

Post / Late? Modernity as the Context for Christian Scholarship Today

Craig Bartholomew¹

[p.25]

INTRODUCTION

Scholarship is always historical, in the sense that it is crafted by particular humans at a particular time and place. Christian scholarship is of course no exception to this rule. Thus Christians in academia, using the insights of God's Word, need to work as hard as anyone to understand the historical context in which they work, so that they might craft integrally Christian theory at their point in history. Once we try to think about the context in which we are doing our scholarship, the word *postmodern* is unavoidable. Go to any major bookshop, especially the sociology section, and you will see what I mean! *Postmodern* is the word in vogue to identify the context in which we in the West live and think as we head towards the end of the second millennium. In this article we shall try to unravel what 'the postmodern turn' involves and examine the challenge it presents for the practice of Christian scholarship at this time.

THE TERM 'POSTMODERN'

Postmodernity is an unusually slippery word, used nowadays in a bewildering variety of ways—the adjective "postmodern" has now been applied to almost everything, from trainer shoes to the nature of our subjectivity—from "soul to soul" as the rappers might say². Although this fuzziness may reflect the instability of the postmodern era, it easily obscures the important issues at stake in the antithetical notions of postmodernity available today.

The term 'postmodern' was used as early as the 1870s and 'postmodernism' first appeared in the title of a book in 1926. Bertens points out that after the 1870s "Postmodern" resurfaced in 1934, in 1939, and in the 1940s. From then on sightings began to multiply. There is, however, very little continuity between these early uses and the debate on postmodernism as it gets underway in the course of the 1960s.³ The contemporary debate about postmodernism begins in the 1950s and 1960s as a reaction to modernism in the arts⁴. Modernism meant different things in different art forms,⁵ and different things to different critics.⁶ Consequently, early postmodernism took different forms. 'Depending on the artistic discipline, then, postmodernism is either a radicalization of the self-reflexive moment within modernism, a turning away from narrative and representation, or an explicit return to narrative and representation. And sometimes it is both.'⁷ The common element in this early postmodernism of the late 1950s and '60s is reaction and an attempt to transcend the limits of modernism in the arts. The debate about what would subsequently be called postmodernism took off

¹ This article is a revised version of a paper presented to the Gloucestershire Philosophical Society, October 1995, and to the Biblical Studies Seminar, Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education, March 1996.

² Nigel Wheale, *The Postmodern Arts: An Introductory Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 4.

³ Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 20.

⁴ See *ibid.* and Margaret Rose, *The Post-Modern and the Post-Industrial* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), pp. 3-20, on the earliest uses of the term 'postmodern'.

⁵ Cf. Wheale, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-32.

⁶ See Bertens, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

between 1963 and 1967, key figures being Leonard Meyer, Ihab Hassan, William Spanos, Susan Sontag, Leslie Fielder and Robert Venturi.

There is not the space here to look at postmodernism in the arts in any detail. To give us a taste, we will glance briefly at **Hassan's** early understanding of postmodernism. Ihab Hassan is no longer a significant player in the postmodern debate, having of late turned to the American pragmatist tradition. However, in the 1960s and '70s he was very influential in giving the term 'postmodernism' wide circulation, influencing, *inter alia*, Lyotard. Particularly in the *literary-critical* field, his influence was so great that his work was the starting point for any treatment of literary postmodernism between the mid-1970s and '80s.⁸ Hassan proposed the notion of a postmodern literature of silence which is anti-representationalist⁹ and anti-modernist in its move towards disorder and attack on form. Initially, he saw this as a strand within

[p.26]

modernism but increasingly came to see post-war variants of the literature of silence as qualitatively different from the pre-war ones. This postmodern literature of silence 'strives for silence by accepting chance and improvisation; its principle becomes indeterminacy. By refusing order, order imposed or discovered, this kind of literature refuses purpose.'¹⁰

From 1971 onwards Hassan promoted and engaged in a new anti-criticism, or what he called 'paracriticism'. This is an attempt to recover multi-vocation in which association and aphorism replace argument. In this way criticism will offer the reader empty spaces, silence, in which the reader can meet him or herself in the presence of literature. Around this time, Hassan extended his critique to culture at large, although it was only in 1978 that he adopted the term 'postmodernity'. In the light of subsequent debates about postmodernity, Hassan's notes are very suggestive but tend to be a catalogue of non-mainstream American culture. By 1978 he had come to see immanence and indeterminacy as characterizing the postmodern age. Immanence is 'the capacity of mind to generalize itself in the world, to act upon both self and world, and so to become more and more, immediately, its own environment. The tendency... depends, above all, on the emergence of human beings as language animals, *homo pictor* or *homo significans*, gnostic creatures constituting themselves, and increasingly their universe, by symbols of their own making.'¹¹ Such immanence is closely linked to the severing of the referential aspect of language referred to in Hassan's literature of silence. Indeterminacy relates to 'heterodoxy, pluralism, eclecticism, randomness, revolt, deformation.'¹² Immanence and indeterminacy are thus at the heart of the new postmodern epistēmē, in Hassan's view. Hassan has thus come very close to a poststructuralist position,¹³ although his seeming to hold

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁹ See the many references to representation and anti-representation in *ibid.* Briefly, the crisis of representation in postmodernity relates to the question of whether or not we can adequately represent the real.

