

Editor: John S. McClure, Louisville Presbyterian Seminary

- 18 Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. Blackwell, 1996. \$15.95.
- 19 David Batstone, Eduardo Mendieta, Lois Ann Lorentzen, and Dwight N. Hopkins (editors), *Liberation Theologies, Postmodernity, and the Americas*. Routledge, 1997. \$22.95.

Can postmodernism, with its commitments to "the other," and its radical deconstructions of race, class, and gender, enhance and extend our understanding of the liberationist "option for the poor?" Or, are postmodernists an ethically uncommitted, anti-historical, privileged European and North American intellectual elite who threaten to co-opt the liberationist project entirely? These are the two questions that haunt both of these books. The answer that emerges from each book to both of these questions is "yes." For Eagleton, Marxist literary critic at Oxford, it is the relationship between Marxism and postmodernism that is at stake. For the multiple authors of *Liberation Theologies, Postmodernity, and the Americas*, it is the relationship between a Marxist-informed liberation theology and postmodernity that is the issue.

Eagleton is pessimistic about the potential relationship between postmodernism and Marxism. He worries that postmodernism represents a tossing in of the towel by political radicals, who have left the streets where they were challenging modes of production, social systems, and doctrinal formulations in favor of intramural conversations about "prisons, patriarchy, the body, and absolutist political orders." (p. 11) According to Eagleton, academic discourse that belabors questions of epistemology ("talk of whether the signifier produces the signified or vice versa") is symptomatic of a complete abandonment of the material world (and any form of historical materialism) altogether. At its worst, it encourages a kind of Stalinist pragmatism (cf. Rorty) that "sees your cognitive propositions simply as ways of promoting your desired political goals" (p. 13) Eagleton appreciates the decentering and deconstructing impulse within postmodernism, but wonders whether this impulse can be "intentional" and "transitive," so that it moves "towards certain projects and into intricate solidarities with others," (p. 15) rather than toward endless intransitive *differánce*.

Even more critically, Eagleton wonders whether the clarion postmodern cry that history has ended and that metanarratives are dead is not part and parcel of the historical contradiction and metanarrative of late capitalism. He finds this same kind of "dogmatic anti-essentialism" to be part of the mystifying logic of capitalism. Using the arguments of postmodernism itself, he shows how the

metanarrative of the death of metanarratives is not a disinterested metanarrative itself. He points out how the "hybrid, plural, and transgressive are at a certain level as naturally coupled with capitalism as Laurel is with Hardy."(p. 39) Ruminating on Pontius Pilate, he sets us wondering in whose interest it is, ultimately, to so magnanimously sacrifice truth to practice.

His most far-reaching arguments with postmodernism are found in his chapter entitled "Histories." He asserts that both socialism and postmodernism believe "in a history which would be one of plurality, free play, plasticity, open-endedness - which would not, in a word, be History" (capital "H"). The problem with some strands of postmodernism (especially at the street level), however, is that they assume that such history can be "had right now, in culture, discourse, sex or shopping mall, in the mobility of the contemporary subject or the multiplicities of social life." This amounts to a "false utopianism" that forecloses on the future prematurely. (p. 64)

Although Eagleton is hard on postmodernism, he does allow that it makes a few notable contributions. It has raised awareness of "the relations between power, desire, identity, (and) political practice." It has also pointed out many of "the complicities between classical left-wing thought, and some of the dominative categories it opposes" (p. 24) What postmodernism seems to lack is precisely dialectical thinking of the sort that would keep its critical apparatus from making of itself a new orthodoxy.

Some of the essayists in *Liberation Theologies, Postmodernity, and the Americas* seem to be aware of the issues raised by Eagleton. Mark McClain Taylor joins Eagleton in a vigorous critique of postmodernism as a potential "smokescreen for exploitative initiatives within the global market." (p. 169) In "Vodou Resistance/Vodou Hope: Forging a Postmodernism that Liberates," Taylor shows how postmodernism co-opts the "arts of struggle." Postmodernism exalts diversity at the expense of the critique of disparity, exploitation and suffering. Postmodernism critiques liberation as a "totalizing narrative." This critique "serves elite owners of capital who often resist being identified and named as such." (p. 173) Popular postmodernism, he asserts, portrays "structural heterogeneity (which often may be a case of oppression) as healthy diversity." (p. 173) This dissolves oppression into mere *differánce*.

According to Taylor, liberation theology challenges postmodernism to learn from African vodou to place transgressive play into the service of resistance and hope. To this end, Taylor offers three points of practical advice. First, postmoderns must "accommodate themselves to more informal communication networks" than are represented by the book, the professional essay, and the Internet. He suggests leaflets, newsletters, neighborhood conversations, group networking, speech-making (preaching?), banners, radio, etc. Second, postmoderns must deliberately cultivate a "sense of place" beyond the halls of the academy and the conference room. Such places could include, but not be limited to, the street, churches, parks, and other places of public gathering. Third, postmodernists must "strike

solidarity with communities in which vodou aesthetics of practice and spirit are already being deployed with liberating effect." (pp. 181-182)

Several writers in this volume demonstrate how postmodernism can make positive contributions to liberation theology in specific situations. For instance, in an essay entitled "Black Masks on White Faces: Liberation Theology and the Quest for Syncretism in the Brazilian Context," Josué A. Sathler and Amós Nascimento show how the liberation theology of Leonardo Boff is complicit with oppressive categories of thought. Boff fails to move beyond ideas of inculturation and indigenization in his treatment of syncretism. The writers argue that postmodern multiculturalism offers a model for understanding syncretism that can ameliorate this problem.

