienne s'y trouve érodé. Ce livre aurait gagné considérablement, au moins en clarté, si les auteurs avaient tracé plus précisément les contours de la modernité et de la postmodernité, s'ils avaient étayé avec davantage d'exemples leur proposition pour une pratique chrétienne et s'ils n'avaient pas cédé aussi facilement aux effets de leur apparente désaffection pour la communauté évangélique.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Middleton und Walsh analysieren und vergleichen, was sie als das moderne, postmoderne und christliche Weltbild bezeichnen. Sie porträtieren eine Kultur in der Krise, herumgewirbelt in den Schnellen der epochalen Wechsel. Die fortschrittlichen Sicherheiten des modernen Unternehmens sind zurückgelassen und durch das unheilvolle Spiel des hyperrealen Karnevals ersetzt worden. Middleton und Walsh betonen zu Recht den narrativen Charakter der Weltbilder, die Bedeutung von Beziehungen bzw. der Gemeinschaft sowie die ethische Relevanz des Mitgefühls. Sie erzählen – reichhaltigen Gebrauch machend von zeitgenössischer Musik, Theater, Film und Literatur – eine fesselnde Geschichte und beschäftigen sich intensiv mit der neueren biblischen Wissenschaft mit dem Ziel, ein Christentum zu entwerfen, das darauf brennt, postmodernen Menschen zugänglich zu sein, d. h. das sensibel ist in bezug auf Leid, verwurzelt in Gottes schöpfungsmäßiger Intention, und das die 'open-endedness' der Bibel betont.

Drei Themen, die *Truth is Stranger Than it Used to Be* durchziehen, verlangen nach unserer Aufmerksamkeit: die Historiographie der Krise, die Feier der Marginalität sowie die Ethik der Improvisation. Zwar ist das Buch mit einer vortrefflichen Prosa und anregenden Exegesen gewürzt, doch leidet es daran, daß es mit Irrtümern hinsichtlich der zeitgenössis-

chen Geschichte behaftet ist, der Frage nach der biblischen Autorität ausweicht und den ethischen Kern des christlichen Lebens aushöhlt. Das Buch hätte erheblich gewonnen – zumindest an Klarheit –, wenn die Autoren größere Sorgfalt auf ihren Entwurf von Moderne und Postmoderne verwendet hätten, ihren Vorschlag bezüglich des christlichen Lebens ausführlicher entfaltet und den Auswirkungen ihrer offensichtlichen Entfremdung von der evangelikalen Gemeinschaft weniger nachgegeben hätten.

Where are we? Who are we? What's wrong? What is the remedy? These questions form the template against which Middleton and Walsh analyse and compare what they refer to as the modern, postmodern, and Christian worldviews. They portray a culture in crisis, swirling in the rapids of epochal shift. The progressive certainties of the modern project have been left behind, and replaced with the fatal play of the hyperreal carnival.

Modern answer: Postmodern answer

Where are we? A world of natural resources which can be scientifically known, technically mastered and economically exploited, progressively en route to utopia. A socially constructed, hyperreal, simulated carnival.

Who are we? Autonomous humanity: independent, self-reliant, self-centring and self-integrating rational subjects seeking mastery over the natural world – and other people. Socially saturated multiphrenic constructs: individuals internally fragmented into a plethora of media-facilitated selves seeking consumer autonomy and experiencing victimisation. What's wrong? Superstition, hierarchy and cultural lethargy. Totalising metanarratives marked by a metaphysics of violence which excludes and oppresses minority voices and people. What is the remedy? A rational, objective, abstract, universal morality, founding scientific, technical and economic progress. Deconstructing metanarratives and tolerating a radical plurality of local narratives.

Middleton and Walsh rightly emphasise the narrative character of worldviews, the importance of relationship or community, and the ethical importance of compassion. They tell a gripping tale – making rich use of contemporary music, theatre, film and literature – and dig deeply into recent biblical scholarship to re-imagine (p. 190–193) a Christianity eager to be accessible to postmodernist people:

sensitive to suffering, rooted in God's creational intent, and emphasising the open-endedness of the Bible.

Christian answer

Where are we? A fundamentally good, harmoniously diverse, covenantal and eloquent creation, relationally responding to the generosity of God, and ordered toward healing, restoration and justice. Who are we? The image of God: empowered agents, gifted stewards of creation called to compassionately benefit creation. What's wrong? Human rebellion against the Creator God, wilful bondage to futility and entrapment in no-exit situations – realised paradigmatically in totalitarian societies driven by totalising/marginalising worldviews. What is the remedy? God's passionate desire to liberate, effected through the death and victorious resurrection of Jesus and the imaginative, improvisatory praxis of the messianic community.