¹⁰ Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1987), p. 10. See Chapter 1, 'The Literature of Silence', for a fuller discussion of Hassan's view. He identifies Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett as the masters of this literature of silence.

¹¹ Ihab Hassan, 'Desire and dissent in the postmodern age', *Kenyon Review* 5 (1983), p. 10.

¹² Hassan, 1983 *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹³ That is, to the sort of postmodern views held by Barthes, Derrida, De Man, *etc.*, who 'develop' structuralism in such a way as to undermine the possibility of accurately representing the world. For a useful overview of poststructuralist theories, see Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* 3rd edn (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 125-73.

open the possibility of return to a referential era represented a more conservative stance. Indeed, he balked at the radical implications of his position and, as we mentioned, turned to the American pragmatist tradition.

The two terms, 'postmodern' and 'postmodernism', thus alert us from the outset to the complexity of the 'postmodern' debate. Philosophical (ideas), cultural (arts, religion) *and* social (capitalism, politics, communications revolution) shifts are all ingredients in the postmodern pie, and any respectable analysis of postmodernity must focus on these different strands and their entanglement.¹⁴ The postmodern turn results from the interaction between philosophical, cultural and social developments. This does not of course mean that the postmodern debate has no earlier roots. A cursory reading of Baudrillard, Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard, key theorists of the postmodern, makes their dependence upon Nietzsche, Heidegger and the likes, clear. In his brief summary of the progenitors of contemporary theorizing of the postmodern, Lyon singles out Nietzsche, Marx, Heidegger, Dostoyevsky, Merkegaard and Simmel as 'streams feeding into the postmodern river'.¹⁵ Little in theories of the postmodern is new, but it is the widespread disillusionment with modernity and the embrace of previously minority anti-modern positions that makes the present different. In the latter sense, Bertens is correct to situate the start of the specifically postmodern modern debate in the early 1960s in American cultural and literary criticism.¹⁶

THEORIES OF THE POSTMODERN: SOME EXAMPLES

Up until the 1980s, the debate on postmodernism was generally confined to the arts and architecture, although, as we saw with Hassan, the debate was being extended to a general critique of Western culture. 1981-84 changed the general restriction of postmodernism to the arts, when philosophers began to address the postmodern debate in all seriousness. Jürgen **Habermas** set the ball rolling with his 1980 Adorno lecture entitled 'Modernity versus Postmodernity'. And Habermas is regarded as the main target of Jean-François **Lyotard**'s 'La

[p.27]

Condition postmoderne', published in English in 1984. A huge volume of literature on postmodernity continues to snowball, representing a plurality of views often deeply at odds with each other. We will limit ourselves to an overview of the theories of the postmodern of Habermas, Lyotard and Derrida, once we have given some indication of the nature of modernity.

¹⁴ David Lyon, *Postmodernity* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994), p. 7, proposes that we use 'postmodernism' in relation to cultural and intellectual phenomena and 'postmodernity' in relation to putative social changes. Thus postmodernism would refer to the reaction to modernism in the arts and to the current epistemological crisis resulting from the shaking of foundationalism. Postmodernity relates more to whether or not a new kind of information and consumerist society is emerging after/out of modernity. This is a useful distinction but it is important to remember that the cultural, intellectual and social cohere and are not easily separated.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-11.

¹⁶ Bertens, *op. cit.*, p. 17, comments that 'The debate on postmodernism as it has been variously defined since the 1960s has its origins in American literary and cultural criticism and it is from there that it moves into all the other fields and disciplines where it has in the last twenty-five years manifested itself.' Of course, the specifically postmodern debate is connected with, and indeed an expression of, ongoing and developing disquiet with modernity, and thus connects with all evaluations of modernity.

Habermas has reacted strongly to the postmodern notion of the end of **modernity**, proposing instead that we think of modernity as an unfinished project.¹⁷ This concern over modernity, which is central to the postmodern debate, alerts us to the shift in the discussion from postmodernism in the arts to a broader social and cultural critique about Western society as a whole. Modernism in the arts is 'generally' agreed to refer to the period 1890-1930,¹⁸ so that postmodernism is a reaction to this artistic modernism. Modernity, which is under discussion in the postmodern debate, refers, by contrast, to the whole Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment period, roughly 1789-1989.¹⁹ The concept 'modernity', although it describes the changes in Western culture from the late sixteenth century onward, only achieved wide circulation in the 1970s!²⁰ Since so much of the postmodern debate centres on an evaluation of modernity, let me sketch briefly what modernity entails.

Modernity refers to the social order and perspective/s upon the world that emerged out of the Enlightenment. Some of the major characteristics of modernity are:

- Unprecedented change and positive espousal of this, closely related to the Industrial Revolution.
- Rejection of the authority of tradition and belief in the power of unaided human reason to produce freedom. Remember Kant's 'Dare to know!'
- Belief in progress.
- A deeply anti-Christian bent. As Gay explains: '...The philosophers rudely treated the Christian past rather as Voltaire treated the plays of Shakespeare—as a dunghill strewn with diamonds, crying out to be pillaged and badly needing to be cleaned out.'²¹ Certainty was to be sought in areas other than religion, which was privatized.
- Global consequences: the industrial and economic influence of modernity has been immense; think of job differentiation, rationalization, urbanization, military developments and secularism. Hardly any country of the world has been left untouched.

