

Postmodernity and Rationality: the Final Credits or just a Commercial Break?¹

Nick Mercer

1. Introduction

Postmodernity is a delightfully slippery word; a lexicographer's nightmare. Rather like the sub-atomic particle dutifully obeying Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, it refuses to be pinned down. The literature is so littered with 'probably' that it rivals the lager adverts. As far back as 1987 *The Independent* was advising hip culture vultures that: 'This word has no meaning. Use it as often as possible.'² Postmodernism is already passé within its own terms, for the concept becomes outmoded as soon as it is articulated. Postmodernity – a word to be preferred to postmodernism,³ which is a self-contradiction, for there are no more 'isms' – is a condition⁴ and not a philosophy. It is an all-pervasive mood and not a rational structure; a shift in sensibility;⁵ a *Weltstimmung* and not a *Weltanschauung*. Postmodernity passes the death sentence on the

1 In places this chapter is written in a style rather different from the others. This is intentional and is itself a statement about the subject matter.

2 *The Independent*, 24 December, 1987 quoted in M. Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Sage, 1991), 1.

3 P. Sampson offers a slightly different explanation for preferring 'postmodernity' in 'The Rise of Postmodernity', P. Sampson, V. Samuel and C. Sugden (eds.), *Faith and Modernity* (Oxford: Regnum Lynx, 1994), 50, n. 1.

4 D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) and Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

5 A. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 181.

***Mission and Meaning
Essays Presented to Peter
Cotterell***

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Cartesian project of self-authentication through self-knowledge and it marks the final abandonment of the Enlightenment's promise of self-determination. It describes a world full of contradictions and fuzziness in whose very paradoxes and pluralities personhood is affirmed.

Protestant Christianity has long been the bastion of Enlightenment rationality and in so doing has always been in danger of dethroning the suprarational God of the Bible. Despite the warnings of the Wisdom literature and some of the hard sayings of Christ, there has always been the irresistible temptation to systematise and so tame and control the Lion of Judah. In its championing of the rational mind mastering God's rational world,⁶ it has unwittingly fashioned and honed weapons for its enemies. They have built the secular city and banished an objective and transcendent God to the realm of personal preference and inner reality; the god who is within; the god-whatever-you-conceive-him/her-to-be. Don Cupitt and the 'Sea of Faith' group have openly acknowledged this and sought to build a Brave New Christianity on this premise.⁷

But postmodernity sweeps all this away, and in this respect it is the most profoundly Judeo-Christian epistemology since the Garden, because it implicitly acknowledges that we cannot work anything out for ourselves. It confesses that, if indeed we are limited 'to our poor reach of mind', then the fragmentation and meaninglessness portrayed in Ecclesiastes is all we can expect.

2. Definitions

The first use of the word can be traced back to Frederico de Onis in the 1930s, although its contemporary employment dates only from the 1980s.⁸ There have been different usages at different times over the past forty years in music, architecture, literature, theatre, the sciences... Charles Jencks notes with wry humour the beginning of the postmodern era in architecture at 3.32 pm on 15 July 1972 when the Pruet-Igoe housing development in St Louis, the prize

6 From another point of view, a belief in a rational God who created a rational universe has underpinned much of the post-reformation expansion in scientific knowledge. See R. Hooykaas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

7 E.g. D. A. Hart, *Faith in Doubt: Non-realism and Christian Belief* (London: Mowbray, 1993).

8 See Featherstone, *Consumer Culture*, 7ff., and A. Compagnon, *The 5 Paradoxes of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University), 114ff.

construction of high modernism, was blown up on account of its being uninhabitable.⁹

In the 1940s the noted historian Sir Arnold Toynbee undertook a massive overview of the history of civilisation. He used the word in the early 1950s, but in the sense of the decadent, anarchic and irrational. Nonetheless, there are striking similarities with present descriptions of the postmodern condition and it is worth mention. Patricia Waugh summarizes Toynbee's prophetic characterisation of what would follow the post-war decade during which he wrote:

For Toynbee, the postmodern age would be the fourth and final phase of Western history and one dominated by anxiety, irrationalism and helplessness. In such a world, consciousness is adrift, unable to anchor itself to any universal ground of justice, truth or reason on which the ideals of modernity had been founded in the past. Consciousness itself is thus 'decentered': no longer agent of action in the world, but a function through which impersonal forces pass and intersect. Art becomes not so much an expression of human spirit, but another commodity. Like knowledge, therefore, it can no longer be critical but only functional. Moreover, we are in the postmodern condition and, implicated in a culture where all knowledge is produced through discourse, we can no longer seek transcendence. There is no position outside of culture from which to view culture. There is no Kantian 'view from nowhere', no conceptual space not already implicated in that which it seeks to contest. There can only be disruption from within: micropolitics, language games, parodic skirmishes, irony, fragmentation.¹⁰

It is dangerous to set up any sort of polarities between modern and postmodern, but so long as it is recognised that the present mood is something of a tension between the two poles, a synthesis, an acknowledgement of one in the light of the other – then the exercise is of some value. Hassan's schema is one such attempt to voice equivocal dichotomies.¹¹

9 Harvey, *Condition*, 39.

10 P. Waugh, *Postmodernism: A Reader* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), 5, quoted in G.E. Veith, *Guide to Contemporary Culture* (Leicester: Crossway, 1994), 45. I suspect that Waugh brings some of her own postmodern mind-set and language to this summary which tends to postmodernise Toynbee.

