

# POSTMODERNISM AND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

By WILLIAM D. DINGES

## *Introduction*

POSTMODERNISM IS NOT A COHERENT social theory.<sup>1</sup> Scholars dispute whether or not postmodernism is a form of *radical* modernism or something distinctively *postmodern*. Nor is the pace of postmodern cultural trends even or uniform in various national or social settings. While the successes and limitations of disembodied rationality, modernist-inspired liberalism and Marxist socialism are now apparent, those of postmodernist influence are not. Nor is the long-term impact of postmodernism on organizational structures, particularly religious ones, self-evident.<sup>2</sup> Reflection on the relationship between postmodernism and religious institutions remains, therefore, a speculative enterprise.

In order to side-step the problem of overgeneralizing, I will confine my reflections in this article to the relationship between postmodernism and *Christian* religious institutions in the United States. I offer no more than a sketch of affinities between general trends in certain of these institutions and broader currents associated with the postmodern cultural ethos.

Other contributors in this volume have delineated the various meanings of postmodernism. My use of the phrase 'religious institutions' refers to Christian religious identity that finds expression in churches, sects or denominations.

## *Religion in America*

It has long been noted that Americans are a hyper-religious people – even where this religious vitality is disparaged as 'a mile wide but an inch deep'. Churches and houses of worship are ubiquitous in American society, as are church-related institutions of higher education. Religious institutions operate social, charitable and health care agencies and are important 'mediating structures' in the American independent sector. These institutions have a long history of mobilizing individuals and communities on behalf of social and moral causes. Church membership and attendance rates have been consistently (and in many cases dramatically) higher in the United States than in most

European countries. Other indices of religious institutionalism (such as religious giving) also remain high among America's church-going population.<sup>3</sup>

However, in spite of the long-standing cultural visibility of religious organizations, religion in American society has also harboured an individualist temper inimical to institutionalism. This 'penchant for religious disestablishment' sees religious institutions as inherently alienating. It is an orientation that has roots in the Protestant theological tradition and in the post-Enlightenment adulation of self-interested individualism. It is embodied in American values of individual autonomy, self-reliance, rugged individualism, localism, ruralism and direct democracy. These have promoted religious populism and suspicion of authority (religious and otherwise) and encouraged demands for a dispersal of power in all spheres of American social and cultural life.<sup>4</sup>

The question of the status of religious institutions in contemporary American culture is, therefore, problematic. The culture-shaping power and authority of these institutions has declined over time. Where religion has influence, it is only on certain *types* of issues, and only in respect to *cultural* (symbols, moral appeal) rather than *structural* (politics, coercive networks) power. Personal religious beliefs consistently have greater influence in society than formal or 'institutional' teachings. And religiously motivated interest groups operate increasingly not in the name of or as representatives of their base community or institution, but on their own initiative.<sup>5</sup>

The demise in the status and influence of religious institutions in American society has been further accelerated by internal problems related to sexual and financial scandals, by ideological assault ('deconstruction') on the hierarchical bastions of male power ensconced in them, and by the growing disappointment of many individuals with institutions and organizations of *any* kind, ranging from political parties to labour unions to the bureaucratic apparatus of the welfare state. In addition, an increasing number of Americans are now growing up outside the social milieu of institutional religion.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most significant developments in American religious life over the past three decades has been the decline of the mainline denominations. During this same period, Roman Catholicism in the United States has experienced serious institutional instability and malaise, stemming from dramatic changes in the Catholic class structure and from the contested interpretation of the meaning and implementation of the reform initiatives of the Second Vatican Council.

However, while the more culturally normative religious traditions have declined, many of the conservative, traditionalist, and fundamentalist high-tension ones have achieved new visibility and strength. In addition, various 'new religious movements' of non-Western cultural derivation have also achieved an institutional presence, and grown with varying degrees of success.<sup>7</sup>

With respect to institutional religion *vis-à-vis* postmodernism, I will focus my remarks on four pertinent developments: the loss of institutional salience, the cultural uncoupling of spirituality from religion, the loss of institutional control of religious symbols, and the rise of transdenominationalism. I will then link these trends with aspects of the postmodern temper.

### *Loss of institutional salience*

As noted previously, one of the most conspicuous illustrations of the decline of religious institutions in American society over the last three decades is the demise of the mainline Protestant denominations (e.g. United Methodist Church, Episcopal Church, Disciples of Christ, Presbyterian Church [USA]). The reasons for this decline in both membership and vitality have been academic fodder for some time now and need not be reiterated *in toto* here – other than to mention that the decline has been linked with lack of cohesion, too much openness and diffusion, and the absence of a clear institutional identity.<sup>8</sup> Rather, I want to direct our attention to a key finding in a recent study of one such denomination – the Presbyterian Church (USA).