Lyon sums up modernity as follows:

Modernity is all about the massive changes that took place at many levels from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, changes signalled by the shifts that uprooted agricultural workers and transformed them into mobile industrial urbanities. Modernity questions all conventional ways of doing things, substituting authorities of its own, based in science,

¹⁷ See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), and R.J. Bernstein, *Habermas and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1985).

¹⁸ *Generally* needs to be stressed; cf. Wheale, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-32.

¹⁹ This rough characterization is suggested by Lyon, *op. cit.*, p. 6. Thomas Oden argues similarly in *Two Worlds: Notes on the Death of Modernity in America and Russia* (Illinois: IVP, 1992). Cf. Toulmin, *Cosmopolis. The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 5-13, on the difficulty of determining the start of the Enlightenment. Personally I am uneasy with both 1989 as the termination of modernity, and with 1789 as the start. See below for a discussion of the extent to which postmodernity remains modern. As regards the origin of modernity, I suspect its roots are to be found in the Renaissance.

²⁰ Lyon, *op. cit.*, pp. 19, 20.

²¹ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment. An Interpretation. The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 323.

economic growth, democracy or law. And it unsettles the self; if identity is given in traditional society, in modernity it is constructed.²²

Increasingly, however, the double edge to this development has been in the foreground; alienation and exploitation accompany this economic and industrial development; meaninglessness and aloneness (the society of strangers), and destruction of the environment have become the order of the day. Modernity has entered a crisis, and postmodernity is its name. Several scholars regard modernity as in crisis. According to David Lyon 'The postmodern, then, refers above all to the exhaustion of modernity.'²³ In his book on humanism, Carroll concludes, 'Our story is told. Its purpose has been simple, to shout that humanism is dead, has been so since the late nineteenth century, and it is about time to quit. Let us bury it with appropriate rites, which means honouring the little that was good, and understanding what went wrong and why.'²⁴ A final example: Stephen Toulmin says

[p.28]

of modernity, 'What looked in the nineteenth century like an irresistible river has disappeared in the sand, and we seem to have run aground.... we are now stranded and uncertain of our location. The very project of Modernity thus seems to have lost momentum, and we need to fashion a successor programme.'²⁵

Modernity is in crisis, but the answer, according to Habermas, is to get it back on track, not to abandon it. Habermas acknowledges the problem of logocentrism²⁶ and foundationalist²⁷ understandings of rationality but still argues that, politically, a privileging of rationality is indispensable. He proposes that we conceive of rationality as 'communicative reason'. Problems have developed in modernity because theoretical, practical and aesthetic reason have become separated from each other, and capitalist modernization has resulted in theoretical reason dominating the other two modes. The structures of language itself offer a way out of this impasse. Habermas elaborates on this with his philosophy of intersubjectivity revolving around communication and consensus. 'Progress comes about by untiring attempts to achieve an ever more enlightened consensus on the basis of reasoned debate, not by way of a permanent crisis that refuses to resolve itself.'²⁸

Habermas's defence of the project of modernity continues to be one of the major boundaries of the postmodern debate. Linda Hutcheon has perceptively pointed out that at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the '90s the postmodern debate was increasingly bounded on the one side by Habermas and on the other by Jean-François **Lyotard**.²⁹ Lyotard's *The Postmodern*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²³ Lyon, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

²⁴ John Carroll, *Humanism. The Wreck of Western Culture* (London: Fontana, 1993), pp. 228-32.

²⁵ Toulmin, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

²⁶ 'Logocentric' refers to that Western notion of reason which aims at pure, unmediated access to truth and knowledge.

²⁷ 'Foundationalist' is often used too loosely in the postmodern debate. 'Classic foundationalism' is the view that a belief is properly basic if it is self-evident to me or immediately self-evident from my experience. It is classic foundationalism that has increasingly been undermined this century, but this is not the same as saying that epistemology or truth have been undermined. See Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: OUP, 1993) pp. 176-93.

²⁸ Bertens, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

²⁹ Bertens, *op. cit.*, p. 122. Inevitably it is not easy to talk of boundaries where postmodernity is concerned. Contra Hutcheon, Lyotard may not be the opposite boundary to Habermas. Chris Norris

Condition' is o study of 'the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies'.³⁰ Lyotard uses 'postmodern' to describe that condition.

