

A Contemporary in Dissent: Johann Georg Hamann as a Radical Enlightener. By Oswald Bayer. Translated by Roy A. Harrisville and Mark C. Mattes. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012. (German original, 1988) 234 pp.

Alongside many other theological virtues, Oswald Bayer excels as an exegetical champion of worthy, though forgotten authorships. In his skillful hands, Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788) emerges from a self-inflicted obscurity wrought by his style of occasional writings, piecemeal treatises, critical reviews of other authorships, all laced with difficult allusions and apparent non-sequiturs and obiter dicta, defying systematization. All this maddening elusiveness of the “Magus of the North” Bayer opens up to understanding. It is a labor as valuable as necessary. Though Bayer makes a virtue of necessity in describing Hamann’s choice of genre as immanent criticism or “meta-critique,” Hamann’s style did not so much express as hide under the veil of apparent fideism and obscurantism a stance of radical dissent originating within the age of Enlightenment (thus the subtitle, “a radical Enlightener”) and, even more significantly, of prescient criticism of the towering giant of the age, Immanuel Kant. Bayer’s lucid retrieval, appropriation and advocacy of Hamann is an important contribution to post-modern theological reconstruction which returns from the purism of reason to the body, nature, society and language by learning again to speak of the biblical God “deep in the flesh” or *not at all*. That latter either/or is the radical implication of Hamann’s legacy for theology in the tradition of Luther today.

“Modernity” in this connection denotes the invention of Descartes’ unnatural and ahistorical quest for indubitability. This quest was inscribed transcendentally in a supersensible or noumenal soul by Kant’s supposed deduction of an a priori and universally valid knowledge of knowledge in general. As these philosophical idols of modernity crumble—so Bayer manifestly intends in the

many forays he makes extending Hamann’s line of thought into post-Kantian philosophy and theology—along with them fall all the ever so earnest variants of “modern” or “systematic” theology that have trailed in Kant’s wake. The transcendental and universal claim made by Kant for the Tribunal of Reason is in recent times, of course, widely doubted. To the extent that this subversion of Kant can already be traced to Hamann, theology in the down-to-earth tradition of Luther, as Hamann knew it from the Reformer’s catechism and drew it especially from his Christology of the *communicatio idiomatum*, re-emerges today precisely as a “post-modern” possibility.

In my reading, Hamann’s two key moves were the theological critique of epistemology and the Trinitarian revision of metaphysics. The theological self is *matter* addressed by God *through matter*: “the transient and voided human being who is nonetheless immortal because God has addressed him and thus will have to do with him in eternity, whether in anger or in grace . . .” (33). Thus in the very place of Kantian transcendentalism comes instead the auditory event of being addressed by God. Kant would object to this: how could one ever tell that some finite and sensuous word is the word of the Infinite? Kant thought that the issue is one of epistemological justification for an outrageous, “enthusiastic” claim to know the infinite in the finite. For Hamann, however, the biblical text on the *imago Dei*, Genesis 1:26–28, is the “historical a priori.” It decodes all human experience, most basically the child’s experience of being addressed by elders and parents and hence summoned to adult dignity and responsibility. God thus speaks to the creature through the creature continuing, enjoying, preserving and expanding the work of creation, eminently and decisively in the new man Jesus Christ, in whom creation is redeemed. The epistemic warrant of this theological interpretation of nature and history is biblical narrative, which displays the structure of Trinitarian advent: “The condescension of the triune God who has interlaced his eternity with time, not only with his incarnation and death on the cross but as the Creator who addresses the creature, and as the Spirit who kills and makes alive through modest, particular, temporal events, as narrated by the Bible” (196). Creator and creation, eternity and time are not separated

but united in Christ, and thus Christ is the Bible's key to interpreting nature and history.

A concluding caution: The danger in Hamann's strictly immanent criticism of Kant is that one may end up, not with Luther, but merely with Hume; that is, one may revert to the skepticism which awoke Kant from his dogmatic slumbers rather than going forward to the critical dogmatics of Luther's "assertions" against Erasmus. Throughout this book, Bayer's rejection, following Hamann, of the "desire for unity" in systematic thinking which constructs false universals is on display. This preference for the essay over the system is well taken, so far as it expresses the disruption of the word of the cross. But the word of the cross issues in gospel narrative, taking time and space in the world in Trinitarian advent. On its account the forthright and systematic presentation of Christian doctrine follows not only as a possibility but as an urgent necessity in post-modern theological reconstruction.

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