

Review of D.A. Carson's *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*

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At the end of D.A. Carson's *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, Carson leaves us with the words, "Damn all false antitheses to Hell". There is wisdom in this call, perhaps more than even Carson knows. For the struggle to achieve a new synthesis beyond the thesis of modern absolutism and the antithesis of postmodern relativism is one towards which few are seriously working. While this synthesis will come, one day, it doesn't seem to me helpful to critique of group of pastors for not having delivered it yet. The chief virtue of Carson's book is its clear and repeated insistence that we shun this false antithesis. The chief shortcoming of Carson's book is its own failure to move beyond this antithesis, coupled with its criticism of a primarily pastoral movement called the Emerging Church for what is a failure of academics.

The false antithesis about which Carson writes is that between two ways of knowing, or, two epistemologies. One epistemic option, owing its origins to Descartes, makes absolute certainty its criterion. Cartesian epistemology claims to achieve certainty through mechanistic deductions from indubitable premises. These indubitable claims, the foremost being certainty of consciousness ("I think therefore I am"), form the foundation on which bodies of knowledge are formed through If...Then mechanical steps. The other side of this antithesis is occupied by postmodern epistemologies. This option points out that individuals are incapable of such certainty in any knowledge because individuals always occupy a historical position and perspective that structures their every claim about the world. These two options may be termed absolute realism and subjectivism.

The fault lines within numerous academic disciplines lies along this antithesis. Most are content with these divisions and the proliferation of schools of thought within academic departments that results. It is easier that way. It is easier to not have to read and thoroughly engage whole schools of thought because of a single disagreement, however important it may be, than to struggle for a new synthesis that incorporates insights from all. I believe Carson thinks he has thoroughly engaged Emergent writings, and that he has achieved a synthesis - what he calls soft postmodernism - beyond this false antithesis. Inasmuch as this was his intention, which I believe it was, he should be commended. Inasmuch as he fell short, he should be helpfully critiqued. This critique, which I hope is helpful, focuses on four missteps made by Carson in his attempt to move beyond the false antithesis of absolute realism and subjectivism.

First, Carson's favorable portrait of the realist option, as based in a Christian evangelical project led by Descartes whose sole error lay in overestimating what finite humans can know, overlooks serious issues with this option that any new synthesis must deal with.

Carson: "Descartes (1596-1650) observed that an increasing number of his intellectual friends no longer bought into premodern epistemology. In fact, some of them were closet atheists. As a devout Roman Catholic, Descartes wanted to be able to convince them of the truth of Catholicism, but found the common 'givens' where too few to make significant progress in discussions with them." Carson then describes how Descartes' evangelical designs inspired him to doubt everything until he settled on a foundation, consciousness, that his atheist friends would not doubt and on which he could mechanistically demonstrate the existence of God.

However, Descartes - and the modern philosophical project we have inherited - did not merely reject premodern epistemology. Descartes consciously and comprehensively rejected premodern thought as it had reigned since Aristotle for 2,000 years. Indeed, there is no such thing as premodern epistemology, for to speak of epistemology is to already be a modern. Google

"premodern epistemology" and you will find little, save some quotes from Carson. Only by ripping consciousness apart from the world, by presenting it as something separate from and prior to our knowledge of the world, did Descartes create a problem. Attempts to solve this problem are what we moderns call epistemology.

Classical thought thus had no need for epistemology. It is hard for us to imagine what this was like. It is hard to imagine a world in which solipsistic consciousness was unthinkable, for one could not imagine being conscious without being conscious *of* something or other. In such a pre-epistemological world, it was the job of philosophers to describe reality in its essence, via metaphysics, political philosophy, ethics, mathematics and so on.

So what was Descartes up to? He wasn't trying to convert non-Christians. He certainly wasn't continuing "the revival of classical learning" amidst "the relative freedom from monolithic ecclesiastical control achieved by the magisterial Reformation", as Carson writes in *The Gagging of God*. Descartes' *Discourse on Method* was published in 1637, in the midst of the horrific Thirty Years War, four years after Galileo was forced to abjure the theories of Copernicus. Indeed, it was in that year, 1633, that Descartes himself abandoned what would have been his first book, *The World*, which adopted a Copernican view of the planetary system, to be replaced by *Discourse on Method* as his first book followed in 1641 by *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Descartes' situation could not have been more different from the liberal, evangelical context painted by Carson.