11 I. Hassan, 'The culture of postmodernism', *Theory, Culture and Society* 2, 3 (1985), 123-24. Some of the terms in this chart will be unfamiliar to some readers. A helpful, fun, but well informed and illustrated commentary on all these terms can be found in R. Appignanesi and C. Garratt, *Postmodernism for Beginners* (Cambridge: Icon, 1995).

Modernism

romanticism/Symbolism
 form (conjunctive, closed)
 purpose
 design
 hierarchy
 mastery/logos
 art object/finished work
 distance
 creation/totalisation/synthesis
 presence
 centring
 genre/boundary
 semantics
 paradigm
 hypotaxis
 metaphor
 selection
 root/depth
 interpretation/reading
 signified
 lisible (readerly)
 narrative/*grande histoire*
 master code
 symptom
 type
 genital/phallic
 paranoia
 origin/cause
 God the Father
 metaphysics
 determinacy
 transcendence

Postmodernism

paraphysics/Dadaism
 antiform (disjunctive, open)
 play
 chance
 anarchy
 exhaustion/silence
 process/performance/happening
 participation
 decreation/deconstruction/antithesis
 absence
 dispersal
 text/intertext
 rhetoric
 syntagm
 parataxis
 metonymy
 combination
 rhizome/surface
 against interpretation/misreading
 signifier
 scriptible (writerly)
 anti-narrative/*petite histoire*
 idiolect
 desire
 mutant
 polymorphous/androgynous
 schizophrenia
 difference-difference/trace
 The Holy Ghost
 irony
 indeterminacy
 immanence

3. The Postmodern Mood

One of the drawbacks of trying to convey the feel of postmodernity is the limitation of words on a page. So in this next section, rather in the manner of the 'stream of consciousness', beloved of late modernity, I want to try to affront you with The Post. Ideally, you should be listening to floaty, ambient music like The Orb or Enigma, Björk or Enya, or the theme music of Twin Peaks. John Tavener would do at a push... Alternatively, you could put the radio and the TV on at the same time.

The degree to which you are disturbed by this section is a measure of how much you have been influenced by the postmodern culture of the West. If you find it disorientating and confusing then

you are very much a Modern. You probably don't like those TV programmes where several things are happening at the same time as text is appearing on the screen (like *Def II*) and you don't like alternative worship. (I went to a service where the Latin Tridentine Mass was being said against a heavy House rhythm while slides of icons were displayed on a high nave screen and several abstract videos were running on banks of TV screens.) You have probably never read novels by William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon, Martin Amis or Don DeLillo. Most over 40s are firmly entrenched in modernism, as are almost all who have grown up in evangelicalism.

But first some terms which both set the scene and help to create the mood of 'pessimistic wishful thinking' or 'nihilism with a smile':¹²

The Post – Postmodernity, or high modernism, or late modernism or Pre-postmodernity, or post-Fordism, or Late Capitalism, or Modernism-Not – the present intellectual and artistic climate in Britain, arguably, as discussed above. It is the quasi-philosophical and cultural accompaniment to the New Age and is experienced in one way or another by most who live in the silicon cities of the West and the US. It is only discussed by intellectuals dispossessed¹³ of a role in the 'new' techno-rational society: 'the implosion of intellectual vision', as Bauman puts it.

Cyberpunk – a genre of science fiction (SF) which became self-conscious during the 1980s, first characterised as Radical Hard SF or Neuromantics¹⁴ or the Mirrorshades group.¹⁵ At its best, it describes with all the linguistic style of the modern novel, a hi-tech future which is sometimes a drug-induced nightmare, sometimes a surrealistic New Age, always beyond the cutting-edge of physics and metaphysics. The Frank Herbert 'Dune' series (also a film) is a very accessible way into the mind-set.

Cyberspace – the 'place' where we can live in virtual reality. 'There is no "there" there.' I was 'sitting' in a cyberspace restaurant (actually I was sitting at my computer console) talking with an academic from the West Coast of the US who was bored at 3.00 am their time and decided to look around one of the cyber-cities you can

12 Gardner and Rietkerk, quoted in Sampson, 'Rise of Postmodernity', 30.

13 This is part of Zygmunt Bauman's argument in *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1992).

14 After William Gibson's classic *Neuromancer* (London: HarperCollins, 1984).

15 Bruce Sterling edited a cyberpunk anthology, *Mirrorshades* (London: Ace Books, 1988), which contains a good editorial Preface outlining the history of cyberpunk.

visit by way of internet.¹⁶ A colleague ended up doing some bereavement counselling with someone he met in cyberspace from... who knows where they are from – in virtual reality anyone is from anywhere.

