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POSTMODERN THEOLOGY

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Contents

1 Theology and the condition of postmodernity: a report on knowledge (of God)

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PREFACE TO POSTMODERNITY: CONCEPT, CULTURE, OR CONDITION?

Those who attempt to define or to analyze the concept of postmodernity do so at their own peril. In the first place, postmoderns reject the notion that any description or definition is "neutral." Definitions may appear to bask in the glow of impartiality, but they invariably exclude something and hence are complicit, wittingly or not, in politics. A definition of postmodernity is as likely to say more about the person offering the definition than it is of "the postmodern." Second, postmoderns resist closed, tightly bounded "totalizing" accounts of such things as the "essence" of the postmodern. And third, according to David Tracy "there is no such phenomenon as postmodernity."[1] There are only postmodernities. Given these three points, the task of writing an introduction may seem to be well nigh impossible: "Abandon hope all ye who enter here!"

In fact, "postmodern" has become a gregarious adjective, and can often be seen in the company of such respectable terms as "literature," "philosophy," "architecture," "art," "history," "science," "cinema" – and, yes, even "biblical studies" and "theology." But what does the qualifier "postmodern" mean and how does it work? Does it carry the same force when linked to history as to theology, to art as to biblical studies? Typically, introductory studies of postmodernity take one of two routes: some follow its growth and trajectory in a single domain (for example, architecture, literature); others seek to give a theoretical account across a number of domains. With respect to the latter strategy, there is a further divergence: between theories that describe a process in the history of ideas, on the one hand, and socioeconomic processes, on the other.[2]

[1] David Tracy, "Fragments: The Spiritual Situation of Our Times," in John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 170.

[2] These distinctions correspond more or less to those of Steven Connor who distinguishes postmodernity as a name for (1) developments in the arts and culture (2) the emergence of

In order to avoid employing such hierarchical binary oppositions as explanations "from above" and "from below," I shall resist describing postmodernity in either conceptual or cultural terms alone. I shall prefer, rather, to speak of the postmodern "condition" as something that is at once intellectual/theoretical and cultural/practical, a condition that affects modes of thought as well as modes of embodiment. Significantly, the first book to treat postmodernity as a distinct intellectual and cultural movement was Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, published in 1979.

A condition is something altogether different than a position. A position refers to one's location in space or, alternately, to one's opinion on a certain issue. The point is that a position, whether geographical or argumentative, can be plotted and specified more or less accurately. Positions are determinate – fixed, definite. A condition is altogether more diffuse, an environment in which one lives and moves and, in some sense, has one's being.

The postmodern condition. This phrase is susceptible of a number of possible meanings, of which three are especially relevant:

1 A set of circumstances that affect the existence or functioning of something or other (for example, working conditions; living conditions).
2 A state of being or fitness. Athletes, for example, are typically in "good condition." Conversely, the term may be used to indicate some ailment or abnormality (for example, a heart condition). One challenge in describing postmodernity is to judge which sense of condition applies: health (*salus*) or dire illness (*krisis*)?
3 A stipulation or requirement that must be fulfilled in order to do something else (for example, condition of entry). What, then, is the passport into the postmodern? What conditions does postmodernity impose on individual and societies, believers and churches? Most urgently: does postmodernity present us with enabling conditions and hence with new opportunities and possibilities, or does postmodernity represent a disabling condition, a condition of *impossibility* say, for discovering truth or for talking about God?

What does it mean to do theology in the postmodern condition, to do theology under the conditions of postmodernity? This, the governing question of the present work, implies three others: (1) is there really such a thing as a distinctly and uniquely postmodern condition? (2) If so, just what kind

new forms of social and economic organization (3) a new theoretical discourse (see his "Postmodernism" in Michael Payne, ed., *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 428–32.

of a condition is it? (3) Is postmodernity a condition from which Christian theology can, and should, recover, or does postmodernity represent a net gain for Christian faith? To be sure, one characteristic of the postmodern condition is a suspicion of simplistic either–or contrasts. The answer to this latter question, then, may be "both–and" or "neither–nor."

The purpose of this introduction is to set the stage for the essays that follow by surveying the cultural and intellectual contours of the postmodern. The first section begins with an examination of the so-called "postmodern turn," which is as much a turn *away from modernity* as a turn to something else. Who is in a position to report on the postmodern condition? No *one* voice taken in isolation is adequate. No single individual nor discipline is equipped to take the full measure of what I am calling the postmodern condition. As Best and Kellner note, different accounts of the postmodern turn can be given by the various disciplines. Accordingly, in what follows I shall conduct a series of "reports" on the postmodern condition from representatives from a variety of cultural and academic traditions. Yet Best and Kellner also contend that, despite these differences, there is indeed "a shared discourse of the postmodern, common perspectives, and defining features that coalesce into an emergent postmodern paradigm."[3] Accordingly, in the second section I suggest five complementary ways of characterizing the postmodern condition. No one of these descriptions, taken alone, is adequate, but together they make up a compelling composite picture, albeit one with blurred edges.

