

**Millard J. Erickson – *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism*, InterVarsity Press, Grand Rapids 2001, 335 p.**

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**Abstract**

Motivací pro sepsání knihy bylo Ericksonovo pozorování, že mnohé komentáře a reakce na postmodernismus byly buď nekriticky přijímající nebo silně negativní. Autorovou snahou je proto 1) vyvážit tyto extrémní a 2) dát konstruktivní křesťanskou odezvu na postmodernismus.

**Keywords:** Western Society, Postmodernism, Christianity, Truth

**Klíčová slova:** západní společnost, postmodernismus, křesťanství, pravda

M. J. Erickson's motivation for writing his work was his observation that "many commentaries upon and responses to post-modernism have been either uncritically accepting or strongly negative" (9). The author's attempt, therefore, intends to serve as 1) a corrective to these extremes and 2) a constructive Christian response to postmodernism (9–10).

The first corrective thing he does in the introduction is to distinguish between the terms postmodernism and postmodernity. There he briefly defines the former as "the intellectual beliefs of a specific period", and the latter as "the cultural phenomenon thereof" (9). Erickson makes clear that his goal is to present an introductory study of the "movement known as postmodernism" (9).

In the first part of the book Erickson examines the background factors which preceded postmodernism. In several sub-chapters he acquaints the reader with the thinking of the main intellectual spirits of pre-modernism, namely Plato, Augustine and T. Aquinas. In the following chapters he examines in the same way four major representatives of modernism: R. Descartes, I. Newton, J. Locke and I. Kant.

The author further observes that postmodernism did not "burst upon the scene suddenly and completely" (75). Therefore he dedicates two comprehensive chapters to nineteenth-century precursors to postmodernism and twentieth century transitions to postmodernism. These chapters study the ideas of S. Kierkegaard, F. Nietzsche and M. Heidegger; H. G. Gadamer, L. Wittgenstein and T. Kuhn. The examination of these thinkers discloses the roots of the intellectual shift from modernism to postmodernism that took place in the western world.

Each chapter is concluded by a very well epitomized summary which reviews the main affirmation of the particular period in relation to the theory of knowledge.

The second part of the book presents the results of the author's attentive reading of four philosophical leaders of postmodern thought: J. Derrida, M. Foucault, R. Rorty and

S. Fish. The extensive analysis of these thinkers enables the author to evaluate postmodernism, both positively and negatively, which he does in the third part of the book.

The limited scope of this review does not allow us to go into great detail so we will merely re-state the main evaluative headings. The author acknowledges that postmodernism has revealed these positive values:

- i) the “conditioned nature of knowledge” (186),
- ii) the fact that we all have certain presuppositions, through which we filter the thoughts of the others (188–190),
- iii) “the problematic status of foundationalism, as usually conceived” (190),
- iv) the fact that every view or theory contains elements of its own contradiction (190–194),
- v) the fact that knowledge can be used as an instrument of power (194–200),
- vi) the necessity of a hermeneutic of suspicion (200–201),
- vii) the role of community in relation to “our understanding of facts and events” (201),
- viii) the value of narrative (202).

The author’s negative evaluation of postmodernism cannot be summarized as easily as the positive one. The author in this chapter recognizes the difficulties related to the criticism of postmodernism, for the very criteria employed in the criticism are the matter of argument. The author observes that “postmoderns generally contend that the criticisms leveled against them assume the very modernism that they would dispute” (204).

In such a situation, therefore, the author suggests for his negative criticism the criteria of pragmatic consistency. The pragmatic considerations are called into the question, because “if the functioning of humans in some communal way with a maximum of harmony and productivity and welfare of the largest number is a good, then whatever militates against this is a negative” (204).

The element of consistency is necessary, according to the author, for without that any dialogue or communication would not be possible. “For if a word can mean both one thing and its contradiction, then one has no way of knowing what really is meant...” (204) Thus the problem of autoreferentiality is brought into the discussion about the evaluation criteria. By autoreferentiality the author means “a theory must be able to account for itself. If it applies criteria to other views that it fails to apply to itself, or that it does not satisfy itself, that undercuts the seriousness with which the theory can be regarded” (204).

After formulating the evaluation criteria, the author, sets out to demonstrate the inconsistencies of postmodernism, which he considers as the major problem of postmodern tactic.

We cannot cover all the areas the author discusses, so we will limit ourselves to one representative example: the practice of deconstruction. Erickson shows that Derrida’s deconstructive theory of alterity fails to satisfy its own requirements, for if deconstruction maintains that everything must be deconstructed except itself, then we have within the theory a contradictory element, an element of alterity (206). In other words, the practice of

deconstruction, if implemented consistently, requires the deconstruction of deconstruction, which is of course autoreferential and thus self-destructive.

In the last chapter, called *Beyond Postmodernism*, the author offers his own constructive approach to the problem of postmodernism. Recognizing that the main problem is the epistemological one, he first of all deals with two essential themes: the nature of truth and the assessing of truth. In two comprehensive chapters the author argues for the so called “postpostmodern” or “perennialist”<sup>1</sup> view of truth, that is neither distinctively modern nor postmodern (237). This view holds that there exist certain intelligent tests that enable us to assess and justify a worldview.

The last subchapters of this book discuss the problem of metanarratives. The author shows that a metanarrative is both possible and necessary, even unavoidable, for even those who directly object to metanarratives are always involved in some kind of (anti)metanarrative as well.

The main issue for Christians of our day is, however, the problem of actual apologetic method. What is the proper way of contemporizing Christianity without violating its lasting message? This is the main theme of the final sub-chapter. The author advocates an approach which “seeks to adapt to a given context by expressing itself in such a way as to be understandable by those in that situation. It will not, however, try to make itself acceptable, at least not without a radical change on the part of unbelievers” (308). The author further explains that there is always an ineradicable and legitimate element of scandalous offence to non-Christians in the Christian message, for Christ crucified has always been “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles”. To remove this is, according to the author, to cause Christianity to cease to be Christianity.

M. J. Erickson’s well-informed treatment of postmodernism is indeed enriching. The author’s unprejudiced style of writing allows the representatives of the discussed philosophical movements to speak for themselves. Thus the reader is acquainted with a very thorough and comprehensive analysis of both the roots and results of postmodernism.

One of the greatest qualities of the author’s approach to the problem is his non-dogmatism. He does not ridicule or simplify the opposing views, but deliberately works hard to present all legitimate options as objectively and fairly as possible – and (only) then indicates which one he personally favors, and why.

The only critique we bring forth is the author’s limited choice of the representatives of postmodern thinking. Such a profound treatment of postmodernism could have dealt in a greater detail with authors like Lyotard, Levinas and the like.

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<sup>1</sup> Erickson acknowledges that this term was used before him by Maynell.