Three themes woven throughout *Truth is Stranger Than it Used to Be* require our attention: an historiography of crisis, a celebration of marginality, and an ethics of improvisation.

The first chapter in the book sketches the crisis of our times. Contemporary events testify to the postmodern fragmentation and tribalisation of the globe (p. 24). '... many of us feel the angst in late-twentieth-century Western culture. ... modernity is in radical decline' (p. 25). 'We are on the edge of an abyss' (p. 26). Such an historiography of crisis has been dear to the successive avant-gardes of recent centuries. And once the sirens of crisis are jangling, it is common for a certain amount of confusion to set in. Such confusion marks the way in which Middleton and Walsh make use of the terms 'modern' and 'postmodern'. Is modernity a current manifestation of a persistent worldview option characterised by totalisation, imperialism, domination, violence and hierarchy or is it an epochal bloc in a teleological progress of human history toward a postmodern near future marked by a radical pluralist celebration of marginality? Is the postmodern a worldview position ('postmodernism') or an emerging epochal bloc ('post-modernity')?

These confusions lead to considerable lack of clarity as to the remainder of their cultural-historic analysis. Can the current historical period, or at least the dominant cultural trend or dynamic of this period, be best described as post-, hyper-, ultra- or late modern? What might any one of these descriptions mean, in

view of the confusion with regard to the meaning of 'modern'? Is the demise of modernity immanent because of the necessities of the teleological dynamic evoked, or unlikely in view of the historical virility of democratic capitalist hegemony in three-piece business-suits (p. 155)? Is modernity exclusively rationalistic and irrationalism exclusively postmodern? Is postmodernism significantly different from modernity, or distinctively modern in all its decisive particulars?

One would not want to deny that all of human history since the Fall has been under a sign of crisis. But compared to when – and in what way – is ours in particular a time of exceptional crisis? Is our time, albeit marred by many small wars and tragically photogenic famines, not rather uncritical compared to the years of intra-modern armed conflict against nazism and communism? There is a danger that with the high dramatics of crisis we might feel the urge to an impatient revolutionary crypto-triumphalism (like some liberation theologians and calvinist reconstructionists), a decadent and conservative fatalism (like Baudrillard and, I would argue, Rorty), or a paradoxically moralistic antinomianism – which I would suggest is what we find in the recent work of Middleton and Walsh.

While it is true, as Middleton and Walsh argue, that Christians should be conversant with the issues of our time, it is equally true that in this conversation we almost inevitably succumb to the jargon of our time, and find ourselves often saying things more along the lines of the times than in line with the script of Scripture. This has been shown with regard to some of the intellectual forebears of Middleton and Walsh: Herman Dooyeweerd to some extent echoed the pervasive neokantianism and phenomenology of his time, and Abraham Kuyper often spoke with a romantic organicist and semi-mystical tongue. Middleton and Walsh most clearly harmonise with the postmodernism they address in their celebration of marginality. So, for instance:

p. 94, '... the whole purpose of the exodus-Sinai event was for Yahweh to found a community ... which refused to cause oppression and instead was committed to fostering justice and compassion toward the marginal.'

p. 102, 'It is precisely because (1) Yahweh is the universal Creator and Judge of all nations, indeed of heaven and earth, that (2) the marginal and the suffering other have a normative court of appeal against all injustice.' p. 103, 'Jesus reinterprets holiness as loving inclusion of the marginal and he enacted this

reinterpretation by befriending the outcasts of Jewish society.' p. 152, 'We offer this biblical vision ... in fulfilment of the important post-modern sentiment of wanting to hear the voice of the marginalised other.' p. 198–190, 'Postmodernists are right: the voices of the marginalised, of those who have been left outside the story line that has been dominant in the West, need to be heard.'

Close to the core of the story or teachings of the Bible we undeniably find a bias in favour of the poor, and in favour of those unable to care for or defend themselves – exemplified by widows and orphans. This bias does relate (albeit obliquely) to the mission of Jesus for sinners. To muddle together, however, these distinct categories 'sinners', 'the poor', 'widows and orphans' – into an amorphous and anachronistic 'marginalised' is to invite misunderstanding. Postmodernism celebrates the marginal with indiscriminate relativism: the margins, after all, accommodate not only the poor and defenceless, but also the weird and dangerous. This celebration does not seem to value any escape from the margins, but rather harbours an ambition for the thrill of being the outsider, the rebel, the victim. This is not the ambition of Christianity. Jesus died to rescue us from sin, not to valorise our marginality. Christian ethics does not romanticise the marginality of the poor, the widows and the orphans – rather, it draws them to the centre of our practical concern.