The third section puts theology in the picture in order to raise the explicit questions and issues addressed in subsequent chapters. How does postmodernity "condition" theology? For some, it means that theology need no longer do its work under the conditions of modernity. On this view, the postmodern condition results in the liberation of theology. For others, it means that theology must work under a new set of conditions, some of which may be as constraining, or as impossible, as their modern precursors. After exploring these possibilities, I shall go on to consider an alternative genealogy in which theologians tell quite a different story about the genesis of modernity and postmodernity alike. The moral of this counter-narrative is that postmodernity, instead of being a condition of theology, is actually a *theological* condition. I conclude with some thoughts on whether, and how, the postmodern condition ought to affect the mission of theology, and vice versa.

[3] Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997), p. xi.

THE POSTMODERN CONDITION: AN INTERIM INTERDISCIPLINARY REPORT

To conduct a thorough and compelling paternity test for postmodernity is beyond the scope of the present chapter. Some account of its relation to modernity, however incomplete, is clearly necessary. However, like the French Revolution perhaps, there is no single causal explanation of what I am calling the postmodern condition. The modernity–postmodernity relation looks different when viewed in terms of the humanities, the social sciences, and the theoretical discourse of philosophy respectively. With this qualification in mind, we now turn to examine the onset and then the character of the postmodern condition.

The "postmodern turns"

The term "postmodern" signals some kind of relation to modernity, containing as it does the very word. Which part of the term is most significant: *post* or *modern*? This remains a point on which there is no little dispute. The other disputed point, of course, concerns the nature of "modernity" itself. Is modernity a *material* or an *ideological* condition? On this latter question, my own view is that it is both–and: neither simply a material nor simply an ideological condition, but both together. In other words, modernity and postmodernity are conditions that have both material and ideological aspects. It follows, then, that the work of sociologists and cultural historians, on the one hand, and philosophers, on the other, contribute something to an account of the transformation I am calling the postmodern turn.[4]

The "arts and humanities" turn

One of the earliest sightings of the term postmodern was in the field of architecture. "Modernist" architecture turned its back on traditional styles and concentrated on forms that served a structure's function, thus applying modernity's concern with instrumental reason to the shaping of physical space. The modernist building does not "mean" anything but simply serves its purpose. The postmodern turn in architecture consisted in the rejection of this ideal of universal form that expresses the "essence" of a given building. Charles Jencks, for example, argued that buildings, like texts, have both contexts and predecessors, and a building's style should be in dialogue as it

[4] Typically, introductions to postmodernity written by theologians tend to focus on changes in literary theory and epistemology. Insofar as theology concerns the interpretation of biblical texts and the knowledge of God, this is understandable. However, such reductionistic accounts are also more liable to underestimate the postmodern situation, which affects not only the intellectual in the academy, but the values and practices of everyday life as well (so Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Turn*, p. xi).

were with both.[5] Postmodern architects resist the illusion of "the universal perspective," preferring to allude to past styles, through a playful eclecticism, without being dominated by any one of them.

There was a similar reaction to the "modernist century" (approximately the 1850s to the 1950s) in the arts. One key feature of modernism is its belief in the autonomy of art; the artist was free to pursue purely aesthetic goals without having to worry about morality, religion, and politics. This belief in art for art's sake gradually led to a concern with the purely formal features of the work of art, which, in turn, led modern art to be highly self-conscious and self-referential, preoccupied with itself, accessible only to an elite. This was as true of Picasso's abstract expressionism as it was of Eliot's poetry and Schoenberg's serial music. Postmodern artists and writers renounce the belief in the autonomy of art and resist the modernist tendency toward abstraction and elitism. Postmodern artists and writers also tend to "quote" the historical tradition, to acknowledge their "concreteness" (viz., their location in history and culture), and to blur the boundary between "high" and "low" art.

The "culture and society" turn

From a different vantage point, the postmodern turn may be seen as a transformation of modern modes of social organization. "Modernity" in this context refers to social forces and institutional forms – secularization, industrialization, bureaucratization – that embody the Enlightenment ideals of rationality, individual autonomy, and progress. As a cultural and social phenomenon, modernity was "a secular movement that sought the demystification and desacralization of knowledge and social organization in order to liberate human beings from their chains."[6] Modern society is a triumphalistic exercise of instrumental rationality in the domain of the social. Once again, postmoderns reject the idea that there is one universal rational form.

The aim of "work" in modernity was to produce materials necessary for modern life: food, clothes, homes, cars. In modernity, there was a sharp dichotomy between the puritan work ethic and the hedonistic "leisure ethic" of self-expression and self-improvement which only a very few could afford to pursue. Society reaches a postmodern condition when "work" turns into art, that is, when more and more areas of life are assimilated into the logic of the marketplace, when the economy is increasingly geared to providing entertainment, and when the business of America is leisure. In a postindustrialist postmodern economy, goods are produced not to supply preexistent

[5] See Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977).
[6] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 13.

needs, but to supply needs that are themselves created by advertizing and marketing strategies. What gets marketed is not an object so much as an image or a lifestyle.