Generation X – post-boomers, twenty somethings, baby busters, the 38 million Americans born between 1963 and 1977 made famous by Douglas Coupland's book.¹⁷

MTV – Music Television, which shows contemporary music videos 24 hours a day worldwide. There are some regional variations, but in general, this is the lifeblood of youth culture around the world.

'Zine – a magazine or fanzine. Glossy and expensive like *Mondo*, *Wired*, or cheap FAXed and Xeroxed. Look along the magazine racks in the 'pop' or 'techno' or 'culture' section of Tower Records, or a big HMV or Our Price. In the right shops there are 'zines to cater for every taste, whether Knitting Patterns, Latex Sex, Black Poetry or Chicken World.

Metanarrative – some overall story or set of ideas which binds all cultural activities together in a project or system which proposes to make sense. Christianity is such a metanarrative; postmodernism denies the possibility of such Grand Narratives, or Macronarratives.

Structuralism focuses our attention on the text itself, and the understanding of a text in its cotext and context.

Deconstructionism is the daughter of Structuralism and concentrates on the reader-response to a text. All 'meaning' or authorial intention breaks down.¹⁸

16 There are always articles and TV programmes about the global information superhighways, 'surfing the net' and so on. E.g. T.C. Morgan, 'Cyber Shock: Can the church keep pace with the new information culture?', *Christianity Today* 39, 4 (3 April 1995), 78-86, and P. Farrington, 'Inklings of God on the Internet', *Alpha* (May 1995), 38-40.

17 Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales For An Accelerated Culture* (London: Abacus, 1992). And see William Mahedy and Janet Bernardi, *A Generation Alone: Xers Making a Place in the World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994).

18 That great ironist Lewis Carroll illustrated the point well: 'When I use a word,' said Humpty Dumpty scornfully, 'it means what I want it to mean, neither more nor less.'

'My dear old thing,' said the March Hare, 'there's no more to it than that. When you say or write something, you've got to reckon that you can't keep tabs on it. Other people might take what you say quite differently from how you meant it. It's like setting a bird free. Once it's gone, it flies where it wants.'

See M. Ovey, 'Deconstruction: Gaggling the Speaking God?' *Cambridge Papers* 2/4 (1993); for a fuller discussion on structuralism and deconstructionism, see Veith, *Contemporary Culture*, 47-70.

So drift through this...

I have been to McDonalds in Berlin, London, NY, SFO, Manila, Hong Kong, Paris, Stockholm, Worthing, Johannesburg, Athens, Madrid, Brugge, Toronto... They are PSZs ('Personal Security Zones', Toffler) in our turbulent Global Village. There was a time when churches were PSZs. But now they are menacingly unpredictable, even in the Home Counties.

I am a compulsive consumer – you are a consumer – of this book, of worship services and articles and sermons and Goods. Productivity has collapsed into the black hole of consumption. *Tesco, ergo sum* – I shop, therefore I am.

I am a compulsive producer. We are trapped in the cash-nexus and bind of consumerism: every time you spend money, you're propping up systems you loathe; the structural sin that so tightly binds.

I am a target market. Somebody wants to sell me something, somebody who knows my needs, desires and anxieties, and will use this knowledge as a crow bar to alter my behaviour and therefore open my wallet... or am I paranoid?... or cynical... or grateful?

Of all the 'somethings' I am supposed to buy, I am to keep buying more of them. So they are obsolete or out of fashion almost as soon as I buy them.

Global Village – Universal Culture. Driftwood shanty towns, with TVs and satellite dishes. Two billion people watch the World Cup.

The Post is cultural white noise – makes no sense, but it is on TV. Democracy increasingly makes false promises. Politicians are more concerned with image than integrity. So the media, the Image Makers, control the political machine, while claiming they are serving the democratic process.

The Post is a Soup of floating cultural fragments – Scientific Revolution 17th Century... Enlightenment 18th Century... Romanticism 19th Century... Modernism 20th Century... Postmodernism 21st Century... Relativity (Einstein); Uncertainty (Heisenberg); Incompleteness (Gödel); Chaos (Mandelbrot). And a backcloth of CSSM choruses.

'Fake it 'till you make it.' We all have to look the part, we have to consume our images. Images are the most ephemeral of commodities, shifting fashions keep us purchasing in an accelerated culture. Shopping Malls are the temples of creativity and diversity. They give meaning.

'Just as unitarily conceived ultimate reality encourages fragmentation, so, by contrast a God conceived trinitarianly, a God who contains within himself a form of plurality in relation and creates a world which reflects the richness of his being, can surely enable us better to conceive of something of the unity in variety of human culture' (Colin Gunton).

'People bind themselves into numbered seats and fly across time zones and high cirrus and deep night knowing there is something they have forgotten to do' (Don DeLillo).

