Part one

Types of postmodern theology

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.