The "philosophical and theoretical" turn

Modern thought was characterized by a drive for certitude, universality, and perhaps, above all, *mastery*.[7] In this respect, it is only fitting that the modern university rewards graduate students who have acquired specialized knowledge with a "Master's" degree. Newton showed that reason could master the mechanics of the natural world. Modernity, or the "Enlightenment Project," may be understood broadly as the attempt to bring critical rationality and scientific method to bear not only on the natural world but on humanity more generally conceived (for example, ethics, politics), and even "divinity" (for example, biblical criticism, philosophical theology).

Postmodern philosophers, many of them French intellectuals disillusioned after the Parisian university protests of May 1968, rebelled against the so-called "Enlightenment project" that sought universal human emancipation through the light of universal human reason, deployed through the powers of modern technology, science, and democracy. Postmodern thinkers rejected the idea that "reason" names a neutral and disinterested perspective from which to pursue truth and justice. Specifically, postmodern theory rejects the following modern postulates: (1) that reason is absolute and universal (2) that individuals are autonomous, able to transcend their place in history, class, and culture (3) that universal principles and procedures are objective whereas preferences are subjective.

There is continuing debate as to whether postmodernity represents a passage beyond or an intensification of modernity, taken either as a socio-economic or an intellectual condition. Is the postmodern a turn *away from* modernity or a *turning in* of modernity upon itself? To some extent, this question is inevitable, because postmodernity and modernity are joined at the hip, or at least as host and parasite, for the very meaning of postmodern depends on its difference from modernity. Nevertheless, some construe the postmodern as "most-modern," as the imploding of modernity, as the implicit paradox of modernity made explicit. On this view, postmodernity is simply modernity in its death-throes. Others see postmodernity as the emergence of new forms of experience, thought, and social organization.

[7] Cf. Gavin Hyman, who defines the modern as "the desire for an all-encompassing mastery of reality by rational and/or scientific means" (*The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001], p. 11).

I cannot settle these debates in this short space.[8] What does appear beyond dispute is that the latter half of the twentieth century has witnessed a series of cultural and intellectual developments that have unsettled a number of modern convictions. But those convictions have not been entirely dislodged. In that respect, postmodernity is not so much a clearly definable chronological period as it is a condition of history; it is not a specifiable moment on the timetable of history but a mood. Twenty-first-century Westerners now live "in parentheses" between the modern and the postmodern "in an interregnum period in which the competing regimes are engaged in an intense struggle for dominance."[9]

A report on knowledge and belief

One of the first and most important attempts to articulate the postmodern condition was François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.[10] Lyotard's report begins with an account of modern scientific knowledge. How do we account for its prestige? "Modern" designates "any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse . . . making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative,"[11] for example, the Einsteinian or Darwinian paradigms. There are three conditions for modern knowledge: (1) the appeal to metanarratives as a foundationalist criterion of legitimacy, (2) the outgrowth of strategies of legitimation and exclusion, and (3) a desire for criteria of legitimacy in the moral as well as the epistemological domain. The key factor in Lyotard's analysis is the role of "metanarrative," a "master story" that serves as a comprehensive explanatory framework for everything else, "narratives which subordinate, organize and account for other narratives."[12] Modern discourses like science appeal to metanarratives that legitimate it by, for example, telling a story of how Enlightenment thinkers overcame ignorance and superstition thanks to critical methods, or how modern science has resulted in greater health and wealth for humanity.

Lyotard defines postmodernity in terms of a loss of faith in such grand narratives: the postmodern condition is one of "incredulity toward metanarratives." In Lyotard's words: "The grand narrative has lost its credibility . . . regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of

[8] For further discussion, see Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), pp. 12–13.

[9] Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Turn*, p. 32.

[10] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,1984 and Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). Lyotard's work was commissioned by the government of Quebec, which had requested a report on the state of "contemporary knowledge."

[11] Ibid., p. xxiii. [12] Ibid., p. 30.

emancipation."[13] For example, postmoderns no longer accept the story that science tells to legitimate itself, namely, that it contributes to human freedom and well-being. Postmodernity, in short, cuts metanarratives down to size and sees them for what they are: *mere narratives*. Western science loses considerable prestige when viewed in terms of "the story white Europeans tell about the natural world." The mark of the postmodern condition of knowledge, then, is a move away from the authority of universal science toward narratives of local knowledge.

Eating from the postmodern tree of knowledge occasions a new "fall" and loss of innocence. No longer can we aspire to the knowledge of angels, much less a God's-eye point of view. How, then, are we to make judgments as to true and false, right and wrong? Lyotard acknowledges that the central issue of postmodernity is the possibility of ethics, that is, right action. Lyotard, for his part, is content to live with "little narratives." Yet there are many narratives, and this plurality is what makes the postmodern condition one of legitimation crisis: *whose story, whose interpretation, whose authority, whose criteria counts, and why*?[14]

Toward which metanarratives in particular are postmoderns incredulous?

Reason

Postmodernists reject the epistemological foundationalism that proclaims "come let us reason together" (on the basis of shared experience and shared logical categories). It is not that postmoderns are irrational. They do not reject "reason" but "Reason." They deny the notion of universal rationality; reason is rather a contextual and relative affair. What counts as rational is relative to the prevailing narrative in a society or institution. Postmodern rationality, we may say, is narration-based. Stated somewhat differently: reason is always *situated* within particular narratives, traditions, institutions, and practices. This situatedness *conditions* what people deem rational.

