

Topic: Public Theology and Postmodernity
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Presenter: Michael Scanlon, Villanova University
Respondent: Michael J. Himes, Boston College

In contemporary theology postmodern language is pervasive. It has radicalized our historical consciousness as it shows our social, cultural, and linguistic embeddedness. While Catholic theology under the tutelage of Karl Rahner's more adventurous "Hegelian" version of historical consciousness wherein we are the producers of history has celebrated human freedom, the postmodern "Marxist" version of historical consciousness has deepened our awareness of the fact that we producers of history begin as products of history, as sociocultural constructs. Political and liberation theology had already taught us this lesson, but postmodern thought has relentlessly relativized all of our knowledge claims. The postmodern is a challenge to human rationality as such.

Theologian J. Wentzel van Huyssteen responds to the postmodern challenge to rationality in several works; most recently in his book, *The Shaping of Rationality*. He accepts much of the postmodern critique of modern rationalism as constructive: its decentering of the autonomous subject; its celebration of pluralism, multiplicity, and heterogeneity; and its contextualizing of human thought in time, place, circumstances, tradition, and community. He rejects positions of radical incommensurability which rule out interdisciplinarity and effective public theology. This leads him to reject as well theological nonfoundationalism, and to embrace what he calls postfoundationalism, which places theology within our common resources of rationality.

Van Huyssteen refers often to the work of philosopher Calvin O. Shrag, one of whose major contributions is a postmodern presentation of the decentered self as the rhetorical self in communicative praxis. The postmodern public theologian can find her or his identity and task outlined there.

The response and discussion focused especially upon the role of rhetoric in relation to rationality, both in a historical perspective (from Augustine forward) and in contemporary expressions of literature and art.

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