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Lakeland - Book Profile: Beyond Foundationalism - JCRT 2.3

Book Profile

Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press. xi + 298 pages. First edition. ISBN 0-664-25769-0.

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Since at least the time of the publication of George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984), foundationalism in theology has been on the defensive, if not definitively routed. Lindbeck's cultural theory of religion, dubbed "postliberalism," was equally critical of traditional "propositionalism" and what he called "experiential-expressivism, roughly the post-Schleiermacherian romantic trend in theology. The target of Lindbeck's by-now classic critique was any attempt to set a standard or hermeneutical frame of reference by which the truth of doctrine was to be measured, thus any "foundation" external to the Christian narrative.

3. Grenz and Franke make a sustained case in this volume for a postfoundational evangelical theology. They see themselves taking up a challenge implied in Lindbeck's remark at a Wheaton conference in 1995 that the future of postliberalism as "a communal enterprise of the church" probably lies with evangelicals. Their proposal requires an internal critique of the evangelical heritage, specifically establishing that a postfoundational approach is truer to the evangelicalism than either Reformed scholasticism or the biblical dogmatism of the scripture principle. But the book in fact makes larger claims, arguing that postfoundational theology is *the way* in which a truly theocentric theology can be forged today. It operates effectively on three levels: as a survey of the state of contemporary Protestant theology, useful to students; as a proposal for the reform of evangelical theology; and as a challenge to foundationalism of whatever theological persuasion.
4. In the first of the book's three major sections, the authors claim that two major characteristics of postmodernity, the rejection of modernity and the shift from a realist to a constructionist view of truth, establish a kind of postmodern preferential option for non-foundationalism. They face the obvious critique that social constructionism is unhelpful for theology because it moves away from metaphysical realism, and respond in a most interesting way, arguing that the real to which theology points is not this present world, which will pass, but the future eschatological world determined by God's will, which is not yet. The second section of the book examines the three sources of theology, scripture, tradition and culture. The third and final section looks to the three fundamental characteristics of a sound theology—what the authors call "focal motifs"—namely, trinity, community and eschatology. Each chapter in part two offers a superb survey of the contemporary discussions of scripture, the theology of tradition and cultural anthropology, while those in the final section lay out the history and present state of theological discussions on the Trinity, ecclesiology and eschatology. The chapters in these two sections are structured similarly, moving from discussions of problematic elements in the Protestant tradition and helpful summaries of the history of theological developments

to proposals for construing the value of the three sources and three motifs in nonfoundational terms. Particularly useful here are the chapter on scripture with its wonderful account of how theology must read scripture as text, the outstanding summary of the state of cultural anthropology, and the recalling of evangelicalism to a serious ecclesiology.

5. To the degree that this book establishes a middle ground on which the sterile alternatives of liberalism and scholasticism can be brought together, critiqued and transformed into something new, it is an important and timely project. Even to those who do not accept the constructive direction of the work, it is invaluable as a study of where theology is today. The whole book is admirably well constructed and almost faultlessly written. At times there are minor flaws, like the failure to treat adequately the contemporary Catholic understanding of the scripture/tradition relationship, or the occasional brevity of the constructive proposal that comes at the end of lengthy critical discussions, but these are eclipsed by the book's strengths. The authors provide important correctives to the internal weaknesses of their own tradition, especially an individualism and a historicist approach to eschatology. Their generally eirenic and ecumenical tone invites the reader in, and their voluminous notes and references offer many avenues for further exploration. If there is a serious omission, it must be in the lack of any attention to pneumatology. Given the centrality of their claim for the work of the Spirit in creating a world through scripture, and the need for theology to listen to the Spirit, such a pneumatology would help to overcome the slightly magical sense of the Spirit's activity with which we are left.
6. The book builds upon Grenz's earlier *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (1993) and *Renewing the Center* (2000), as well as showing much evidence of Grenz's longstanding interest in the work of Wolfhart Pannenberg. It owes a lot to work like Nicholas Wolterstorff's *What New Haven and Grand Rapids Have to Say to Each Other* (1993) and Nancey Murphey's *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism* (1996). Its clearly evangelical focus means that its tantalizing minor comments on John Milbank and his merry band of orthodox radicals goes undeveloped, and it sadly takes no account of important Catholic discussions of postfoundational and neoliberal thought like John Thiel's *Nonfoundationalism* (1994). But its substantial bibliography illustrates the breadth of its authors' competencies. Overall, this is an outstanding and helpful work, stimulating to those persuaded of the virtues of nonfoundational theology, challenging to those not so convinced, and a reassuring testimony to the vitality of postmodern evangelical theology.

Paul F. Lakeland is Professor of Religious Studies at Fairfield University in Connecticut. He teaches courses on the intersection of religion and culture, and on Catholic theology. He is the author of *Theology and Critical Theory* (1990) and, most recently, of *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age*. He is currently an editor of *Religious Studies Review* and chairs the *Theology and Religious Reflection* section of the American Academy of Religion.