According to Lyotard, the postmodern condition is characterized by incredulity towards metanarratives. Metanarratives are those large narratives that undergirded and legitimated the knowledge enterprise in modernity. An example of this is the Enlightenment narrative according to which the consensus reached between two people is true if they are both operating rationally.³¹ Science may appear to have very little to do with narrative, but as Lyotard points out,

to the extent that science does not restrict itself to stating useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game. It then produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status, a discourse called philosophy. I will use the term modern to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of the Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth.³²

Legitimation of knowledge always requires some narrative, but, in the postmodern context, such narratives are incredible: The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements... Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. However, we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable.³³ The postmodern condition thus strikes at the heart of the possibility of transcendent, objective legitimation. Language games have replaced metanarratives and these always have only local and limited validity. 'The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation.'³⁴

However, the decision-makers in our society continue to try to manage this pluralistic and fragmented situation in terms of a single language game, namely performativity. Knowledge has been profoundly affected by the replacement of

[p.29]

the production of material goods with information as the central concern in advanced societies. Society is being computerized and instrumental rationality dominates others forms of reason. The production of proof... falls under the control of another language game, in

(*What's Wrong with Postmodernism?* London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990, p. 165) argues that *no one* is as extreme as Baudrillard in his opposition towards truth claims. He acknowledges that Lyotard has made similar claims, but 'In Lyotard's case there has been a marked shift of emphasis, from a work like *The Postmodern Condition* where enlightenment values are seen as the source of manifold errors and evils, to those recent texts where a certain (albeit heterodox) reading of Kant is applied to questions of history, politics and interpretation.'

³⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: MUP, 1984) p. xxiii.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

³² *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

which the goal is no longer truth, but performativity—that is, the best input/output equation.³⁵

Liotard is clear that the attempt to find a larger narrative in performativity is as incredible as previous metanarratives. He rejects any attempt to work towards consensus with regard to what is true knowledge. Lyotard argues that Habermas's notion of consensus is based on the narrative of emancipation.³⁶ However, political emancipation is achieved through dissensus, not consensus, and Lyotard proposes an apprenticeship in resistance. Communication will always be a struggle, in Lyotard's view, and in place of Habermas's consensus he suggests 'general agonistics' and 'paralogical activity'.³⁷ Both these concepts are Lyotard's terms for affirming new and different moves in language games as opposed to the notion of consensus. The only moves not permitted in a language game are those of terror. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honour of the name.³⁸

Jacques **Derrida** has become a household word as regards postmodernism. As Thiselton points out, 'Deconstruction in literary theory is often perceived as the strongest philosophical context of post-modernism, and Derrida as one of its most forceful exponents in this dual area.'³⁹ Certainly Derrida has been an important figure in promoting the idea of language as the bottom line of reality, textual instability (see below), and the inability of language to represent reality accurately, themes which have become central to much postmodernism. Caution is required, however, in positioning Derrida as a postmodern theorist. Norris has insisted that we distinguish Derrida's work from the more anti-rational work of Rorty and Baudrillard, pointing to his thorough and close analysis of texts and his concern with philosophical argumentation.⁴⁰

The genre of Derrida's writings is not easy to classify, and this is related to his unusual understanding of the relationship between philosophy and literature. Derrida refuses to privilege philosophy as the dispenser of reason and focuses on language, with all its disruptiveness, as the basis of both philosophy and literature. Derrida deconstructs Saussure's view of language to expose the disruptiveness of language.⁴¹ Against Saussure, he argues that language can only represent a representation of the world. Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified depends on an absolute term, beyond the play of signs, which anchors meaning. Without such an anchor, the endless play of signification becomes apparent.

Philosophy cannot dispense with language and is thus as subject to the disruptiveness of language as is any discourse. In the history of Western philosophy, thinkers have been able to impose their concepts on other disciplines only by ignoring the disruptive effects of language. By undermining/deconstructing this boundary between philosophy and other modes of discourse, Derrida 'provided a whole new set of powerful strategies which placed the literary

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³⁷ See especially *ibid.*, pp. 60-67.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

³⁹ Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 103.

⁴⁰ Cf. Chris Norris, *Deconstruction. Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 136-58; *What's Wrong with Postmodernism*, pp. 49-76, 134-163.

⁴¹ For a good introduction to this aspect of deconstruction see Kevin Mills's essay, 'Words and presences: the spiritual imperative,' in D. Barratt, R. Pooley and L. Ryken. eds, *The Discerning Reader* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996) 42 pp. 121-136.

critic, not simply on a footing with the philosopher, but in a complex relationship (or rivalry) with him, whereby philosophic claims were open to rhetorical questioning or *deconstruction*'.⁴² Indeed, in so far as literary texts are in touch with their rhetorical nature, they are less deluded than philosophers who deny their embeddedness in language.

Derrida's deconstructive⁴³ approach rests therefore on his philosophy of language. Language as 'writing' is the bottom line of reality and is Derrida's means of opposing logocentrism. Derrida moves to this point by critiquing Saussure's privileging of spoken over written language. He discerns a whole metaphysics of pure self-presence (*i.e.* an assumption of an absolute term which guarantees meaning) underlying Saussure's favouring of spoken language, a position which has a long history in the Western philosophical tradition. Contra Saussure, Derrida argues

[p.30]

that writing is the precondition of language and thus prior to speech! It is important to note that he is using writing to mean something different from mere inscription. In *Of Grammatology* he says, 'We say "writing" for all that gives rise to inscription... cinematography, choreography, ... pictorial, musical, sculptural "writing"'.⁴⁴ Norris explains Derrida's notion of writing as follows:

The term is closely related to that element of signifying difference which Saussure thought essential to the workings of language. Writing for Derrida is the 'free play' or element of undecidability within every system of communication. Its operations are precisely those which escape the self-consciousness of speech and its deluded sense of the mastery of concept over language. Writing is the endless displacement of meaning which both governs language and places it forever beyond the reach of a stable, self-authenticating knowledge.⁴⁵

If this is difficult to understand, that is part of Derrida's intention; he does not want the meaning to be pinned down, as the elusiveness of his use of *differance* indicates, its meaning remaining suspended between 'difference' and 'defer'.⁴⁶ Derrida applies his understanding of writing to Rousseau's 'Essay on the Origin of Languages' and Levi-Strauss's nature-culture distinction in order to show how both texts suppress writing which nevertheless remains present, and having set this in the foreground, deconstructs their texts.⁴⁷ In terms of deconstructive method, Norris comments on this work of Derrida that, 'Once again it is a matter of taking a repressed or subjugated theme (that of writing), pursuing its various textual ramifications and showing how these subvert the very order that strives to hold, them in check.'⁴⁸ Such self-engendered paradoxes in texts, Derrida calls 'aporia'.⁴⁹

⁴² Norris, 1991, *op cit.*, p. 21.

⁴³ Christopher Norris helpfully defines deconstruction as 'to draw out conflicting logics of sense and implication, with the object of showing that the text never exactly means what it says or says what it means'. See Norris's essay in C. Norris and A. Benjamin, *What is Deconstruction?* (London, New York: Academy Editions/St Martins Press, 1988), p. 7.

⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 9.

⁴⁵ Norris, 1991 *op. cit.*, p. 28.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴⁷ *Cf. ibid.*, pp. 32-41.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁴⁹ *Cf. ibid.*, p. 49.

Language as the bottom line of reality neither has underlying ground to support it, nor has any meaning beyond itself. Consequently, Derrida resists any attempt to recentre philosophy. The Western tradition has identified a number of different possible centres which provide a foundation for language. However, for Derrida, all these centres take their place within the universe of signs and they cannot escape the endless chain of signifier and signified. Centres are functionally indispensable but they are always only provisional; Derrida calls this approach *decentering*, and the refusal to acknowledge the provisionality of our centres, *logocentrism*.⁵⁰ Here we encounter a major theme of postmodern thinking, what Lyotard refers to as the rejection of metanarratives. Fragmentation and transience characterize postmodernity, accompanied by thorough-going pluralism. For Derrida, there is no grounding of language; language has no ground external to itself that is not illusory. Here he follows Heidegger in absolutizing language and refers to language as 'the bottomless chessboard' to indicate the lack of any foundation and the fact that play has no meaning outside of itself.⁵¹ Habermas and Norris disagree strongly about how to evaluate Derrida and how to position him among postmodern theorists.⁵² For Habermas, Derrida is particularly interested in standing the primacy of logic over rhetoric, canonized since Aristotle, on its head.⁵³ Norris argues that Habermas misreads Derrida, who retains a concern for rigorous analytical work and careful philosophical argumentation. This is true, but it does seem that there are major tensions in Derrida's work between this emphasis and the sea of textuality amidst which all is adrift.

Our survey of three key theories of the postmodern has been all too brief, and no attention has been paid to theorists of the importance of Jameson, Baudrillard, Rorty, Michel Foucault and Zygmunt Bauman.⁵⁴ However, the purpose of the survey is simply to put our discussion of postmodernity and OT hermeneutics in this broader philosophical context. These broader issues continually impinge on the special sciences, but they are often unknown.

[p.31]

THE POSTMODERN TURN AS A TIME OF FOUNDATIONAL CRISIS

As I have stressed, there are many layers to the postmodern turn. Socially, postmodernity is related to shifts in capitalism at the end of the twentieth century and to the communications revolution.⁵⁵ Culturally, we have glanced at the shifts in the arts, and, of course, the media are deeply involved in the communications revolution. Religious renewal is also part of the mix. In this section I want to focus on *philosophical* aspects of the postmodern turn, while being alert to this as only one aspect of the total. I suggest that, philosophically, the postmodern turn represents a time of foundational crisis as the tensions and internal contradictions of modernity play themselves out.

1. Postmodernity has raised all sorts of questions about our capacity to know and how we know and whether we can accurately represent reality, *i.e.* about **epistemology**. The possibility of universal objective knowledge is considered by many to be impossible. Much

⁵⁰ See footnote 26 above.

⁵¹ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, and Other Essays on *Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 174.

⁵² Habermas, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-210; Norris, 1991 *op. cit.*, pp. 139-58.

⁵³ Habermas, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

⁵⁴ See Bertens, *op. cit.*, for a useful overview of these theorists.