Postmoderns point out two other problems with modern epistemology: first, its referential view of language, where words unproblematically represent extralinguistic things and unproblematically express feelings and

[13] Ibid., p. 37; Best and Kellner criticize Lyotard for his tendency to identify modernity with Enlightenment thought. Stated somewhat differently: Lyotard offers a "docetic" interpretation of modernity that fails to engage with social and material reality (*Postmodern Turn*, p. 165).

[14] Perceptive readers, and analytic philosophers, will be quick to point out an apparent inconsistency: Lyotard dismisses metanarratives, but does he not present his own account in metanarrative terms, that is, as the "true" story of knowledge? We here encounter a common phenomenon in postmodern theorizing, namely, the appearance of performative self-contradiction.

values. Language is not a neutral tool but a social construction. Second, postmoderns resist the atomism and reductionism presupposed by science's working hypothesis that the real world of nature is physicalist and can be explained in terms of systems of causal laws, perhaps even by a single system, an all-encompassing explanatory framework or "unifying theory."

Truth

The above rejections combine to form a grand refusal of modernity's metaphysical project, namely, the project of mastering natural reality in a comprehensive conceptual scheme. "Postmodernists reject unifying, totalizing, and universal schemes in favor of new emphases on difference, plurality, fragmentation, and complexity."[15] Postmoderns are suspicious of truth claims, of "getting it right." Upon hearing the assertion that "that's the way things are," postmoderns are likely to respond, "that's the way things are for you." Truth on this view is a compelling story told by persons in positions of power in order to perpetuate their way of seeing and organizing the natural and social world. According to Michel Foucault, behind every discourse on truth there lurks rhetorical posturing: knowledge claims are violent impositions by powerful institutions; universal truth claims are simply masks for ideology and the will to power.

History

Postmoderns are also incredulous toward narratives that purport to recount universal history. Modern thinkers like nothing better than to tell stories about "universal history." From Kant to Hegel to Marx, modern thinkers have attempted to tell the story of humanity, usually in terms of the progress of the race. Postmodern historians reject the premise that history moves according to a unified linear logic. Discontinuity rather than continuity is the postmodern watchword. Furthermore, postmoderns are suspicious of claims to have got even local or partial histories correct. There is no more "one true story" of the past than there is of the present. Instead, histories – like philosophies – reveal more about the people who made them than they do about the way things actually are/were.

Self

It follows from the above that there is no one true way of recounting one's own history and thus no one true way of narrating one's own identity. But the self is decentered in other ways as well. Postmoderns reject the notion that the person is an autonomous individual with a rational

[15] Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Turn*, p. 255.

consciousness that transcends one's particular place in culture, language, history, and a gendered body. *Contra* Descartes, the self cannot even know its own mind. According to Paul Ricoeur, consciousness is not a given but a task, for we find ourselves always-already immersed in an embodied situation. Postmoderns do not believe in the metanarrative of the knowing subject. The postmodern self is not master of but subject to the material and social and linguistic conditions of a historical situation that precedes her.

Postmodern incredulity thus undoes H. Richard Niebuhr's three-stranded cord: "To be a self is to have a God, to have a God is to have a history, that is, events connected in a meaningful pattern; to have one God is to have one history."[16] In this respect, postmoderns agree with Nietzsche that "God" – which is to say, the supreme being of classical theism – has become unbelievable, as have the autonomous self and the meaning of history.

A report on language and life

The postmodern turn from metanarrative to narrative may also be viewed as a turn from subjectivity to language. Whereas Heidegger chided modernity for forgetting the question of being, postmodern thinkers contend that what has actually been forgotten is *language*. The knowing subject of modernity assumed that reason was universal, impervious to differences of culture and language. For moderns, language was a transparent medium that enabled consciousness to grasp reality. Postmoderns find this picture of the mind–world relation incredible. Not only do we not have nonlinguistic access to the way things are, but the way we speak and think is conditioned by the particular language in which we dwell. It is simply not the case that reality informs thought and that thought informs language.

"Language" refers not simply to English, French, Swahili, and so forth, but more specifically to the system of differences – the pattern of distinctions and connections – that a given vocabulary imposes on the flux of human experience. For example, a psychoanalyst uses a different set of categories to talk about dreams than does the neurologist, just as the sociologist uses a different set of categories to talk about the church than does the theologian.

Jacques Derrida has famously commented that "There is nothing outside the text."[17] This is not a comment about what there is in the world so much as a claim that what we know about things is linguistically, which is to say culturally and socially, constructed. Derrida elsewhere paraphrases his

[16] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 59.
[17] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 158.

point by adding, "there is nothing outside context."[18] By this Derrida means that it makes no sense to inquire into the meaning or truth of a sentence or text outside of a specific context. Moreover, every linguistic and conceptual structure is deconstructible (able to be disassembled, undone) because, for Derrida (and for structuralists and post-structuralists in general) language is a set of arbitrary distinctions. No one language carves up the world at its joints. Once one sees that languages are social constructions, it is difficult to continue believing in their universal reliability. *The postmodern condition thus pertains to one's awareness of the deconstructibility of all systems of meaning and truth.*

"Language" thus stands for the socially constructed order within which we think and move and have our being. Our speech and action are always-already situated, and hence conditioned, by one vocabulary or another. Postmodernity is thus a linguistic or textual condition in which human beings "suffer" language. This linguistic condition of postmodernity is at the same time a political condition because the differences inscribed in language privilege certain forms of social organization rather than others. Those who get to make the distinctions control the social imagination and thus hold the reins of social power. It is partially thanks to such insights that feminism may be deemed postmodern.

