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*Who's Afraid of Relativism? Community, Contingency and Creaturehood* by James K. A. Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), + 192 pp.

I have come to appreciate the growing body of work of James K.A. Smith. All of his books have a single aim: to render accessible the Continental tradition of philosophy to a Christian audience. This book is no exception, except that it broadens the scope: analytic philosophers now come under the illuminating pen of Smith.

The book reconstructs, in outline form, the pragmatic philosophy of Wittgenstein, Rorty and Brandom. Given the brevity of the book itself, the chapters devoted to the three figures strike the reader as perhaps too economical. Of course, we can grant Smith leeway, for his plea is that we do so. We are to realize the book "makes no claims to have 'mastered' the field." His task is "exploratory and programmatic, not exhaustive and pedantic" (13). The book, overall, is nevertheless a success, even if I may disagree with its basic goal—more on that in the final paragraph. The book, I pause to note here, treats its topic in an entertaining way, with films (*Lars and the Real Girl* and *Crazy Heart* for example), music, and conversational anecdotes regularly invoked, all in the service of making a case for "Christian pragmatism" or "Christian Relativism" (181).

Dispelling the "spectre" of relativism in his opening pages, Smith wants to submit thinkers as well-known as Christian Smith and Alvin Plantinga to critique, and rightly so: they adopt a kind of critical realism that entails a move toward representational correspondence, whereby my mind "in here" lines up with or hooks onto perfectly the real world "out there." The impulse to secure "perfect" or "absolute" truth impervious to contingency may serve the Christian's intent to find a bulwark against arbitrary relativism, but it does not, in Smith's mind, "honor the contingency and dependence of our creaturehood" (30). Christian realism so conceived is philosophically untenable for Smith. Notwithstanding the question of interpretive accuracy, Wittgenstein is Smith's philosophical lead-in. Because the meaning of language relies on its ambient community of practice, the naivety of "objective" knowledge, acquired from a "God's eye" perspective, is exposed as a conceit. The meaning of a word or sentence or a larger narrative finds its conceptual bearings only within context, or to employ Wittgenstein's vocabulary, a "form of life." Language does not participate in a collection of timeless forms, but rather reflects or discloses the rules and syntax of a particular, time-bound grammar. Language has utility, that is, it indicates a meaning only if the community recognizes the meaning as such. What does this mean for the Christian? For the church? It indicates that Christian discipleship is intensive practice, a language or set of skills acquired as a kind of "know-how," a speech act learned over time through performance in the community of the church. We learn how to love as Christ did only once we enter into the form of life of the church: "in the gracious condescension of his incarnational being, God's revelation meets us *in* and *under* these social conditions of meaning. God's revelation meets us in these conditions of contingency and dependence" (72). There is no "objective" revelation nor is there an obvious "natural law" to be read off from the pages of the world (though Smith does attend briefly to the problem natural law poses to his thesis, see 112 n49). Does Smith venture into well-worn territory here? I already see the parallels in his account with MacIntyre's or Hauerwas' radical communitarianism.

The longest chapter belongs to Rorty. Does he not famously deny objectivity? He denies truth of any sort, does he not? Attached to Rorty's reputation, therefore, is a kind of queasiness, a result of Rorty's repudiation of a "misbegotten paradigm" of correspondence theories of truth and a "final language that transcends the contingency of practice" (96). Rorty, just like Wittgenstein,

refuses to grant currency to the inside/outside picture of reality. Common sense tells us there is a world “out there” independent of the mind. Rorty wishes to deny this state of affairs, common though it remains. Truth is not a representation of the outside world, but rather the property of the sentences we enunciate, a property we establish together in a web of beliefs. Finding ways to cope, opening up space to agree, eliciting others to generate group solidarity, all these practices replace truth. Rorty’s conception of truth, substantially taken as true, depends thereby on how a statement coheres with and is sanctioned by present standards. Smith heartily affirms this. But, as if to anticipate an immediate objection from secular realist and Christian traditionalist alike, Smith claims that Rorty is no nihilist; he is not enthralled by an “anything goes” relativism. Smith’s refrain at this point is clear: “to reject the pragmatist account of meaning and knowledge amounts to denying the finite, creaturely conditions of human knowledge” (107). And this is irresponsible according to Smith. Christians should affirm Rorty’s basic pragmatism, since any sacramental ontology bears within its logic a similar affirmation: contingency, social solidarity, ways of coping, dependence and social conditions of knowledge, all of which reflect a “humble” creaturely finitude granted to us by God; we’ll return to this final point presently.

Brandom reinforces pragmatism; however, he adds the important layer of “accountability” that social conditions of knowing invariably assume. When I make a statement of any kind, but especially a religious one, my discursive community holds me responsible for that statement. In other words, summoned by my peers, or better, interrogated by them, I will respond with reasons that justify my stance. I will make explicit what I believe. To say that I am rational and responsible is to show myself to others as one who gives a set of reasons to my peers that meets the criteria laid out by a normative space of reasons—a rationality constructed by that particular community of practice. The point, once again, to avoid confusion, is that Smith wants to place an accent in the strongest possible terms on contingency and the functionality of language, as they yield truth that is normative for a particular community of practice (or language game or form of life). Objective truth is not so much objective as it is socially constructed to be objective.