Writing in Holland, where writers and royalty from across Europe were fleeing for their lives, Descartes set out to undermine the ideas behind the war by redirecting man's concerns from God and destiny to the self and science. Descartes writes at one point, "We should be concerned only with those objects regarding which our minds seem capable of obtaining certain and indubitable knowledge" (*Rules for the Redirection of the Mind*). This narrowing of man's concerns began with his "discovery" of consciousness in *Discourse on Method*: "[T]his truth 'I think, therefore I am' was so firm and sure that...I decided that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking....I knew I was a substance whose whole essence or nature was to think." This "idea" of consciousness became a given (Locke: "Self is that conscious thinking thing") and is so still today.

Descartes could have affirmed Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction, with which he was very familiar, as his first, indubitable principle. This, however, would not have achieved his aim. That the redirecting of human purpose from classical ends to the self as an end in itself was Descartes' intention is revealed through a close reading of his texts and in numerous private letters, such as the following: "...these six Meditations contain all the foundations of my physics. But please do not tell people, for that might make it harder for supporters of Aristotle to approve them. I hope that readers will gradually get used to my principles, and recognize their truth, before they notice that they destroy the principles of Aristotle" (To Marsenne, 28 January 1641). Such a sophistic move was anticipated, as many things were, by Plato, in his *Euthyphro*.

SOCRATES: Hatred and wrath my friend - what kind of disagreement will produce them? Look at the matter thus. If you and I were to differ about numbers, on the question which of two was the greater, would a disagreement about that make us angry at each other, and make enemies of us? Should we not settle things by calculation, and so come to an agreement quickly on any point like that?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, certainly.

Descartes' achievement was thus to undermine classical reflection on the essence of things (e.g. the big questions) by redirecting man's attention towards solving a contrived epistemological problem, a problem Descartes solved by elevating foundationalist, mechanistic knowledge above

all else (e.g. the peaceful, scientific questions). Nowhere in Carson's book do we find a concern for foundationalism. Carson's concern is for the particular foundation chosen by Descartes – the individual – given the finitude of the individual as understood by Carson's theology of the Fall. Foundationalism is not critiqued by Carson, "it's that by beginning with 'I,' the foundation is so unstable."

Second, Carson's third way beyond the false antithesis of absolute realism and subjectivism - what he calls soft postmodernism - is no third way at all, as it avoids answering the tough questions of either realism or subjectivism.

Carson: "[S]cholars who think of themselves as belonging in some sense to the postmodern camp tend, at this point, to divide into two camps....On the one side are those who...conclude that we human beings cannot have objective knowledge about anything. All we can ever sensibly mean by 'truth' is what is 'true' for some individual or group. Let us call this position *hard* or *strong* postmodernism. On the other side are those who admit that although human knowledge is necessarily perspectival...we human beings can in measure approach the truth in some objective sense. How they reach this conclusion we shall think about in a moment. Let us call this position *soft* or *weak* postmodernism.... I hold that it is possible and reasonable to speak of finite human beings knowing some things truly, even if nothing exhaustively or omnisciently." (p. 116)

However, Carson does not attempt here or elsewhere to demonstrate how objective knowledge is possible for finite humans. He postulates three models for how humans think – the fusion of horizons of understanding, the hermeneutical spiral and the asymptotic approach – without actually proving, objectively, any of them. This is a particularly perplexing feature of this book and of *The Gagging of God*. After a critical survey of postmodern writers, the reader is expecting a triumphant demonstration of Carson's third way beyond the current debate, only to find a postulated third way with no support or proof or demonstration. Even more perplexing is the sole thinker that Carson footnotes in support of his "soft postmodernism", Michael Polanyi, who appears in McLaren's *A New Kind of Christian* in multiple places as Neo's "favorite philosopher". The disagreement Carson has with McLaren becomes muddled.

The type of demonstration required by any epistemic claim such as Carson's soft postmodernism – that our knowledge can be both perspectival and objective at the same time – includes an engagement with the difficult questions that the two current positions – realism and subjectivism – pose to each other. For example, Descartes posed the question of indubitable knowledge: is there anything about which we can know without doubt? In *Discourse on Method*, he describes autobiographically his early education in classical learning which he expected to provide "knowledge of everything that is useful in life". "But as soon as I had completed this entire course of study, at the end of which one is ordinarily received into the ranks of the learned, I completely changed my mind. For I found myself confounded by so many doubts and errors that it seemed to me that I had not gained any profit from my attempt to teach myself, except that more and more I had discovered my ignorance." Descartes' subsequent search for indubitable knowledge is described at several points as "freeing us of all prejudices". This dichotomy – indubitable knowledge versus prejudiced knowledge – runs throughout early modern thought and continues into late modern and postmodern thought, which denies the possibility of indubitable knowledge. Carson's criticism of postmodernism for posing a false dichotomy of omniscience versus subjectivism is thus not fair, as the quest is not for omniscience but for indubitable knowledge. In fact, one sees here that this dichotomy of indubitable knowledge and prejudiced or perspectival knowledge is present not just in postmodern thought but begins in early modern Cartesian thought. The question of the existence of indubitable knowledge, answered by Descartes with his certainty of consciousness, is nowhere addressed by Carson. We are nowhere told what Carson believes we can know without doubt.