Given the centrality of narrative and language in accounts of the postmodern condition, it will come as no surprise to learn that some of the most important contributions to postmodern thinking have come from the domain of literary theory. Indeed, according to several French postmodern thinkers, literary theory has come virtually to displace philosophy, or, rather, philosophy has come to be seen as a species of rhetoric and literature. It was Nietzsche who denied facts in order to make room for interpretations. Indeed, for him, it is interpretation "all the way down." To the extent that the postmodern condition is linguistic and textual, those who inhabit it are sentenced to interpretation. Just as the meaning of a word does not come to rest in the thing to which it refers, so the meaning of a text lacks fixity due to the changing contexts in which it is read. The postmodern condition is therefore one of undecidable and unfinalizable interpretation.

THE POSTMODERN CONDITION: THE CONFLICT OF DESCRIPTIONS

To this point, we have traced the postmodern turn in a number of different areas: architecture, art, society, philosophy, and literary theory. Is

[18] Derrida, "Afterword," in *Limited Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 136.

there anything that can be said about the postmodern condition in general? I believe there is.

A new Copernican revolution

Copernicus decentered human vanity when he demonstrated that the sun did not revolve around the earth. Further decentering occurred when it became clear that our solar system is only one of many. The postmodern variation of this Copernican revolution is just as far-reaching: instead of history and culture revolving around reason, reason is now seen to orbit particular cultures and particular times in distinctive ways. The result is a further decentering of the human subject – a revolution not in cosmology, but in *consciousness*.

Other commentators go further, arguing that postmodernity affects not simply how we think about the world, but how we actually *experience* it. According to David Harvey, the postmodern condition refers to "a particular way of experiencing, interpreting, and being in the world."[19] Paul Lakeland agrees: postmodernity is a breakdown in the "givens" of modernity: "time, space, and order."[20] According to Kant, space and time are the two basic conditions for human experience, the environment for thinking, feeling, and doing. If the postmodern condition does indeed provoke a change in how we live space and time, it follows that the postmodern is nothing less than a revolution in human experience *simpliciter*.

Harvey views the postmodern condition "not so much as a set of ideas but as a historical condition," a new way of being-in-time/space, as it were.[21] For time and space have been flattened out. Time lacks the density of history; it has been compressed and accelerated in a post-industrial age whereby goods and services may be had twenty-four hours every day thanks to global communications and the internet. The internet and telecommunications have similarly compressed space, making distance of no consequence.[22] The first major consequence of this cultural acceleration has been "to accentuate volatility and ephemerality of fashions, products . . . ideas and ideologies, values and established practices."[23] Such a mode of experience is conducive to consumerism, less so to conservation. How can a culture where goods are disposable and services are instantaneous *preserve* anything of value? It is perhaps no coincidence that one of the key metaphors for what it is to be

[19] Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 53. [20] Lakeland, *Postmodernity*, p. 2.

[21] Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*, p. viii. See ch. 15 for Harvey's analysis of time and space in the Enlightenment project of modernity.

[22] Graham Ward observes that "Surfing the net is the ultimate postmodern experience" ("Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace," in Ward, ed., *The Postmodern God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. xv).

[23] Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 285.

postmodern is the *nomad*. Heidegger got it only partially right when he said, "In language man dwells." Nomads do not dwell, but only pass through.

A protest against the "natural"

Postmoderns are latter-day philosophical "protestants" who resist the category of the natural, as in the "natural order," "natural law," or "natural sense." For "natural," postmoderns read "historical" or "political." Take, for example, something as apparently uncontroversial as a scheme of biological classification. Foucault cites a Borges story in which a Chinese encyclopaedia classifies animals according to the following categories: belonging to the Emperor, embalmed, tame, strays, having just broken the water pitcher, that from a long way off look like flies.[24] Well, why not? Why is this classification any less arbitrary than the Western convention of distinguishing creatures on the basis of whether they have backbones or not, or whether they reproduce by laying eggs or by giving birth? Foucault's point is that all classificatory schemes have their origin in specific historical "discourses" or formations of power-truth, and are as such culturally relative. The politics behind the "natural" may not be apparent in zoology, but it quickly comes to the fore in discussions about the nature of human sexuality or, for that matter, the family. The postmodern condition is one of "incredulity toward 'the natural,' " for the "natural" is but a historical narrative whose origins in narrative have been forgotten.