The Space/Time compression of the last 20 years. Breakfast in London; lunch in New York. (Luggage in Munich.) This week 70s funk, next retro-punk. And we eat in shiny new 1940s restaurants decorated with expensive memorabilia we threw away in the 1950s.

Fragmentation and surfaces, shifting personal identities – these are the essence. Relationships – not depth or permanence – unless you want them...

Raves, Jungle, Moshing – 'E' – Drugs are simply states of mind – Coenaesthesia (Emotional Anaesthesia). It's the only way To Be. Or Not To Be. Good Choruses will do the trick; or laughing in the Spirit or being slain in the Spirit or anything that can unbind our future-shocked and stressed emotions.

'When there is enough out-of-placeness in the world, then nothing is out of place' (Don DeLillo).

Virtual Reality merges with reality. 'The world looks suspiciously like a 20-channel satellite TV with a madman holding the remote control; before you have time to make sense of the story, the screen beams other images, to be replaced with yet other images, before you begin to know what they are images are of; and all comes from nowhere and melts into nowhere again' (Zygmunt Bauman).

'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world' (W.B. Yeats).

Humour is serious. Irony rules – Humour is the White Man's burden.

The Failure of the Enlightenment Project. *Cogito ergo sum, cogito*. The Enlightenment Project was to illumine everything. It has turned everything into the material and realised that nothing is knowable. Come in Humanism, your time is up.

'Contextualisation in the setting of modernity is both amplified promise and amplified threat' (Os Guinness).

'This statement is unprovable' (Kurt Gödel).

The Xerox Revolution – The 'Zine Scene – proliferation of small circulation/highly specific publications. All you need is a relatively inexpensive personal computer with word processing and DTP software and access to a photocopier.

Death of the Importance of the Individual – Ochlocracy – the crowd wear Levis and are thin and are for abortion and against the government.

Breakdown of Cultural Coherence – social fragmentation and lack of metanarrative. Modernism had the confidence that it knew all the answers and even if it did not it was only a matter of time before it did. Now it has lost its confidence.

The church is the plausibility structure of faith. God is Community. Relational Ontology. (Colin Gunton).

'No one agrees about the language of moral discussion. But we all have a sense of "ought"...' (Alasdair MacIntyre). So norms are negotiated. As there is no Big Picture society is 'Issues based' – AIDS, Green, Education, Health...

Everything you know is wrong.

'It's like this dad. You can either have a house or have a life. I'm having a life.'

Why get a job with responsibility, that takes up all hours? I'd rather have time and a McJob.

Deconstructionism is logical positivism *ad absurdum*.

The good thing about The Post is it takes apart ideologies – communism and churchianity. The bad thing is The Post denies transcendence...

'In the twilight of the gods, men came forth like giants.
In the twilight of the men, all the gods came back again.
But is it dawn or dusk, or just a smoggy day?' (Rob Draper).

Belief in history is a step of faith,
 which having taken it, proves reasonable.
Belief in rationality is a step of faith,
 which having taken it, proves rational.

Faith is risk.

The Holy Spirit is the witness to transcendence and the inspirer of risk.

'When there is the "death of God" in a culture, it becomes increasingly hollowed out, "weightless"' (Nietzsche).

Truth is relative. That may be true for you, but it is not for me.

'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' (Jesus).

Jesus is either mad, bad or who he said he was – so what?

'The clock cannot be put back to the world of the 1950s in which the theology, apologetics and missiology of the post-war revival of evangelicalism in the Church of England was formed' (Chris Sugden).

'Christendom's ultimate worldling today is not the Christian liberal but the Christian conservative' (Os Guinness).

'At least five times the faith has to all appearances gone to the dogs. In each of the five cases it was the dog that died' (G.K. Chesterton).

4. Some Aspects of the Postmodern Condition

Lists always get too close to 'defining', and we have seen that there can be none of that in the pursuit of postmodernity. Sampson put it well concerning his own essay: 'The classification which follows is... open to the objection that it snatches at a shadow, but it does have the virtue of mapping the ground on which the shadow lies.'¹⁹

Frederic Jameson paints a Small Picture:

If the great negative emotions of the modernist moment were anxiety, terror, the being-unto-death, and Kurtz's 'horror', what characterizes the newer 'intensities' of the postmodern, which have also been characterized in terms of the 'bad trip' and of schizophrenic submersion, can just as well be formulated in terms of the messiness of a dispersed existence, existential messiness, the perpetual temporal distraction of post-sixties life. Larger virtual nightmare, the sixties gone toxic, a whole historical and countercultural 'bad trip' in which psychic fragmentation is raised to a qualitatively new power, the structural distraction of the decentred subject now promoted to the very motor and existential logic of late capitalism itself.²⁰

¹⁹ Sampson, 'Rise of Postmodernity', 36.

²⁰ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 117.