Joining in the postmodernist celebration of marginality Middleton and Walsh read the Bible in a way slanted against canonical orthodoxy (despite their claims to the contrary) and dogma, reminding one by their manner of Ronald Knox's comment that 'if you want to beat a dogma, any stigma will do ...'

p. 174, 'We ... require a more honest – and more postmodern understanding of what it means to live out of the Christian faith with authenticity in our contemporary culture. ... biblical faith is not abstract, contextless or timeless but is a personal and communal response to what God has done in the story.' p. 175–176, 'This angularity [of the biblical text] can easily be smoothed out by reducing the text to a series of generalised theological ideas. But the transformative power of the Scriptures is precisely their ability to challenge us by the odd things they actually assert and narrate about God, the world and ourselves. Textual specificity is thus the essence for a canonical approach to the Scriptures. It will not do to take a course in theology and

then blithely assume that we have 'mastered' what the Bible has to say. The odd angularity of the biblical text constantly challenges any theological formulations, even the most well-intentioned.' p. 176, '...the Bible often shatters what we take to be orthodoxy. And perhaps it is in orthodoxy-shattering biblical texts that we will find resources for a genuine postmodern reorientation.'

These are strangely self-contradictory claims in the context of a para-philosophical analysis of worldviews and a systematic presentation of these worldviews in terms of four analytical questions. Certainly we do not in the first instance view the world in abstract, contextless or timeless ways, and certainly the Bible is a predominantly and overarchingly narrative collection of texts. But why an affirmation of these realities should spill over into an apparently expansive antagonism toward the very notions of (non-narrative) principle, dogma, theology or orthodoxy is not clear.

Their wholesale reinterpretation of the biblical narrative and the Christian worldview in order to valorise marginality has a decisive impact on the manner in which Middleton and Walsh relate to Christian orthodoxy – a relationship marked by what appears to be considerable animus against ordinary evangelicals:

p. 176, 'Once you become aware, however, through actual engagement with the text of Scripture, of problems with the text, you can't simply fall back on a naive assertion of biblical authority. Indeed, in our experience, those who assert most forcefully an unquestioning submission to biblical authority are precisely those who avoid the odd angularity of the actual text of Scripture and refuse to struggle with our postmodern disorientation. They remain in the relative safety of well-entrenched 'orthodox' theological abstractions.'

This reading of the Bible and critique of the Christian community from the margins inspires the ethics of improvisation recommended by Middleton and Walsh. And inspire is the exact term, since in their view the Biblical narrative cannot offer us 'abstract', 'generalised' principles or norms for Christian praxis.

p. 183–185, 'Christians need to indwell the biblical drama by serious, passionate study of the Scriptures. ... the purpose of this indwelling would be to ground faithful improvisation. ... if our praxis is to be faithful to the story, this requires taking the risk of improvisation ... It is important that our performance not

simply repeat verbatim earlier passages from the biblical script. ... genuine faithfulness to the authority of Scripture means that we must go not only beyond the biblical text but sometimes even against the text. ... Faithful improvisation thus does not mean blind submission to every text of Scripture but the enactment of God's redemptive purposes through discernment of the thrust of the entire metanarrative.'

This is the weird logic of the argument: marginal texts like the 'texts of terror' (Genesis 16 and 21, Judges 11 and 19, and 2 Samuel 13) counter the central metanarrative, establishing an intra-canonical pluralism which subverts any totalising reading of the biblical narrative. A non-totalising ethics improvises, therefore, not blindly submitting to every text of Scripture but ... following the thrust of the metanarrative! One is prompted to wonder why anyone would want to improvise on a metanarrative which has been effectively subverted by its subtexts. If these marginal texts so decisively challenge the metanarrative of creation, fall, redemption and consummation sketched by Middleton and Walsh, why indeed should we pay any heed to it – or them? This is a similar performative contradiction to that with which they themselves criticise postmodernism (p. 76–79). To be caught between the rock of evangelicalism and the hard place of avant-gardisme is a confusing fate.

