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***The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity*, by Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014, 288pp., £22.99 (hardback), ISBN 9780199959884**

Using social scientific methods, such as participant observation, focus groups and in-depth interviews, as well as surveys and textual sources (including a lot of online material), *The Deconstructed Church* is one of the most comprehensive guides to the Emerging Church Movement (ECM) to date. It provides a generally positive overview of the emerging churches and their communities, mainly in the United States and Northern Ireland, and recounts their attempts to realise a new post-modern Christian *modus vivendi*, less interested in dogma and more interested in 'doing religion'. While it is critical of 'institutional', or 'more traditional' Christian Churches it does not engage with counter-texts in any credible manner, the reason given that they were 'largely polemical' (p. 208): this is a serious shortcoming, especially as Ganiel expresses her own personal proclivities for the ECM in the appendix.

Throughout the text, the members of these 'emerging' churches are described as predominantly educated (often with degrees), white and middle-class, who have post-modern concerns. Their emergence is then accounted for using the concept of *deconstruction*, though the term is often weakly employed and accompanied by a few random, interspersed, generic references to Derrida and Caputo, both by the authors, as well as certain participants. Surprisingly, in a book about a movement deconstructing Christianity through (apparently) deconstructive strategies, there is no reference to the work of renowned French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, Derrida's colleague and friend, who has written most concisely on deconstruction in relation to Christianity in *Dis-enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* (2008).

Chapters two through four illustrate how members of emerging churches view themselves and their organisations as attempting to recalibrate multiple religious identities, react against institutionally 'structured' norms, and embody varying 'entrepreneurial' processes that gesture towards alternative engagement with the Christian tradition. These alternative trajectories, for example in 'pub churches' with 'pluralist congregations', are described as deconstructive, but often merely serve to illustrate how these alterities differ from major institutional churches, which are painted in quite negative hues. ECM members, cited throughout the book, frequently refer to themselves and their 'entrepreneurship' as anti-institutional, radical, and of course, *deconstructive*, linking this to a post-modern re-engagement with 'true' Christian values. It highlights how members attempt to 'practice' Christianity, not just openly discuss issues such as truth, doubt, and God. Something the book does well is to highlight how the ECM is driven by

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'people's experiences', and the fact that there is no statement of faith, also highlights its religious post-credal plurality.

In chapters five and six, Marti and Ganiel provide good examples of the number of members looking for an alternative engagement with Christianity, who eschew the formulaic dogma of institutional churches while drawing on the traditions/churches they came from, and are more open to different ways of practicing/doing Church. The authors also manage to demonstrate how, disappointed by their own various past experiences, many of the participants hope to uncover a new relationship with God through open-ended conversations, and through 'following Jesus in the real world'. While the text highlights the 'flat leadership' and weak power structures of the movement to (apparently) distinguish it from the hierarchy of traditional Churches, the authors nevertheless single out several key 'public leaders'. One such example is Peter Rollins, who is not only in a position of leadership, but clearly wields power and authority. Speaking about Ikon, 'a Belfast-based collective' (an explanation of which is lacking early in the text), Rollins announces that Ikon 'doesn't care about you' (p.119), that it is not responsible for your relationships or the support you get at its meetings, it merely provides a space. Members, then, are encouraged to use the space (or opportunity) provided, apparently shifting responsibilities away from leaders to distinguish it from institutional churches. The authors quite correctly problematise this approach and show how other Ikon members, such as Sarah Williamson, found this lack of pastoral care a problematic issue, at variance with Jesus' call to his followers to responsibly and actively 'do unto others', not passively wait for them to 'do unto themselves'.

While the authors repeatedly suggest that many members of the ECM view themselves as part of a 'political' movement, they do not really provide much evidence of any meaningful political engagement, or any achievements in this regards. After reading the text, it seems that the ECM does not appear to provide a space for the more marginalised, vulnerable, abused victims from predominantly non-white backgrounds whose needs are more visceral than those who are in more powerful positions. The authors, and public leaders such as Rollins, (whose writings in particular abound with clichés; *how to believe is human; to doubt divine*, or on *How (Not) to Speak of God*), seem to suggest that they think what the ECM is doing is entirely new, or once again, radical or post-modern (and of course *deconstructive*). However, many of these ideas can even be traced back to the mystical Christian tradition, for example *The Cloud of Unknowing* (which dates from the fourteenth century) – a text that really attempts to de-construct (un)knowing God, this *Deus Absconditum*, also discussed by Nancy, mentioned above. Both these texts discuss the experience of God, and the experience of God's absence and may have enriched similar discussions in *The Deconstructed Church*.

Finally, it is curious that the authors do not investigate the central Christian idea of 'forgiveness' among ECM members, the importance of which has even been highlighted by Derrida himself in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (1997). Significant in this regard is that despite all the participant observations over several years, neither the authors, nor the participants describe ECM members as caring or compassionate, qualities that might expand a Church membership where curious, undecided visitors are described as 'gawkers'.

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