An iconoclastic purge

"Thou shalt not believe in absolutes." This postmodern imperative is allied to an iconoclastic urge. Lyotard not only finds it impossible to believe in metanarratives but accuses metanarratives of being "crimes against humanity."[25] Why? Because metanarratives – absolute truths – fund various forms of totalitarianism. "The ideology you shall always have with you." What is going on today – in religion, art, philosophy, and thinking in general – is a cleansing of the temples of knowledge of the last vestiges of conceptual idolatry.[26] The postmodern condition is one of life among the ruins of cast down idols, especially in the ruins of cast down -isms (for example, existentialism, structuralism, Marxism).[27] For postmodern iconoclasts do not abandon reason; they merely remove it from its pedestal and *situate*

[24] Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. xv.
[25] In Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982–1985* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).
[26] Cf. Jean-Luc Marion on the difference between the idol and the icon in *God without Being*, trans. Thomas Carlson (University of Chicago Press, 1991).
[27] See, in this regard, Bruce Ellis Benson, *Graven Ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida & Marion on Modern Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

it. To locate an ideology or conceptual system in the rough and tumble of human history, culture, and politics is, of course, to demystify it. Henceforth there are "only human, all too human" -isms. Iconoclastic suspicion is a radicalization of Kant's attempt to determine the limits of reason. The result: a postmodern critique of *impure* reason.

A return of the repressed

The postmodern condition consists of more than negative gestures, more than shakes of the head and shrugs of the shoulder. In contrast with modernity, it also motions for the return of the repressed and for the embrace of the "other." Modern systems can only master reality by excluding what does not fit. That which falls outside our conceptual systems is thus deemed irrational or unscientific. This was the great paradox of the modern desire for mastery, "that in its quest for universal and totalizing comprehension, its system was obliged to *exclude* or *repress* that which lay outside it, thereby calling its universal and total comprehensiveness into question."[28] Common to several currents of postmodern thought is an anti-systematic impulse, "a predilection for the plural, the multiple, a valorization of everything that had been suppressed by earlier systematicity, everything that had been left out or relegated to the margins."[29]

Concern for the other is the major theme in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, for whom ethics – an infinite respect for the irreplaceable other – replaces epistemology as "first philosophy." Whereas modern systems tend violently to absorb the other – ideas or persons – into comprehensive schemes, Levinas contends that one's first responsibility is to let the other be rather than to cast the other in one's own image. One's obligations toward the other cannot be calculated. "Ethics" is not about moral systems or following rules; it is rather about respecting particularity and difference.

A recovery of "messianic" religion

One candidate for "most repressed other" in modernity is religion. At the very least, a strident secularism has kept religion out of the public square. The so-called fact–value distinction relegated faith to the margins of private preferences. Postmoderns have played Hamlet to modernity's Horatio, insisting: "There are more things in heaven and earth . . . than are dreamt of in our philosophy" (*Hamlet*, Act I, v). Postmoderns gesture not only in the direction of the other, but also toward the "beyond." In Graham Ward's words: "The emergence of the postmodern has fostered

[28] Hyman, *Predicament of Postmodern Theology*, p. 12.
[29] Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Blackwell, 2000), p. 299.

post-secular thinking."[30] In particular, the postmodern condition has enabled the recovery of two neglected forms of religious discourse – the prophetic and the mystical – that seek, in different ways, to invoke the beyond: justice, the gift.

Even Derrida, in his later work, has begun to speak of something that is "beyond" deconstruction. Better: deconstructive analysis "is undertaken *in the name of something*, something affirmatively *un*-deconstructible."[31] This something, it turns out, is *justice*. Indeed, Derrida goes so far as to say that deconstruction *is* justice.[32] Everything depends, however, on his distinction between justice and law. "Law" refers to the formulas and structures that make up some judicial system. The law is deconstructible because it is constructed in the first place, historically instituted and constituted. In short, law is always *situated*, and hence prone to partiality. One deconstructs the law in the name of a justice to come, a justice beyond present human formulations. "Justice is what the deconstruction of the law means to bring about."[33] This is not to say that Derrida knows exactly what justice looks like. Indeed, justice for Derrida is the impossible, in the sense that it is incalculable on the basis of factors that are already present. Nevertheless, deconstruction is the desire that justice is "to come" (*à venir*).

Another religious theme that has received much attention of late is that of the gift. For Derrida, the gift is as "impossible" as justice. As soon as we give something to someone, we put that person in our debt, thus taking, not giving. The gift disappears in a web of calculation, interest, and measure. Such is the aporia of the gift, according to Derrida. It cannot be given without creating an economy – a system of calculation and exchange – of debt and gratitude. "It is reintroduced into the circle of an exchange and destroyed as a gift."[34] Can a gift be given in modern societies ruled by various forms of exchange? Morality and other forms of social convention work with a logic of equivalence; however, the true gift is always extravagant, exceeding what is strictly required. Can the gift be thought? Only an "expenditure without reserve," a giving that expects no reciprocity, a giving that forgets a gift has been given, would seem to measure up to Derrida's requirements for a true gift. Neither justice nor the gift is, strictly speaking, of this world; yet both are that for which postmoderns hope.

[30] Ward, "Introduction," p. xxii.

[31] John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 128.

[32] Derrida, "The Force of Law: 'The Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfield, and David G. Carlson, eds., *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 68–91.

[33] Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p. 131.

[34] Derrida, from "On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion," in Caputo and Scanlon, eds., *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, p. 59.

