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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO  
POSTMODERN THEOLOGY

Postmodernity allows for no absolutes and no essence. Yet theology is concerned with the absolute, the essential. How then does theology sit within postmodernity? Is postmodern theology possible, or is such a concept a contradiction in terms? Should theology bother about postmodernism or just get on with its own thing? Can it?

Theologians have responded in many different ways to the challenges posed by theories of postmodernity. In this introductory guide to a complex area, editor Kevin J. Vanhoozer addresses the issue head on in a lively survey of what “talk about God” might mean in a postmodern age, and vice versa. The book then offers examples of different types of contemporary theology in relation to postmodernity, while the second part examines the key Christian doctrines in postmodern perspective. Leading theologians contribute to this clear and informative Companion, which no student of theology should be without.

KEVIN J. VANHOOZER is Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Illinois. Before that he taught for eight years at New College, University of Edinburgh, where he was Senior Lecturer in Theology and Religious Studies. He is the author of *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (1990), *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (1998), *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics* (2002), and *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Theology* (2004). He was also the co-founder and co-chair for many years of the Systematic Theology group in the American Academy of Religion.

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## Preface

To call a theology “modern” is to situate it in a familiar narrative about the Enlightenment or to point out certain family resemblances (for example, critical, scientific) between the thinking of exegetes and theologians and their secular counterparts. No such consensus exists, however, with regard to the term “postmodern.” Yet in the past twenty years or so postmodernity has become a concept that is as indispensable for understanding contemporary Western thought and culture as modernity has been for understanding the past three hundred years. For some, postmodernity marks the end of theology; for others, it is a new beginning. What is undeniable is that a number of theologians have now accepted this adjective as an accurate qualification of their approach to theology. Any genuine grasp of the present situation in theology, therefore, must come to grips with the various ways in which these theologians understand and appropriate “the postmodern.”

Yet postmodernity is as essentially contested a concept as it is an indispensable one – a sure sign of its importance for society and the academy alike. No one discipline has a monopoly on its definition; indeed, “postmodern” turns up in contexts as diverse as art and architecture, on the one hand, and philosophy and cultural studies, on the other. Though its proponents typically resist hegemonic “metanarratives” that purport to offer universal theories which construe reality from a “God’s-eye point of view,” there is nonetheless something ambitious about the very concept of the postmodern. For to be postmodern is to signal one’s dissatisfaction with at least some aspect of modernity. It is to harbor a revolutionary impulse: the impulse *to do things differently*.

Postmodernity is upsetting, intentionally so. Postmodern thinkers have overturned the tables of the knowledge-changers in the university, the temple of modernity, and have driven out the foundationalists. Or, to take an even older image: postmodern prophets have marched, Moses-like, into Egypt and demanded “Let my people go.” Postmoderns have resisted their harsh modern taskmasters together with their requirement to make epistemological bricks out of the straw of logical propositions and the mud of

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universal human experience. Postmodernity is perhaps best construed as an “exodus” from the constraints of modernity, as a plea to release the other, as a demand to let particulars be themselves rather than having to conform to the structures and strictures of the prevailing ideological or political system. Whether this exodus from modernity leads to genuine liberation or to a new bondage remains, of course, a matter of dispute.

Part one presents and examines theologies that either call themselves postmodern or have been described as such. The chapters treat several varieties of postmodern theology (for example, postliberal, deconstructive) with a special view to explaining the way in which each type conceives the task, method, sources, and norms of theology. Each chapter shows how the adjective “postmodern” qualifies its particular brand. Part one thus represents an eightfold typological path, as it were, that leads to enlightenment, at least as far as the meaning of postmodern theology is concerned.

The essays in Part one hold a twofold interest for the student of contemporary theology: first, because they represent an impressive variety of approaches, a variety that presents the further challenge of specifying what, if anything, it is that constitutes their unity-in-diversity, what it is that justifies the common denominator “postmodern”; and second, because each essay makes a case, at least tacitly, on behalf of each type that it, more than the others, is the legitimate pretender to the postmodern throne.

Whereas the chapters in Part one approach theology via postmodernity, the essays in Part two do the reverse, approaching postmodernity from the vantage point of theology, which is to say, from the perspective of particular doctrines. Certain authors explore ways in which postmodern themes make creative contributions to the development of particular doctrines (for example, how might the postmodern critique of modern individualism yield resources for one’s understanding of the church?). Other authors focus on the resources implicit in particular doctrines for engaging, and perhaps correcting, certain postmodern tendencies (for example, how might the doctrine of the Trinity allow us to think difference in terms other than conflict?). In this way, essays in Part two do not merely describe but *do* postmodern theology.

Readers will be interested to know that the image on the cover, “Christ II,” was entered in a contest marking the 2000th anniversary of Jesus’ birth. The image is in fact a “photomosaic” composed of hundreds of images of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a body of ancient Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts written on papyrus and leather that date from 200 BC to AD 100. The scrolls include sections of the Old Testament as well as hymns, commentaries, and apocalyptic writings of the Qumran community. “Christ” is thus constructed of textual fragments – an apt commentary on Derrida’s maxim,

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“There is nothing outside textuality,” and an apt metaphor for a volume on postmodern theology. After feasting on the present fragments contained herein, however, we may find, as with the fragments left over after the feeding of the 5,000, that our theological baskets, far from being empty, are in fact brim full.

KEVIN J. VANHOOZER