⁵⁵ See D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), and David Lyon, *The Information Society: Issues and Illusions* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), for a discussion of these themes.

postmodern theory is strongly anti-realist and considers all knowledge to be local, communal and a human construct. Such epistemological scepticism is captured very clearly in Lyotard's notion of 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. The corollary of this scepticism has been a profound suspicion of the hidden agendas of 'neutral' modern knowledge; what claimed to be objective and value-free has come to be seen as a mask for powerful ideologies. The consequence of this scepticism is an awareness of inevitable pluralism in knowledge and consequent fragmentation. Certainty and truth are regarded by many with great suspicion—paradoxically, the one thing that radical postmodern thinkers seem quite sure of is that there are no metanarratives! There is widespread disagreement about the role of rationality and whether or not knowledge can be grounded. Some, like Norris, Habermas and Gellner, seek to reconstruct the project of modernity. Others would seek a genuinely postmodern position in which rationality is always perspectival. Still others, like MacIntyre, seek to do justice to the perspectival nature of rationality while holding on to more universal perspectives.

2. Epistemology is closely related to **ontology**, and here, too, postmodernity has undermined the broad consensus of modernity. One would expect that incredulity towards metanarratives would leave little room for much ontological reflection, but of course this is unavoidable. All philosophical analysis inevitably carries with it ontological presuppositions, whether consciously or not. A common ontological presupposition in postmodern theory is that language is the most fundamental aspect of reality. Derrida is a good example of this view. Much postmodern theory has little room for any notion of an order in reality existing apart from human construction. Scepticism about human knowing goes hand in hand with a high view of the human community as constructing the worlds in which we live. This, too, reflects a particular ontology.

3. Epistemology and ontology are inseparable from **anthropology**, in the sense of the nature of humankind. The rationalistic, autonomous view of the human which was so dominant in modernity has been undermined, and a plurality of alternatives proposed. Rorty, for example, suggests that we should think of the moral self as 'a network of beliefs, desires, and emotions with nothing behind it—no substrate behind the attributes. For purposes of moral and political deliberation and conversation, a person just *is* that network.'⁵⁶ For Foucault, the human person is 'no more than a kind of rift in the order of things, or, in any case, a configuration whose outlines are determined by the new position he has so recently taken up in the field of knowledge... man is only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, a new wrinkle in our knowledge, ... that will disappear as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form'.⁵⁷ In several postmodern thinkers, Freud's anthropology has been revised and renewed.⁵⁸ If thinkers like Baudrillard play down the possibility of the human subject acting in any significant way, others stress the possibility of human self-creation.

[p.32]

Epistemology, ontology, anthropology: that so much postmodern theorizing is related to these areas indicates the extent to which the philosophical foundations of modernity are in crisis. In

⁵⁶ Richard Rorty, 'Postmodernist bourgeois liberalism', *Journal of Philosophy* 80, 10 (1983), pp. 585, 586.

⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. xxiii.

⁵⁸ For example, Baudrillard, Deleuze and Gittari, Lacan.

many respects, postmodernity is the name we give to this foundational crisis, which Neil Smith captures poignantly when he writes, 'The Enlightenment is dead, Marxism is dead, the working class movement is dead... and the author does not feel so well either.'⁵⁹ Postmodernity is characterized by pluralism, uncertainty, instability and fragmentation. The old certainties seem to have gone, with no unified vision to replace them, even as capitalism hurtles on into a revolutionary information phase.

However, it seems to me better to refer to what is being called postmodernity as late or high modernity.⁶⁰ Harvey suggests that modernity is characterized by a rejection of tradition and embrace of change, as well as confidence in the ability of reason to lead to new certain truths.⁶¹ The capacity of reason to do this has been undermined, so that we are left with change, flux and instability. Such an analysis helpfully alerts us to the fact that the roots of modernity have been called into question, but they have not all been abandoned. Human autonomy, for example, tends to remain as firmly entrenched as ever, the difference being that we now perhaps have to learn to live with, or even perhaps celebrate, the uncertainties and limitations.⁶² Mary Hesse alerts us to the lingering legacy of modernity in the postmodern debate when she writes: 'The liberal consensus has so successfully established itself as the ideology of Western intellectual culture, that it has become almost invisible as the presupposition of every postmodern debate.'⁶³ And it ought not to be forgotten that the nihilistic and relativistic side of postmodern theory is only one aspect of the contemporary situation. Chris Norris detects something of a reaction to the extremes of postmodernism among some of its proponents, namely Said and Kristeva, and he himself has undertaken a major project aimed at rehabilitating a form of realism.⁶⁴

Certainly, if modernity is a reaction to and immanentizing of a Christian worldview,⁶⁵ then postmodernity shows little sign of openness to recovering Christian perspectives on reality. David Lyon says:

Today, the human is being displaced, decentred, and the grip on the future seems once more up for grabs. While this opens the door for everything from Foucault's play of power to the Age of Aquarius, it also renders more possible the possibility that Providence was not such a bad idea after all. Perhaps postmodern apocalypics will have to make space for

⁵⁹ Quoted in Harvey, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

⁶⁰ 'High modernity' is Anthony Giddens's expression. See, for example, his *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), pp. 4, 27-32.

⁶¹ Harvey, *op. cit.*

⁶² In an excellent essay, Keith Sewell puts his finger on this point: 'While the enlightenment ideal of the autonomy of reason might have fallen, the western intellectual tradition continues to be subject to the delusion that we... are the authors and originators of meaning... This is the individualistic romanticism of postmodernism.' See Keith Sewell, 'The eclipse of history and the crisis of the humanities' (Victoria, Australia: The Research Press, 1995) p. 17, 18.