(a) Non-rationality

It is not that postmodernity denies rationality, for to do so would be the death of discussion. Rather it holds loose to connected rational systems, to Grand Narratives, to any notion of the Big Picture. Reason is displaced by reasons, each within its own discourse and for its own public. None is privileged.²¹ It is in this sense post-structuralist and post-deconstructionist.²² This is an area where Christians need to do some more hard thinking. We rightly want to defend rationality and the power of verbal communication, and yet we sometimes seem to be saying that the cosmos is rationally coherent. And, as we experience it, it is not.

(b) Blank Irony

The use of humour in general and irony in particular has been a feature of Modernity for most of this century.²³ But blank irony²⁴ is irony without arrogance. It is irony without self-importance. Moderns are still contemptuous enough to use irony as a tool for mocking that which they have 'ridden above'. The ironist assumes privileged access to an objective point of view. He lives in the Big Picture. But the blank ironist has no such luxury. She lives in an incoherent and pluralist world. This can be seen in films like *Blazing Saddles* or *Airplane*, in series like *Monty Python's Flying Circus* or *Red Dwarf*, or more recently, *Wayne's World* or *Beavis and Butthead*. 'So let me get this straight. Young people go into stores, and buy heavy metal videos, and take them home and play them. And then they kill their friends... So what's the problem?'²⁵ This is part of postmodernity's discomfort with any representation that appears to be 'saying' anything or taking a moral stance. So there is in art and literature (and the adverts) constant self-mockery: what various writers have called playfulness, pastiche, jokeyness, stylistic promiscuity, eclecticism, self-parody.

(c) Consumerism

Why do we need 83 different breakfast cereals to choose from? Why must I be wearing this season's fashions? Why do so many

21 Sampson, 'Rise of Postmodernity', 40.

22 Partly, this is what V. Cunningham discusses in *In the Reading Gaol* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

23 See Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Laughter: A Theological Reflection* (London: SCM, 1994).

24 A term that Frederic Jameson uses in *Postmodernism*.

25 A line from a Denis Leary comedy routine. Woody Allen is also full of blank irony.

millions in the West worship in the mirrored Temples of Shopping Malls every Saturday and Sunday? Because it is in choosing and in buying that I find identity and acceptance. 'Goods are valued for what they mean as much as for their use, and people find meaning in the very act of consumption. Advertising and product image become goods consumed for their own sake, rather than as representative of real products.'²⁶ This is the illusion of freedom which late capitalism offers us. It builds on the premise that 'the love of money' is the only dynamism by which the world economy can function. So if I cannot choose and buy, because I am 'under-privileged' then I must look for identity and acceptance elsewhere, or else despair. The 'elsewhere' can be religion, or drugs, sex and rock'n roll, or violence, or any mixture of these.

(d) *The Return of the Repressed*²⁷

Violence has itself become an exploratory tool of postmodernity and an icon of the modern film. Tarrantino's films: *Reservoir Dogs*, *True Romance* and *Pulp Fiction* all exemplify a society fascinated by the fragility and ultimate worthlessness of life, while outraged at the institutionalised violence and brutality demonstrated by regimes throughout the world. Other examples of this can be seen in Oliver Stone's earlier Vietnam film *Platoon* and in his more recent *Natural Born Killers*. This is an artistic preoccupation with blood, the boundaries of sanity, and the limits of law, which offers an opportunity for voyeurism to a society that has carefully sanitised itself of death, insanity and criminality: these have been institutionalised so that most citizens need rarely, if ever, brush with them. Each year I ask students (of average age 29) how many of them have seen or touched a dead body. Apart from the medics, the affirmative answer represents only about 2%.

Violence is sometimes seen as a way to liberate the oppressed and empower the marginalised in postmodern constructed morals. (I.e. morals constructed by society for some reason or another.) Veith explains 'power reductionism', a sort of postmodern reworking of a discredited²⁸ Freud, in these terms: 'All institutions, all human relationships, all moral values, and all human creations – from works of art to religious ideologies – are all expressions and masks of the

26 Sampson, 'Rise of Postmodernity', 31.

27 A phrase used by A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

28 See G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Athlone, 1984). This is an extremely dense book, but perhaps marks the way ahead for postmodern philosophy?

primal will to power.'²⁹ The rage of the oppressed and the assertion of being through power seems to give special euphoria to some (especially within academia) postmoderns. This is of particular relevance to postmodern politics, but there is no space to develop this here.³⁰

(e) *Plurality of Beliefs*

Postmodernity has seen the commodification of belief structures. I buy into a belief and use it to feel good. If it doesn't make me feel good, then why bother to buy into it? Because of the death of the Macronarrative, I can permute some acceptable combination of Micronarratives which give me a gentle euphoria. No matter that there is a rational conflict between any of these Micronarratives. Non-rationality takes care of that. In this way people build up sets of 'free-standing' self-referential beliefs. Peter Cotterell has often pointed out the illogicality of trying to say that, for instance, Islam and Christianity are both 'true'. 'If we take this issue more generally, when Christianity claims that Jesus died on the Cross, and Islam... insists that Jesus was not crucified... must we make a choice between the alternatives?'³¹ For postmoderns, the answer would be 'no!' Within the self-referential system of Islam, you can believe what you choose. Within the self-referential system of Christianity, you can believe what you choose. And you can swap minute by minute between the two (or more) without worrying your head about the clash of logical truth claims. It is only transcendent truths which would bring conflict. But as there is no Objective Other, no transcendence, then everything is possible.