As with gifts, so with sacrifices. Abraham had to sacrifice his son, to give Isaac to God, without expecting anything back. Derrida writes that "God decides to *give back,* to give back life, to give back the beloved son, once he is assured that a gift outside of any economy, the gift of death . . . has been accomplished without any hope of exchange, reward, circulation, or communication."[35] Being responsible to the other involves a kind of death to self. Again, there are no rules for calculating responsibility, because I, and the other, and the situation are not anonymous variables in a moral equation but particular persons in singular situations. There are no logarithms for determining one's obligations. "Every other is wholly other" (*tout autre est tout autre*). This Derridean maxim effectively closes the gap between the ethical and the religious.

According to Caputo, Derrida's affirmation of the impossibility of justice, and the gift, is a gesture not of nihilistic despair but rather of faith: the desire for something *other* than what obtains in the present world order. Some such expectation of "the other to come" is inscribed in the very structure of deconstruction and what gives it its "messianic turn."[36] Postmodernity abolishes conceptual idolatry, one might say, in order to make room for faith. However, Derrida distinguishes the "messianic" from "messianism," where the latter stands for the belief that a particular Messiah has already come. The messianic, by contrast, has to do with what cannot (at present) be determined. The messianic is a structure of experience, apparently universal, that opens us to an unknown future. The faith of deconstruction is "through and through a messianic affirmation of the coming of the impossible."[37] The messianic is the unforeseeable, the beyond that is always desired but never attained. On this view, the postmodern condition is essentially, that is, structurally, messianic: constitutionally open to the coming of the other and the different. *Faith*, not reason – faith in a religionless (viz., messianic) religion – is thus endemic to the postmodern condition.

A refusal of Christian orthodoxy

There is a sixth possible construal which I will mention here but defer further discussion of it until we consider an alternative genealogy of modernity below. It amounts to the suggestion that the postmodern celebration of faith, not a historic faith but faith as a general condition, stems from a refusal of orthodox Christian doctrine.

[35] Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 96.
[36] Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell,* p. 159.
[37] Caputo, "Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, p. 197.

THE POSTMODERN CONDITION OF THEOLOGY: A REPORT ON KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

What, then, is the condition of postmodern theology? Again, the best way to answer this is to contrast it with its modern counterpart.

Modern theology: correlationism

David Tracy states that modern theologies "were principally determined not by the reality of God but by the *logos* of modernity."[38] Hans Frei's diagnosis is similar: modern interpretative schemes eclipse the specificity of biblical narrative, and with it, the singular *mythos* of Jesus Christ. In so doing, thought Frei, modern theologians gain the whole world – the world of academic respectability and cultural plausibility, in a word: *legitimation* – yet lose their own souls. Paul Tillich's method of correlation, for instance, let modern culture and thought forms set the agenda by asking the questions which theology then answered. In Tillich's own work, the questions were posed within an existentialist framework that predisposed him to interpret the Bible in symbolic rather than historical terms. Tillich is illustrative of the modern tendency to let some *logos* or other swallow up the biblical *mythos*. Modern theological systems, like other -isms, are able only to think "more of the same"; they leave the "other" unthought. In Tracy's words: "Theology will never again be tameable by a system . . . For theology does not bespeak a totality. Christian theology, at its best is the voice of the Other through all those others who have tasted . . . the Infinity disclosed in the kenotic reality of Jesus Christ."[39]

Postmodern typologies

The present work aims to describe various types of postmodern theology (Part one) and to give specific examples of these theologies at work (Part two). Two previous studies have worked with fourfold typologies. In *Varieties of Postmodern Theology* the four types, and their key representatives, are:

1 deconstructive or eliminative (Mark C. Taylor, Carl Raschke, Charles Winquist)
2 constructive or revisionary (David Ray Griffin)
3 liberationist (Harvey Cox, Cornel West)
4 conservative or restorationist (John Paul II).[40]

[38] David Tracy, *On Naming the Present: God, Hermeneutics and Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), p. 41.
[39] Tracy, "Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity," *Theology Today* 51 (1994), 114.
[40] Ed. by David Ray Griffin, William A. Beardslee, and Joe Holland (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity is organized similarly:

1 constructive (David Ray Griffin, David Tracy)
2 a/theological dissolutions (Thomas Altizer, Mark C. Taylor)
3 postliberal (George Lindbeck)
4 communal praxis (Gustavo Gutiérrez, James W. McClendon).[41]

By and large, the two lists overlap, with the exception that the "conservative" option in the first book becomes the "postliberal" in the second, and the "liberationist" type is expanded into "communal praxis." The present work substitutes feminist for liberationist, preserves communal praxis as a distinct type, and adds two new ones – radical orthodoxy and postmetaphysical theology – for a total of seven.

Does not even an expanded typology represent a singularly inappropriate way to present postmodern theology? Is not classification a modern obsession? A postmodern typology will acknowledge both its non-necessary character and its rough edges. There are indeed many different ways that one could classify the contemporary theological scene (here we may recall the Borges story): theologians who prefer tweed to wool jackets; theologians who prefer jacket potatoes to wearing a coat and tie; theologians who live in California; theologians who wished they lived in California; theologians who live in California but wish they lived elsewhere, etc. In the final analysis, the typology presented herein must be considered both provisional and fallible. Yet, while it is less than absolute, it is not entirely arbitrary, for the positions were chosen on the basis of two leading criteria: first, that each type represents, if not a "school," than at least an approach of more than an individual theologian; second, that each approach believes itself to be responding to, rejecting, or passing through modernity, not inhabiting it.