⁶³ Mary Hesse, 'How to be postmodern without being a feminist', *The Monist* 64 (1994), p. 457.

⁶⁴ Christopher Norris, *Truth and the Ethics of Criticism* (Manchester: MUP, 1994).

⁶⁵ Lyon, 1994 *op. cit.*, p. 5, suggests a shift from providence (pre-modern) to progress (modernity) to nihilism (post-modern). David Ray Griffin maintains that 'Modernity rejected the Christian form of this story as mythological but retained the notion of a single movement in history (the modern West), which is alone meaningful and outside of which there is no salvation, now understood as economic and technological progress'. See Griffin's chapter, 'Postmodern theology and a/theology: a response to Mark Taylor', in D.R. Griffin, W.A. Beardslee and J. Holland, *Varieties of Postmodern Theology* (Albany: SUNY, 66 1989), p. 32.

a vision of a (re)new(ed) earth, that antique agent of social change, and the original partner of final judgement.⁶⁶

And John Milbank has argued that only Christian theology provides an alternative route to contemporary nihilism. However, these voices are in the minority.⁶⁷

THE POSTMODERN TURN AND CHRISTIAN SCHOLARSHIP

The complexity and the comprehensive nature of the challenge of postmodernity will be obvious from the above. The postmodern debate raises a myriad of issues that Christians need to address and wrestle with. In this concluding section, I shall simply state the challenge that the postmodern turn presents to Christians to produce integrally Christian scholarship.

The danger of the postmodern turn, at least philosophically, is relativism, and the loss of any notion of 'true truth'. The plus, in my view, is its undermining of the myth of neutrality so central to modernity and the reopening of discussion about foundations. Christians have always had the resources to recognize that scholarship is never neutral but is always shaped by the religious presuppositions and worldview of the academic involved.⁶⁸ However, such has

[p.33]

been the dominance of modernity with its myth of neutral, rational objectivity, that many Christians succumbed to the pressure of doing Christian scholarship beneath the Cartesian umbrella. The general tenets of modernity seemed so obvious that they tended to be taken for granted and assumed, rather than examined from a Christian perspective. These same tenets are now, however, being attacked from many sides. Certainly, within academia, postmodernity provides us with an opportunity to rethink the foundational areas of epistemology, ontology and anthropology and to give an account of our presuppositions. A scientific approach to reality which imposes an inductive method of fact-collecting upon disciplines cannot simply be assumed to be appropriate: if it is the desired approach, and I for one would not recommend it, then it will have to be argued for. The modern consensus has been loosened, at least philosophically. Thus, amidst contemporary scholarly pluralism,⁶⁹ one

⁶⁶ Lyon, 1994, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁶⁷ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990). I am intensely aware that the nomenclature 'pre-modern, modern and postmodern' is inadequate. On the one hand, it privileges the 'modern' too much, and secondly it is far too blunt a tool for the surgical work that cultural analysis requires. It is a bit like trying to do surgery with a spade! Within the Reformational philosophic tradition of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven, considerable work has been done in developing more sophisticated and integrally Christian tools for this type of analysis. For a taste of a Dooyeweerdian analysis of postmodernity see Danie Strauss, 'The modern scientific dispensation and the spiritual climate of contemporary—"postmodernism"' (unpublished paper presented at the Calvin College Philosophy Department, 23 October 1995). I am not aware of a Vollenhovian analysis of postmodernity, but for a useful outline of its basic method see Calvin Seerveld, 'Towards a cartographic methodology for art historiography', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 39 No. 2 (1980), pp. 143-54.

⁶⁸ See Roy Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality. An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), for a superb analysis of the effect of religious beliefs upon scholarship.

⁶⁹ In virtually every discipline there is a growing body of 'postmodernity and...' literature. Cf. for example Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991). Theology is of course no exception to this trend. A useful introductory chapter on postmodernity and theology is that by Gerald Loughlin, 'At the end of the world: postmodernism and theology', in Andrew Walker, ed., *Different Gospels. Christian Orthodoxy and Modern Theologies* (London: SPCK, 70 1993), Ch. 14, 204-21.

needs to consider where one positions oneself philosophically and account for one's position. For Christians, this positively provides the impetus to explore the ontological, epistemological and anthropological implications of a Christian perspective on reality. In short, the postmodern turn challenges Christians to produce integrally Christian scholarship, rather than scholarship which is an uncritical synthesis of different and conflicting perspectives upon reality. All theory construction carries with it philosophical presuppositions, and Christians need to ensure that this is in line with the gospel in their academic labours. The postmodern turn provides the gap, as it were, for Christians to hear the call to scholarship *coram Deo* once again. And, of course, this applies to Christians in all disciplines,, and not just in theology. The foundational philosophic crisis of postmodernity is being felt all over the academy, thereby reminding us that integrally Christian scholarship is required in all disciplines. In his exhilarating 'The New Testament and the People of God', Tom Wright has given us a taste of how attention to the foundations can positively reshape a discipline.⁷⁰ I suggest that for Christians in academia, the postmodern turn presents the challenge and opportunity to do this type of work in all disciplines: re-examine the foundations and find a way of constructing an integrally Christian edifice in that area while remaining deeply in dialogue with contemporary proponents of the discipline. Such labour would do much to reduce the 'scandal of the Evangelical mind'.⁷¹