Neither is the late modern/postmodern question of subjectivity addressed by Carson's soft postmodernism, for the issue raised by Kant, and raised again by all subsequent epistemic

thought is the location of knowledge. Why do we have any knowledge of the world? Is it because the world is rationally ordered and impresses itself on our passive mind or because our mind imposes rational order on the world? This is *the* question of objectivity versus subjectivity. From Kant forward, this question has had to be engaged and answered. Nietzsche and Heidegger radicalized the subjective option, such that subjectivity was itself a subjective prejudice, and had privileged reality as it is present to us. Heidegger wrote that this overlooks all of reality that is absent to us, as well as our own unreliable subjective vantage points given that existence is such that we are thrown into the world. These difficult claims clearly make problematic any claim to objective knowledge. And, like Descartes' quest for indubitable knowledge, Heidegger's quest to radicalize subjectivity by uncovering the illusion of subjectivity must be engaged by any attempt to move beyond the current debate. But never mind: Carson believes that knowledge can be both perspectival and objective.

Third, an obvious place to search for a third way out of the modern-postmodern antithesis – premodern thought – is obscured by Carson's quick and faulty presentation of premodern thought.

What, then, is this "premodern epistemology" referred to by Carson? He writes, "[O]ur knowledge depends on revelation" and "This means that for the premoderns, epistemology does not begin with the self, with me: it begins with God." Carson here sets up his own false antithesis - knowledge begins with either God or the self - that runs throughout the book. But what about knowledge beginning with *reality*, as it did for 2,000 years until Descartes? I would call on Carson to damn his own false antithesis, for both sides of his antithesis are still stuck within the modern epistemological "question". By preserving Descartes' contrived epistemological problem and presenting two potential solutions - a Cartesianized premodern option in which the "problem" is solved by starting with God and a kindler, evangelical Descartes who begins with the self - Carson distorts the options available to us today.

For a third option is to draw on premodern thought. As discussed earlier, there is no such thing as premodern epistemology. Descartes ripped consciousness apart from the world, and presented it as something separate from and prior to our knowledge of the world. This created a problem, a contrived problem in my opinion, and attempts to solve this problem are what we moderns and postmoderns call epistemology. Premodern philosophers could not conceive of consciousness apart from consciousness *of* something or other, and thus they spent their time presenting reality in its essence. For instance, political philosophy presented political reality. Ethics presented what virtuous people do. Metaphysics presented the essence of existence, or, being.

Moderns and postmoderns will surely ask of such naïve premodern thought, how does one resolve disputes in premodern philosophy? Where does authority lie in premodern thought? This question exposes the real break from premodern to modern thought. For, as discussed above, Descartes and the early moderns sought to quell the terrifying violence of their times by redirecting man's concerns from God and destiny to science and self. They thus needed to establish dramatic authority for their claims if they were to achieve their historic aims. Herein lies the importance of foundationalism.

Premodern thought was nonfoundationalist, whereas modern, Cartesian thought, as discussed above, introduced foundationalism as a central element of philosophy. (Premodern thought has been called nonfoundational realism, though this is somewhat misleading as it implies the modern leap from the conscious mind to reality, which premodern thought would reject. I use the term often though.) *Authority, for premoderns, goes to those who provide the best clarifications of reality.* The number of people who read Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* or many other insightful (often fiction) books and think, "I've always known that, but here it is clarified really well", attests to the power of such books to clarify reality. Hence their authority. As books continue to clarify reality over generations, they form a canon. Obviously, a canon reflects the reality of a

certain group of people, for whom much of reality was inescapably absent. Nonetheless, some books are written by wiser people who reflect more carefully and comprehensively about reality than others.

Now this authority isn't the type of authority that garners absolute authority in a short amount of time. That was the purpose of foundationalism. Whereas the ancients aimed high and had low expectations, the early moderns (e.g. Descartes, Hobbes and Locke) aimed low (established philosophic foundations, such as consciousness or self-interest, for prephilosophic life) and had absolute expectations. One shouldn't be too quick to judge Descartes on this point, for the violent daily life of 17th century Europe is difficult for most people today to comprehend.