The aspiration of much liberal and evangelical theology to achieve a transcendent, universal theory of truth, independent of the parameters of contingency and learned “know-how” is Smith’s target of critique. It is no surprise that he positions the book within the legacy of George Lindbeck. More specifically, the book inherits his post-liberal critique of the “experiential-expressivist” paradigm.

Herein lies one potential problem with Smith’s proposal. I can appreciate the critique of the hubris on display by many Christians who claim to possess absolute truth. While I do not advocate for an “experiential-expressivist” realism, is not some kind of “minimal” metaphysical foundation needed for a socially responsible proposal? How else is Christianity permitted to enter into a dialogue with other forms of life? How can Christianity critique (or be critiqued by) other traditions of reasoning if it retreats into a tightly bound enclave, a “discursive community” all its own? As Charles Larmore says, in response to Rorty, “Coherence as the test of truth only makes sense if truth itself is understood as correspondence to the way things really are” (*The Autonomy of Morality* [Cambridge University Press, 2008], 29). Perhaps too strong a statement of realism on the part of Larmore, I admit. But Smith seems acutely aware of objections like these in his last chapter, and responds with the following: second order claims about doctrine rely on the first order ontological claim that Christ is Lord of the world. But the inverse is actually the case: this first order claim is understood to be true only once one sees the world through a Christian lens (167-69). Smith descends into confusion here; he alludes to the Christian God as the “Absolute” who authenticates our contingency by becoming one of us in the incarnation. “In Jesus—the Absolute becomes dependent, Necessity inhabiting contingency—we learn *how* to be dependent” (180). Naming God as Absolute or Necessity sounds like Augustine or Gregory of Nyssa, and they elevate God to a transcendental truth, even if they acknowledge this divine truth is glimpsed only in part, as an enigma. But Smith, in contrast, will have to say that God is “Absolute” only for the Christian discursive community. God is therefore a relative-Absolute. Why then employ the term Absolute at all? Smith anticipates my objection elsewhere when he discusses the possibility of a “realism without correspondence” (or representationalism) (104-09). He undertakes a critical comparison between a Thomistic sacramental ontology and pragmatism, presumably to show they are not exclusive of each other. However, his hold on realism remains tenuous, as he decides in favour of pragmatism, since any realism vindicates itself only as a “cultural accomplishment,” (108) dependent on the “Christian story” (112). But

the reduction of meaning (and reference) to cultural relativity or cultural “stories” is precisely what realism usually challenges.

Is “absolute truth” (I also want to avoid this form of hubris like Smith) the same as the universal logic, or the “realism,” of the gospel? Certainly someone like Balthasar would say Christian truth, should we approach it, is fragmentary (not absolute) but it is no less universal in scope, able to judge all communities of practice. Augustine’s and Balthasar’s epigraphs provided in beginning of the volume, I would add, may mislead some readers: they are not relativists, but “realists” even while they show foundationalism does not oppose contingency, creaturehood and communities of practices in which delight in God unfolds “in dialogue with the neighbour.” Might a Christian “idealism” or “anti-realism” or “pragmatism” also find a way to incorporate elements of realism? One suggestion, though I do not intend to diminish the fruitful way in which Smith “takes to church” figures like Rorty and Brandom, is to highlight the importance of Edmund Husserl’s late concept of the lifeworld. Realism and idealism and everything between unfolds here in a phenomenological idiom, in which the grammar of manifestation and disclosure can overlap with, and shed light on, God’s self-manifestation in Christ.

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*Nation and Nationalism in the Theology of Karl Barth* by Carys Moseley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), vii + 217 pp.

Few theologians have *theologically* discussed the issues around nationhood and nationalism as constructively as Karl Barth. Moreover, it was the failure of Protestantism and Protestant theology in face of nationalism and war that prompted Barth to find a new way of doing theology. But there are surprisingly few studies on this aspect of Barth’s theology. Much is written on Barth’s views on church and politics, church and state, socialism, democracy, the Nazi state, and so on, but comparatively little on nationhood and nationalism. Carys Moseley’s book is thus a welcome addition to the world of Barth studies. It is basically a chronological study. The author leads the reader through Barth’s writings from his earliest student papers up to what she considers to be Barth’s most full and mature position on nationhood, the section on “Near and Distant Neighbours” in *Church Dogmatics* III, 4, published in 1951. The culmination of this study is telling insofar as it shows how Barth’s analysis of nationhood is an integral part of his dogmatics.

However, before Moseley begins her diachronic analysis of Barth’s writings, she attempts to place her study in the context of recent Barth studies as a whole. At least for this reader, this beginning of the book is a bit off-putting. The author is very opinionated and delivers a long list of strongly worded generalizations and binary oppositions that sometimes is quite misleading. Just one example is her characterization of the Marquardt-Jüngel controversy of the early 1970s, where she contrasts “Jüngel’s purely dogmatic approach to Barth” with Marquardt’s emphasis (if one-sided) on the political and practical sides of Barth’s theology. Anyone familiar with Jüngel’s writings knows how distorted this description is. The introduction also shows how the author is driven by her own interest in Welsh nationhood. She also points to the generally little-known early Welsh reception of Barth that, partly because of a different ecclesial and national context, was quite different from the English and Scottish reception.

In the first chapter she shows the importance of the fact that Barth was Swiss and also his background in Swiss religious socialism. He could describe the four peoples living together in Switzerland as a parable of the kingdom of God; different peoples or language groups living together in ways that exhibited harmony and reconciliation. The Swiss experience also makes