The fact is that important shifts are taking place and, whatever our precise interpretation of postmodernity, as David Lyon says, 'the concept of postmodernity is a valuable "problematic" that alerts us to key questions concerning contemporary social changes. I see it,' he says, 'as a concept that invites participation in a debate over the nature and direction of present-day societies, in a globalized context, rather than one describing an already existing state of affairs.... The important thing is to understand what is happening...'⁷² 'Postmodernity' as a concept certainly invites Christians to examine closely the nature and direction of their academic endeavours.

A READER'S GUIDE TO (SOME) CHRISTIAN TEXTS ON POSTMODERNITY

The literature on postmodernity is constantly expanding. As a help for readers wanting to get into this discussion and to develop a Christian perspective on postmodernity, here is a short list of relevant books. The * indicates the titles I would suggest starting with.

Colin E. Gunton 1993. *The One, the Three and the Many. God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: CUP). A thorough theological diagnosis of the condition of modernity with proposals for a theological remedy along trinitarian lines. Highly recommended!

Brian D. Ingraffia 1995. *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology*. (Cambridge: CUP). In this penetrating text, Ingraffia explores the postmodern opposition to theology evidenced in

⁷⁰ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

⁷¹ See Mark Noll's excellent book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), for an exposition of the present lack of serious Christian scholarship in many areas.

⁷² Lyon, 1994 *op. cit.*, pp. 84, 85. Cf. also Lyon's statements that 'the question of postmodernity offers an opportunity to reappraise modernity, to read the signs of the times as indicators that modernity itself is unstable, unpredictable, and to forsake the foreclosed future that it once seemed to promise' (*ibid.*, p. 70). 'The idea of postmodernity may yet turn out to be a figment of overheated academic imagination, popular hype, or disappointed radical hopes. But it is worth pursuing because it alerts us to a series of highly important questions. It raises our sensitivity and helps us see certain issues as problems to be explained' (*ibid.*, p. 4). On the 'problematic value' of postmodernity cf. also Rose, *op. cit.*, pp. 178, 179.

Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida and argues that they all critique the ontotheology that resulted from the Hellenization of biblical theology. Christian thinkers ought not to follow postmodern theory, according to Ingrassia,

[p.34]

but should reverse the ontotheological route by recovering a theology of the cross, and developing Christian critical theory which is built on revelation and guided by a hermeneutics of faith.

Roger Lundin 1993. *The Culture of Interpretation. Christian Faith and the Postmodern World*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans). Superb! Lundin takes an account of contemporary culture by exploring the historical background to some of its central beliefs and considering the implications of these. He starts with a look at current developments in education and the university, and then focuses specifically on two nineteenth-century American authors, Emerson and Hawthorne. Subsequent chapters deal with Marxism and poststructuralism, and the implications of the culture of interpretation for Christian faith.

David Lyon 1994*. *Postmodernity*. (Buckingham: Open University Press). Lyon is a Christian sociologist in Canada. The best introductory text on postmodernity. Only 104 pages but lucid and packed with information.

Thomas Oden. 1990*. *After Modernity... What? Agenda for Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan); 1992. *Two Worlds: Notes on the Death of Modernity in America and Russia*, (Illinois: IVP); 1995. *Requiem A Lament in Three Movements* (Nashville: Abingdon). Oden has returned from the theological wastelands of modernity to (re)discover evangelical orthodoxy. His recent works are as a result fresh and vital, with a keen sense of where the battle-lines are. Although I think Oden has too quickly pronounced modernity dead, the feast of his writings should not be missed!

P. Sampson, V. Samuel, and C. Sugden, eds 1994. *Faith and Modernity* (Oxford: Regnum Press). A useful collection of essays by evangelicals covering a variety of aspects of modernity and postmodernity.

Anthony Thiselton 1995. *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark). Thiselton responds to the serious challenge that the postmodern turn presents to Christian theology, and pays particular attention to understandings of the self and its relationship to society. This important book contains a particularly useful analysis and critique of Don Cupitt's theological development against the background of modernity and postmodernity (Part III).

B. Walsh and R. Middleton, 1995. *Truth is Stranger Than it Used to Be. Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (London: SPCK). A thorough and creative text from the authors of the very useful *The Transforming Vision*. I would, however, be cautious about their particular narrative proposal, with respect to the authority of Scripture.

Craig Bartholomew, "Post / Late? Modernity as the Context for Christian Scholarship Today," *Themelios* 22.2 (January 1997): 25-38.

David Wells 1994*. *God in the Wasteland. The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams.* (Leicester: IVP/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans). A superb and moving text which leaves one with a strong sense of the relevance of the sovereign God for our times.⁷³

© 1997 Craig Bartholomew. Reproduced by kind permission of the author.

Prepared for the Web in July 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/>

⁷³ See also the earlier companion volume: David F. Wells *No Place for the Truth Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).