This rediscovery of the spirit and style of premodern thought has been effected in large part through engagement with Edmund Husserl, who makes many of these points. Dallas Willard has engaged Husserl, as did Pope John Paul II, and both of them wrote extensively on these topics. Willard's writings on the Sermon on the Mount in *The Divine Conspiracy* are written with the assumption that Jesus was describing reality, reality in the Kingdom of God, not that Jesus was introducing indubitable claims about ethics on which a system of ethics could be built.

Fourth, Carson critiques a primarily pastoral movement, the Emerging Church, for what is a failure of academics.

There are some in the Emerging Church, such as Tony Jones, who in their writings side with the subjectivist side of the antithesis discussed here. There are others, such as Brian McLaren, who have repeatedly made a prophetic call for a third way, but haven't provided that third way themselves in their writings. Neither Jones nor McLaren are professors; their primary occupation has been pastoring. In fact, most of those involved in the Emerging Church are pastors, not professors of philosophy or theology. They are pastors who see the antithesis Carson bemoans and side with the subjectivist option or see the need for a third way. It seems that Carson should have nothing but admiration for a group of pastors with such discernment, uncommon in the pastorate graduated by so many Protestant "preacher factories". They certainly should not be criticized for not having delivered the third way themselves.

Pastors are in a different position than professors, in that they encounter more directly the consequences of ideas. It is a timeless principle that the consequences of ideas are part of the ideas as well. Plato affirmed this, as did Descartes as discussed above. This principle of the consequences of ideas is central to McLaren's book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, in which McLaren notices the orthodoxies that tend to lead to orthopraxy, as well as the orthodoxies that tend to lead to hate. I have discussed this extensively in my review of *Generous Orthodoxy*. Carson's review of *Generous Orthodoxy* in the current book is very critical, as he repeatedly chastises McLaren for overlooking the *truth* of the ideas of various orthodoxies. McLaren knows full well the debates of the truth of these ideas, and rightly sees that they are mired in the subtext of the false antithesis of absolute realism and subjectivism. He must still pastor, though. As a pastor, he has wisely discerned the consequences of ideas as an avenue to pastoring in truth while academics debate.

Carson's critique of the Emerging church seems to be softened in his chapter on the strengths of the Emerging Church (the shortest chapter), with which he concludes, "In other words, the emerging church has numerous strengths, and we should be grateful for them – but they are not *exclusively* theirs. In fact, I could list a substantial number of local churches that share the strengths of the movement but would not want to be identified with it." The chapter thus ends up as a backhanded complement, for why should the Emerging Church exist if it provides nothing that's not available in numerous local churches everywhere and, in addition, has such significant weaknesses that are unique to itself?

The answer that I would provide is the following. No one has done as much as McLaren and others in the Emerging Church to present the history, the archeology, of ideas such as the sinner's prayer, the atonement, Hell, that are less than faithful and truthful presentations of the Gospel. While these histories are often called deconstructions, they are not, as they are not in conflict with the notion of objective truth. Carson does not comment on these histories. Yet they have freed up numerous pastors to present the story, the narrative, of Scripture free from these inaccurate summaries.

If the Emerging Church is to be critiqued for anything, it is in relation to the consequences of ideas about which they already have such sensitivity. The responsible writer is particularly concerned with the consequences of his ideas. The level of responsibility required when developing constructive ideas in writing (what Nietzsche called Apollonian movements) is much lower than when developing destructive ideas in writing (what Nietzsche called Dionysian movements). Thus, while McLaren's histories of ideas have freed many a pastor to rediscover Scripture again, they have, in my opinion, undermined the authority of just as many pastors who preach from these ideas. I'm sure McLaren is saddened when he hears of such stories.

I would respectfully submit that such histories should be presented more prudently than in accessible fiction bestsellers such as the NKOC series. This prudence would be motivated by the higher level of responsibility required by prophetic thinkers. In a similar way, it is not by accident that this particular discussion has been reserved for the end of a lengthy paper that dealt primarily with philosophical topics. A refined art of pastoral writing as I hope is being initiated by McLaren would then achieve its own legitimacy separate from theological writing, as a writing that is particularly attuned to the consequences of theological ideas. This sensitivity must keep in mind the timeless principle: to know the truth is an intellectual virtue, to tell or not tell the truth is a moral virtue.

It is difficult to critique a book with charity. It is difficult to critique an author in a manner that keeps the humanity of the author foremost in one's mind, not the critique itself. I have no doubt failed in this critique to preserve the respect and deference one should have to Carson and others of his experience and position. I have failed in the same way at other times with McLaren himself. For those failings I close with an apology. Carson and McLaren are both more important than any critique.

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