In "Writing for Liberation: Prison Testimonials from El Salvador," Lois Ann Lorentzen argues that the *testimonios* of women tortured in Salvadorian prisons form a new "postmodernism of resistance" which "collapses the distance between elite and popular culture, challenges the 'great narratives' of western progress, and generates a new postcolonial narrative of historical space and destiny." (p. 131) She argues that such postmodern narratives of resistance challenge liberation theologies to apply the same hermeneutic of suspicion to themselves as they do to the enemy.

Dwight N. Hopkins, in an essay entitled "Postmodernity, Black Theology of Liberation and the U.S.A.: Michel Foucault and James Cone," argues that while Cone attended well to the macro-structures of racial and social oppression in the U.S.A., he could learn from Foucault to examine the "micro-powers" at work as well, especially those afoot in family, kinship, knowledge, and sexuality. These considerations would lead naturally to more attention to developing solidarities across lifeworlds, especially between blacks and poor and working class white Americans. On the other hand, he argues that the sense of a "narrative of struggle" and of "telos" that pervades Cone's work is a clear reminder that the social location for black liberation has much to contribute to the relatively aloof (bourgeois?) stance of Foucault.

In "From Christendom to Polycentric Oikoumené: Modernity, Postmodernity, and Liberation Theology," Eduardo Mendieta argues that postmodernism and liberation theologies both contribute to a new vision of *oikoumené* which uncouples it from the *orbis christianus*. The result is a "localized and de-centered ecumene that begins with the "non-person," the "dis-possessed, the absent ones from history," rather than from "the church as the site for the dispensation of divine salvation." (p. 265)

It is a welcome gift to find in this collection of essays Edmund Arens chapter entitled: "Interruptions: Critical Theory and Political Theology Between Modernity and Postmodernity." Arens finds many of the political impulses of postmodernity already at work in modernist critical theory and in political theology. Among these are the rejection of conceptions of pure reason and theory, rejection of any myth of the given, and a critique of capitalism. Critical theorists and political theologians, however, do not conclude with postmodernists

that one must abandon reason, completely subvert subjective identity and telos, or jettison as totalizing narrative the historical commitment to transform human relations to systems of money and power. This would be to abdicate to an ironic postmodernist "neoconservatism," found in "a turn or return to aesthetics" (note narrative theologies, postliberalism, etc.) or a fleeing to "religiosity" (note spiritualities, postmodern ethics of character or saintliness). Instead, critical theory, in conjunction with political theologies, seeks to transform reason into communicative reason, rescue "the endangered or even abolished subject" (p. 237), and extend the historical-materialist basis for its critique of social structures to include anamnestic and eschatological forms of solidarity with suffering.

The homiletician might come away from reading these two books asking questions such as these: How do I keep my "post-" (modern, liberal, enlightenment, Christendom) commitments firmly tethered to Christ's clear commitment to the redemption of suffering in history? What kind of preaching will relate a church in a postmodern ethos to this redemptive vision? Where should the preacher's fundamental identifications be? What forms of reason should undergird homiletical practice today? What is our relation to the idea of "historical subjects" in our preaching? What smokescreens for capitalism should we be avoiding in our rush to embrace this or that "post-" in developing homiletical theory? If such questions are of any interest, I heartily recommend these two books.

□ John S. McClure

- 20 Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Columbia University Press, 1997. \$ 16.50 (paperback).

Extraordinary Bodies is a fascinating sociological and literary study of how physical difference dictates identity formation, affirming who we are by contrasting ourselves with those whose physical appearance is contrary to our own. The "normate" is the dominant society's ideal while the disabled figure signifies the exact opposite, what Americans fear they will become – someone without control over external circumstances, someone without control over body and world, someone who is no longer autonomous. These categories, however, are ideal constructs that are not based on lived experiences.

By analyzing Erving Goffman's "Stigma" theory, Mary Douglas' "Dirt" concept, and Michael Foucault's "Docile Bodies" theory, Thomson positions persons with disabilities outside the realm of medicine and pathology and into that of ethnicity and political minorities. "I propose that gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability are related products of the same social processes and practices that shape bodies according to ideological structures." (p. 132)

Extraordinary Bodies then analyzes the Freak Shows from 1835-1940. The "freaks" put on display were either "normal non-Westerners" or "abnormal Westerners." (p. 63) One major role of the Freak Show was to confirm the "normalcy" of the spectator's status by