But even if one were persuaded by the case for an ethics of improvisation one would unfortunately not be able to tell what, according to Middleton and Walsh, such an ethics might look like. We are provided with a little set of examples of actions inappropriate to the biblical story (p. 183): sexual promiscuity, entrenched denial of the force of the postmodern critique and rabid cultural-political nationalism. We are referred to the examples of Phyllis Trible, Bruce Cockburn and the Canadian political advocacy and research organisation Citizens for Public Justice – but we are not told too many stories about their ethical improvisations. We are encouraged to hear the pain of the earth and her marginalised, and to prophetically imagine a whole range of Good Things (p. 192–193): a politics of justice and compassion, an economics of equality and care, child nurture with prophetic vision and biblical dreams, work as service and praise rather than grim necessity, friendship with creation, and so forth. (And in the absence of such imagination, we are informed, we have no hope). The West is encouraged to shut up and dismantle itself (p. 194).

Helpfully, Middleton and Walsh endeavour to make their vision concrete ... (p. 191): 'Concretely, this vision will engender an economics of care rather than exploitation, of enough rather than insatiable greed, an ethos of listening to the voices of creation rather than mere exploitation and control, an environmental ethic of loving and wise development rather than an aggressive lifestyle of global toxification, waste, extinction and degradation.'

It is difficult to be against things such as these – justice, compassion, care, service – even if, ironically, they are norms and principles rather than narrative enactments. It would certainly be unfair to require any sort of generalising normative elaboration from Middleton and Walsh as to how one might enact the biblical metanarrative in an improvisatory manner in this time of crisis. But the claim that the paragraph quoted makes their ethical vision concrete is surely extravagant. One would have imagined that a greater number of more detailed examples – maybe in the form of exemplary narratives of contemporary Christian improvisations – might well have been instructive.

There is much that can be helpful in a narrative approach to ethics. Why such an approach should be privileged exclusively, as Middleton and Walsh appear to recommend, in particular over and against the approach of theoretical analysis, is unclear. Stories are one way of knowing reality. Ideas another. Both abstract. Both generalise. Both provide gateways to and from worldviews. Neither can be either contextless or timeless. Certainly we re-interpret norms for praxis in our time and place, but if such normative improvisation is not anchored to the creational principles most certainly scripted in the Bible (including the very justice, compassion, care and service invoked by Middleton and Walsh) and not aligned with the practical testimony of the people of God throughout history, then we are indeed abandoned to the fatal play of a radically relative autonomy.

Despite the delightful prose and enticing exegesis peppered throughout, *Truth is Stranger Than it Used to Be* suffers from an unfortunate meta-weave of confusion with regard to contemporary history, evasion with regard to the nature of biblical authority, and erosion of the ethical core of Christian praxis. This book would have gained considerably – at least in clarity – had the authors taken greater care in their delineation of modernity and postmodernity, had they exemplified

more expansively their proposal for Christian praxis, and had they succumbed less thoroughly to the effects of their apparent alienation from the evangelical community.

I enjoyed reading this text. There can be no doubt that Middleton and Walsh are imaginative, well-read, nice people. For serious engagement with the historical, theological, and ethical issues of our time, though, I would rather recommend the reader cuts straight through to the notes and tracks down the original sources referenced there.

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Women in the Church's Ministry: A Test-Case for Biblical Hermeneutics
R.T.France

Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995, 96 pp.
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RÉSUMÉ

La thèse principale de l'auteur est que l'exhortation à la soumission des femmes aux hommes s'applique à la vie conjugale et non aux structures sociales. L'ouvrage peut rendre service aux lecteurs évangéliques comme une introduction aux discussions qui leur sont propres, mais le débat plus vaste qui agite notre monde contemporain n'est pas abordé.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Frances zentrale These besteht darin, daß die an Frauen gerichteten Ermahnungen, sich dem Mann unterzuordnen, auf die eheliche Beziehung gemünzt sind und nicht auf gesellschaftliche Strukturen angewendet werden können. Das Buch ist als interne, an evangelikale Leser adressierte, Einleitung durchaus nützlich, doch die Kernpunkte der breiteren momentanen Debatte werden nicht angesprochen.

Dr R T France, formerly Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, presents here the published form of his Didsbury Lectures for 1995. He opens his discussion with a reminder of the timely nature of the topic, when the Church of England General Synod approved the ordination of women in 1992, but two traditions continue within several Churches, partly on the ground of concerns about New Testament language concerning 'headship' and 'order',