(f) *The Media*

This is the central nervous system of the postmodern body. It communicates culture. The inescapable air waves shape our thinking from cradle to grave. 'Media is man-made weather,' says one of the characters in Oliver Stone's film *Natural Born Killers*. And there is always weather. Satellite TV has arguably been a major factor in the crumbling of communist superstates and the fascist dictatorships. The capitalism portrayed in the glossy adverts, in *Dallas*, *Dynasty* and *Baywatch*, in MTV and the Hollywood Blockbusters, doesn't look nearly as bad as the totalitarian regimes paint it. There is of course a close connection between advertising and the media, which is

29 Veith, *Contemporary Culture*, 158.

30 But see Veith, *Contemporary Culture*, ch. 9.

31 P. Cotterell, *Mission and Meaninglessness: The Good News in a World of Suffering and Disorder* (London: SPCK, 1990), 33.

financed in most parts of the world by advertising – and no doubt soon will be in Britain. This leads to the conclusion that Capitalism is the engine of culture. It is pure profit that drives the cultural machine. This has led Camille Paglia to comment: 'Capitalism is the mysticism and glamour of things which take on a personality of their own... the West objectifies persons and personalises objects.'³² Postmodernity is also, therefore, the death of High Art and the death of the Dignity of Life. It is only those who have an Other World objectivity, a worldview based on transcendence, who can exercise high art within their own sphere of expression.

(g) *Technology*

I was 'ink monitor' at my primary school, mixing up the ink from the blue powder and topping up the ink-wells on each child's desk. The 'nibs' we stuck on to our wooden 'pens' cost one old penny each. Now, 35 years on, I am sitting in a McDonald's (again!) in Washington DC, with my lap-top on the table, having just checked the correspondence which I downloaded from Postmodern Christian, an internet subscriber group which I accessed via the phone line in my friend's house last night. Our capitalism/media driven culture is only possible because of technology. The printing press was one revolution, the cheap microchip has been another. And machines humble us, because they never make mistakes and they remember everything. Indeed, in the world of artificial intelligence, the capacity for error is now a measure of humanity. It is observable generally that, the more there is for humans to remember, the less they remember. I used to learn telephone numbers. Now all my phones 'know' the numbers of my friends. The ironically named 'virtual reality' is becoming more convincingly real by the day and cheap technology is opening many new doors into cyberspace.

(h) *The Significance of Insignificance*

The Enlightenment Project and history as the history of success has failed. The history of failure is what matters. Humanity has dethroned itself from the high ground of cosmic significance. Museums are often reluctant now to set out their displays as the history of 'progress' for that suggests success and 'right direction'. It implies an objective viewpoint. Rather the past is observed as a non-judgmental collage of what was.³³ From a Christian perspective, this

32 Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (London: Penguin, 1991), 37.

33 See Sampson, 'Rise of Postmodernity', 51, n. 18.

'history of failure' is a profoundly Biblical view of the world and of *Heilsgeschichte* – God's saving acts in the light of humanity's constant failure.

(i) *Different Relationship to Space and Time*

The Copernican Revolution marked the opening up of Space and Time to the mind-boggling proportions that post-Einstein cosmology has now given us.³⁴ Postmodernity has recognised the fact that for most people the idea of '150 years ago' and the idea of '15 thousand million years ago' are equally impossible to grasp; Saturn, a few million miles away, might just as well be at the edge of Hubble's known universe a trillion, trillion, trillion... miles away. Then there is also a paradox that the faster things happen, the longer waiting takes. When it took a week to go from London to New York, an hour's delay in departure hardly mattered. Now an extra hour in the departure lounge warrants a letter to the airline. This is the apparent compression of space and time. There is now a lack of any chronological perspective as we have moved from the diachronic to the synchronic. So postmodernity espouses a new consciousness of time and space, a new way of relating to how things were and of the spaces in which we live and interact. Everything is in effect viewed through the timeless 'here and now'. There is no history and no future. This is not the existentialist 'now' of self-authentication through decision. This is an acknowledgement that all history is a history of the present.³⁵ Nostalgia can be another good trip. You can see this experimenting with time in the work of writers like Martin Amis, Vonnegut or Foucault, and in films like Sally Potter's *Orlando* or in David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* series.

