

Book Review: Out of the Embers: Faith after the Great Deconstruction¹

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Brad Jersak's timely and thought provoking book is probably one of the most thorough and scholarly presentations of what has been defined in recent years as '*deconstruction*'. He starts by referring to two Great Awakenings in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when large numbers of people were joining churches. Now in the twenty-first century, the church in North America (and the west generally) is experiencing phenomenal decline- hence the term 'the Great Deconstruction'. In defining this more precisely, he refers to a move from previous status quo faith forms into a new understanding of God, or out of faith altogether, speaking of it as being 'liberating or traumatic', 'voluntary or involuntary',² likening the inevitability and necessity of the process, to going through the birth canal into new life.

The book is divided into three parts, Part 1 Memoirs, trauma, purgation, and liberation. Part 2, Memos in which he interprets a vast sweep of deconstruction from Moses to St John of the Cross, Plato to Simone Weil referencing the deconstructionists of the Enlightenment and the Existentialist eras, Voltaire, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Weil. Part 3, which he defines as Provocations-Out of the Embers- Faith after Freefall. For those who may find the term deconstruction unhelpful he aligns his approach with other expressions of this process e.g. St John of the Cross (and other mystics): purgation/illumination//union; Tolkien: enchantment/disenchantment/re-enchantment;

Rohr: order/disorder/reorder; McLaren: simplicity/complexity/perplexity/harmony;

In Part 1 Jersak writes about his personal, rather traumatic experience of deconstruction and what he has learnt through it. He states, "We don't bring it on ourselves; it just happens, you aren't failing at faith: you're expressing it, it's not sexy or trendy it sucks; deconstruction comes from within and can do something positive for our faith that nothing else can."³ For him 'True Be-Leavers' are those who are following God's call, rather than fleeing. Nonetheless he doesn't pull any punches

¹ Bradley Jersak, *Out of the Embers: Faith after the Great Deconstruction* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House 2022)

² *Ibid* 18

³ *Ibid* 28

when he describes various reactions, especially when people leave congregations, e.g. concern and bewilderment, accusation and condemnation, reckless and defiant acclamation. He also describes the downside for 'be-leavers' in their sense of up-rootedness and sometimes, loneliness. He raises an important question *Deconstruction happens and then?* He broadens the scope when he speaks of bigger and wider impacts, suggesting that our entire culture is passing through a major time of upheaval and deconstruction with polarised politics, unpredictable economies; the results of the pandemic and climate changes. "We're in an era that is undoing old constructs at breakneck speed."³

This opens the way to Part 2 where he identifies the start of an *apophatic* deconstruction process, beginning with Moses forbidding idols, linking it with Jewish/Christian apophatic theology "the attempt to reveal what is good not by a positive statement but by clearing away the obstacles..."⁴

This includes deconstructing every 'un-Christ like' conception of God so that we can experience the 'Real Deal'. For Jersak the ultimate deconstruction is found in the cross and our baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection.

A third of his book is devoted to the deconstructionism of various philosophers' in particular historical eras. If you are daunted by delving into this I would still recommend a patient read. He starts with Plato's cave analogy and deconstruction as breaking free from the cave of our attachments. Moving on to Voltaire, he describes him as the greatest deconstructionist ('next to Jesus') and the most influential thinker that heralded the Enlightenment. Whilst acknowledging

Voltaire's attack on many aspects of faith he identifies where he stands for truth, e.g. his strong defence of Christian liberty and his rejection of cynical atheism. Alongside Voltaire Jersak refers to Nietzsche's nihilism, his 'dark gift', taking deconstruction all the way to the bottom of the abyss, 'puncturing escapist utopian dreams' to face our current realities and to take seriously our calling, seeking the genuine, which is ultimately bearing God's divine image.

He suggests that this opened the way to existentialism and voices such as Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky who point to the fact our existence matters, the quest for meaning, individual freedom and responsibility. In critiquing this aspect of deconstruction however, Jersak sees the danger of radical individualism, which some might point to in our current time. Finally in referring to Simone Weil he links her experience with Nietzsche's abyss, but in the forsakenness of it she discovers the

⁴ *Ibid* 78

cross which is the greatest *'decreation'*. "Deconstruction is not strong enough term a term for this kind of self- emptying" (kenosis)⁵

In Part 3 Jersak asks after deconstruction, 'out of the embers' what then? In his answer I like how he speaks of faith from 'elsewhere' characterising it as inexplicable in its light, hope, faith, sacrificial love and goodness. In asking where the light was in the darkness he suggests "it looks like the cross. It looks like a cruciform and wounded God."⁶ It is interesting to note that Jersak rarely uses the term reconstruction (only once possibly), maybe to avoid creating something which will need deconstructing again. Instead he focuses on learning from the faith of the marginalised, the martyrs, the disinherited black voices (particularly referencing the writings of Howard Thurman) and being a remnant people. His use of the term the Commonwealth of God is helpful, as something given and a sharing of riches, rather than 'kingdom' which has often been about greed and domination.

Finally he centres on communion with God, confronting the lie of not having a living connection that many may feel when experiencing deconstruction. He describes the current time as 'liminal space' that we can welcome and grow to love, discovering different and creative ways of communion with God for ourselves but also a greater connectedness in expressing revolutionary life changing love to others. I believe this book offers signposts in a time of much uncertainty, confusion and self -doubt. It enables us to recognise the inevitability of deconstruction, stripping away artificial constructs in order to keep discovering greater realities.

⁵ *Ibid* 187

⁶ *Ibid* 217