The seven types represent various ways that theologians are negotiating the conditions of postmodernity. On some points, the seven are far apart. Some, for example, like reconstructive theology, believe that there is still room for metaphysics in postmodernity, though of a holistic rather than atomistic variety. Others, like postmetaphysical theology, contend that all forms of ontotheology must be left behind. Perhaps the most significant question concerns the nature of the postmodern condition: is it a stipulative condition, a requirement that must be met before theology can speak of God? Is postmodernity simply the latest extratextual framework into which theology must translate its discourse in order to be considered legitimate?

[41] Terrence W. Tilley, *Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).

In exorcising the demon of individual rational autonomy from the subject of theology, how can we avoid other demons, some of them postmodern, from taking their place? Is postmodern theology simply a matter of exchanging one philosophical master for another, so that one now correlates with *postmodern* interests and concerns rather than modern ones? Or, alternatively, does doing theology under the conditions of postmodernity mean that philosophy and culture no longer set the agenda, that one need no longer correlate? In short: does postmodernity represent a new bondage or does it set the captives free?

Deconstructing postmodernity? An alternative genealogy

To consider types of postmodern theology is to focus on the postmodern as the condition of theology. There is, however, another way to construe the relation. For the return of the repressed includes the return of theology as a metadiscourse, as a "form of reflection that situates all other forms of reflection."[42] Theology returns, not as a modern science, but as a theodrama that situates the human within the narrative of God's creative and redemptive activity. The suggestion, therefore, is to situate modernity and postmodernity alike within the story of what relates both what God is doing in the world through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and what the world is doing in response. Postmodernity here appears as a properly *theological* condition.

Hans Urs von Balthasar provides an alternate genealogical account of modernity and, by implication, the postmodern. He locates the genesis of the "error" that was modernity in Duns Scotus' fateful departure from Aquinas' ontology. Scotus was the first theologian to adopt the Averroist reading of Aristotle that treated philosophy as the comprehensive science of being, where "being" is a univocal concept which applies both to the created and the uncreated.[43] The result of this move is twofold: ontologically, it denies God's transcendence; "being" is what the creature and the Creator now have in common. Epistemologically, it provides a magna carta for reason to undertake an independent study of all that has being without having recourse to revelation; the metaphysical project – the attempt to gain knowledge of being, including God, through reason – here achieves legitimacy.[44] The "God" thus known, however, is only a conceptual idol manufactured by human reason; and the "God" proclaimed dead or unbelievable by Nietzsche is,

[42] Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical–Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 67.

[43] *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 5 *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991).

[44] See Gavin Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology*, ch. 2 for a fuller treatment of these themes.

likewise, only the construction of modern "ontotheology." On this account, then, the deconstructive or nihilist versions of postmodernity are actually the logical culmination of basically modern tendencies.

In reacting to modernity, postmodernity risks being defined, albeit negatively, by the same set of categories. For example, deconstructive postmoderns speak of "the death of God put into writing," yet the "God" they have in mind is the modern metaphysical construct. Christian orthodoxy, oriented toward God's revelation in Christ, tells a different story: "the triune life of God put into Word and writing." Some, though not all, of the chapters in Part two are exercises in such a counter-narration: they begin from Scripture and theology and go on to examine postmodernity in light of Christian doctrine rather than the other way around. Other chapters accept certain aspects of the postmodern condition, then go on to work out their significance for an understanding of a particular doctrine. Accordingly, the chapters in Part two display both the *postmodern* condition of theology and the *theological* condition of postmodernity.

CONCLUSION — THEOLOGY AND THE POSTMODERN MISSION

Missiologists Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh have argued that Christianity has always grown as a result of its encounter with the "other" in the history of church mission. Specifically, this growth takes place through the process of translating the faith into new languages and new cultures.[45] Walls says that "the attempt to transmit faith in Christ across linguistic and cultural frontiers revealed that Christ had meanings and significance never guessed before."[46] May we say something similar about the encounter of Christian faith and the "other" of postmodernity? Is postmodernity a "culture" into which the Gospel may be translated, or is it a condition from which the Gospel must be liberated? Perhaps the question is: who is on a mission to whom? Are postmoderns on a mission to save theology or are theologians

[45] Walls and Sanneh stress the translatability of the Gospel, which entails the recognition that no one culture has a monopoly on the form of language and life the Gospel may take. See Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989); Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), esp. ch. 3. I recognize that these authors are primarily concerned with the history of "foreign" missions, that is, the history of the church in the west taking the Gospel into new geographical regions. I am extending their argument to the postmodern condition, considered as a culture, a move they may well wish to resist. Interestingly enough, however, Walls is aware of postmodern concerns about "difference" and comments that translation is "the art of the impossible" (p. 26). Christian confidence in translation rests on God's prior act of translation: the incarnation.

[46] Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. xviii.