(j) *The Waning of Affect*

The ability to feel deep emotion is spasmodic and brief. This is partly due to information overload and partly due to the fragmentation of consciousness. We have to cope with so many emotions in so short a space of time each day. The TV culture and sound-bite sensations have coarsened the human spirit. There has been a loss of depth and more than that, in postmodernity there is a denial of depth. Jameson describes the loss of an 'inner self' that is able to feel, claiming that postmoderns' 'feelings (Lyotard, "intensities") are now free-floating and impersonal and dominated

34 S. Toulmin and J. Goodfield, *The Discovery of Time* (London: Pelican, 1967) and *The Architecture of Matter* (London: Pelican, 1965) are still very readable accounts of this.

35 See Harvey, *Condition*, Part III.

by euphoria'.³⁶ Edward Munch's famous painting, *The Scream*, is a canonical expression of the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation.³⁷ In postmodernity there can be no cathartic, wordless scream. There is only humour and another day.

(k) Image as Identity

In the loss of any objective 'Other' and of any sense of progress, there is a fragmenting of the personality; a controlled schizophrenia in which 'the unity of the "I" is more like the unity of a story than the unity of a thing'.³⁸ This is a persistent theme through all postmodern theatre, literature and film. Madonna is the iconographic example of this in contemporary culture. She is all surfaces and image; performances and pastiche; sexual machine, controlling superfemme, vulnerable Monroe, exploitative capitalist. There is no identity 'behind' the image. She is the sum of them and the collective consciousness of all her roles.

(l) Cultural Cohorts

We used to talk of the generation gap (young and old), and then of generation gaps (from 14 upwards at roughly 7 year intervals). But a more accurate picture of our presently fragmenting society recognises cultural tribalism or postmodernisms. 'Society is splintering into hundreds of sub-cultures and designer cults, each with its own language, code and life style.'³⁹ Many people participate in various microcults each week: the cult of the work place, the modern management cult, the Club cult, the pub cult... Some of these commonly overlap, for instance the work cult and the pub cult. Others rarely do. So there are few from the world of banking amongst the neo-punks – although there are some – I have met them! Advertising recognises the need to aim for target audiences. Satellite TV and the Fanzine scene has made this task easier. But for the church at worship and play, this presents a considerable problem. When I am asked to speak at a 'Youth Service', I wonder 'which youth?' For there are a host of subcultures in the 15 to 25 age group.

36 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 15.

37 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 11.

38 Harre, quoted in Sampson, 'Rise of Postmodernity', 45.

39 P. Elmer-Dewitt, 'Cyberpunk!' *Time* (8 February, 1993), 62.

5. Postevangelicalism for Postmodernity?

As I have already hinted, I think that the postmodern world can be a very fertile soil for the gospel if the church will but grasp the opportunities and venture through the open doors. We should not mourn the loss of arrogant modernism. But what will come in its place? As Toynbee recognised, the symptoms are those of decline and fall. Although the threat of nuclear apocalypse has receded with the unexpected thaw in the Cold War, computer technology has made the threat of economic collapse in the West an ever present danger. Will there be a resurgence of the Right and fascism, of the Left and ideological authoritarianism, of militant religious fundamentalism, or of servant Christianity? If we are in what Northrop Frye describes as a low mimetic period of history, then there can follow (says Frye) either chaos or a return to high myth. Although it is much more, Christianity is certainly high myth, and the stage could be set for a new revival. Evangelicalism in its present dying form will be unable to play a dominant role on its own. Postevangelicalism⁴⁰ which will be able to integrate more readily with broader traditions of historic Christianity, could play a major role in shaping the world which will emerge, God willing, from postmodernity.

These are early days yet, but perhaps we can see some characteristics of postevangelicalism emerging which will help us with the dominical gospel mandate.

(a) *Making Sense of Things*

Postmodernity is a way of coping with life. It does not make sense of it. There is none.

Christianity is a way of coping and making sense of life. Not complete sense, for now we see through a glass darkly. It is a metanarrative, but it is not exhaustive and Christians should beware of claiming too much. 'Part of the responsibility for the modern fragmentation of culture, and especially for its loss of a coherent sense of meaning and truth, is to be laid at the door of Christian theology's traditional tendency to a monolithic conception of God and of truth.'⁴¹ Biblical faith forces humility and a degree of

⁴⁰ There will be a spate of books on this subject in the coming few years. J.I. Packer's exhortations to 'co-belligerence' in North America and the widespread move in British evangelicalism towards a radical self-appraisal of essentials is already paving the way.

⁴¹ C.E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), 129.

agnosticism on us, less we presume again to eat of the tree of knowledge. Traditional, rational apologetics was fine for modernism, although even then it tended to share modernism's arrogance, but it will become increasingly irrelevant to western postmodernism. We need to let God grasp people's hearts and imaginations before we can restore their minds.

(b) Story and Hope

Postmodernism sees that personal identity, in as much as there is any, is experienced in the story of life, unfolding moment by moment, crossing the lives of others, with shifting images and shifting beliefs. (*Short Cuts* is a good cinematic example of this.) The people of God have glorious beliefs and a magnificent story to tell. But we must learn how to relate to those round about us at the level of our common humanity, and not, at first, at the level of schematized dogma. Douglas Coupland concludes his latest book, *Life After God*, with these poignant words of challenge: 'My secret is that I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.'⁴² So why, like many of my friends and family, is he not looking to the church to find God? Largely because we have become implausible and such an introverted sub-culture that we cannot communicate with our contemporaries. We must learn to give a reason for the hope within us in a way our friends (if we have any unchurched friends) can understand.

(c) Community

God, the Holy Trinity, is community, and in that community of love we find our identity in the postmodern sea of shifting images and personal fragmentation. Jesus' command has never been more relevant: 'Love one another as I have loved you... by this everyone will know that you are my disciples.' If we cannot demonstrably love one another, then we might as well pack up. Colin Gunton and others are right in stressing the importance of Trinity as foundational to our faith, practice and mission.⁴³

⁴² Douglas Coupland, *Life After God* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 359.

⁴³ Gunton, *One, the Three and the Many*, *passim*.

(d) Transcendence

Many postmoderns, like Coupland, realise the need 'To break the holds of power and institute research into a new collective subjectivity and a revolutionary healing of mankind. For we are sick, so sick of ourselves'.⁴⁴ But where can they look but to themselves if there is no 'Other'? We must present clearly the intimations of transcendence which God has planted throughout his universe. Beauty and love, order and satisfaction, suffering and meaninglessness – all point to an Utterly Other, to a gently compelling *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (Otto). Theologically, Gunton has argued for 'open transcendentals' and 'trinitarian transcendentals' which maintain the dynamism in our God-given faith and guard us from another round of reformation-stultification.⁴⁵ But once a postmodern has encountered Christ and believed the incarnation, she can never be 'properly' postmodern again. For if we are not alone, then there is a fulcrum for meaning, rationality, progress and morality.

Worship is an important part of this witness to the transcendent God. A vibrant corporate spiritual life, whether charismatic, Toronto-blessed, Anglo-catholic or Alternative worship, points to human creatureliness and the otherness of God which postmodernity denies but which our image-of-Godness yearns after. 'You have set eternity in their hearts...' says Koheleth.⁴⁶ Furthermore, liturgy and the liturgical year, tradition and sacramental re-enactments, all help us to regain our place in space and time. This has always been a function of cultic worship.⁴⁷

(e) Radical Holiness

The evidence of God in our own lives is one of the clearest signposts to transcendence. It is not by setting up a dull and irrelevant Christian counter-culture, but by affronting society with godly living, that we challenge people to consider the immanence of the transcendent Christ. To counter postmodernity's anti-hero we need Christian heroes: men and women who will be Rough Knights for the High King.

(f) A Theology of Pleasure and Desire

The Old Testament perhaps extols pleasure more than the New, but the New does not deny it in giving it a firmer basis in joy. We

44 M. Seem, in the introduction to Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, xxi.

45 Gunton, *One, the Three and the Many*, ch. 5.

46 Ecclesiastes 3:11.

47 See e.g. M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, 1959).

should receive with thanksgiving all the exciting things and experiences that postmodernity brings to many of us, while demonstrating that we are citizens of heaven with a greater hope. Postevangelical Christianity must be more life-affirming than denying. Although with C.S. Lewis we should remember that: 'All joy emphasizes our pilgrim status, always reminds, beckons, awakens desires. Our best havings are wantings.'⁴⁸ Our desire for God, the giver of all good things, can never be satisfied this side of death. It is the Love of perpetual longing. Mark Seem is indulging in wishful thinking when he suggests that desire alone in some way can replace the transcendent. 'A politics of desire would see loneliness and depression as the first things to go... the anti-oedipal strategy: if man is connected to the machines of the universe, if he is "anchored", he ceases to worry about the fitness of things, about the behaviour of his fellow-men, about right or wrong and justice and injustice. If his roots are in the current of life he will float on the surface like a lotus and he will blossom and give forth fruit... The life that's in him will manifest itself in growth, and growth is an endless, eternal process. The process is everything.'⁴⁹

(g) *A Transformed Western Church*

We have tried all manner of techniques and reforms in the church in the past fifty years and seen a steady decline in the West. Perhaps the new thing that God is forcing upon us through postmodernity will better equip us to work with Christ in disciplining a generation who are 'open' but do not know where to turn.

Generation X has come into young adult maturity in a cultural and moral "whirlwind of barbarism"... We believe that the characteristics for which Generation X has received such bad press are the very qualities that will render them most effective as pioneers. Their pragmatism and skepticism, their sharp-eyed assessments of life and above all, their search for community and personal relationships are exactly what the emerging era requires.⁵⁰

If postmodernity is just a commercial break then we should work and pray for the Kingdom programme to follow... until the Final Credits.

48 This theme appears throughout Lewis' writings; see esp. *Surprised by Joy* (Glasgow: Collins, 1955), 170-90.

49 Seem in the introduction to Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, xxiii.

50 Mahedy and Bernardim *A Generation Alone*, 20.