In *Vanishing boundaries*,<sup>9</sup> my colleague Dean Hoge and his collaborators report on their analysis of the decline in membership among members of the Presbyterian Church. *Vanishing boundaries* presents a fascinating profile of five hundred individuals who have left and stayed with the Presbyterian tradition.

The most interesting 'type' among this population of active and ex-Presbyterians are the Baby Boomer 'lay liberals'. These 'lay liberals' are generally affluent and well-educated. What is significant is the pervasiveness of their perception that it is no longer possible to believe in any compelling way that Presbyterianism in particular (or Christianity in general) is necessarily more true than any other religion. For 'lay liberals', religious truth is not seen primarily in 'objective' categories but in terms of what is subjectively plausible and agreeable. As a consequence, 'lay liberals' are reluctant to exhibit any activity construed as an imposition of religious beliefs. They are deeply ambivalent about religious authority. They reject institutional churches

as the sole source of ultimate authority. For many 'lay liberals', confidence in the existence of any ultimate objective religious truth has been undermined by a relativistic disposition, which has, in turn, led to an erosion of their institutional loyalty and identity.

It is noteworthy that 'lay liberals' are not anti-institutional *per se*; rather, religious institutions simply have little relevance for their religious identity. These institutions are peripheral to concerns with a broader and purely subjective spiritual quest. The pervasiveness of this decline in the salience of institutional religious identity has also been documented in other studies of the religious life of the American Baby Boomer population.<sup>10</sup>

### *The uncoupling of religion and spirituality*

As a logical expression of the waning salience of institutional religious identity, religion in contemporary America has also become more 'individualized' and 'privatized'. This trend, too, has been a staple of academic analysis for some time now.<sup>11</sup> It is generally construed as another aspect of 'secularization', viz., the ongoing social and cultural contraction of religion.

One key but relatively unexplored aspect of the privatization of religion is the uncoupling of spirituality from an institutional nexus. For many contemporary Christians, 'care of the soul' has become divorced from any meaningful or compelling connection to a disciplined community or to an organized historical tradition. Especially among the more socially affluent cultural experimenters, spirituality has assumed an eclectic and do-it-yourself quality. Spirituality has become an element in the culture of 'preference', a 'life-style' choice, another commodity fetish in a free-market economy of ever multiplying material and symbolic goods. Here the journey of the spiritual argonaut is a solitary one ('the hero' à la Joseph Campbell), not one of the collectivity and certainly not of the Church as a community. The spiritual quest is a purely individual task divorced from institutional loyalties and commitments and devoid of any form of hierarchical control or social inheritance.<sup>12</sup>

Along with this separation of spirituality from religious institutions and their historical development, and in the context of a cultural setting dominated by an ethos of therapy and narcissism, spirituality has also been readily conflated with psychology. As Philip Rieff argued in his classic work, religious symbols in such a milieu are readily transformed into therapeutic ones.<sup>13</sup> Faith is reduced to another mode of self-help therapy or a tool-kit mechanism for meeting psychological

needs related to individual affirmation, personal growth, personal fulfilment, or the perennial American quest to reinvent the self. One social predicate of this therapeutic ethos, especially in relationship to 'stages' and 'life-cycle' psychological modelling, is the presumption that the individual necessarily 'outgrows' the 'institutional phase' of their religious identity in the course of spiritual (and psychological) maturation.<sup>14</sup>

This uncoupling of spirituality and religion and the cultural privileging of therapeutic vocabulary explains, for example, much of the contemporary popularity of someone like Joseph Campbell. Campbell's notion of 'the power of myth' is Pelagian to the core. And his take-home message to Christians in general and Catholics in particular was that while their church can provide them as individuals with a poetic and imaginative symbolic imagery that brings them closer to the ultimate questions of life, this same church *qua* institution is devoid of any compelling social or spiritual relevance or necessity.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Loss of control over the meaning of symbols*

Closely related to the two previous trends is the inability of religious institutions (unlike many commercial corporate ones) to exercise normative control over the meaning and coherence of their rituals and symbols.

In the postmodern culture setting, aesthetic products have become commodity products; likewise, religious symbols are increasingly vulnerable to mass commodification. This development, in turn, eviscerates their social and sacral power while further trivializing their cultural significance.

In addition, many religious symbols have become dislodged from their historic connection with theology, with a significant ethic, with community commitment, or with distinct religious identity. Religious symbols have lost much of their power to differentiate. They have been co-opted by the insatiable commercial, entertainment and therapeutic demands of media- and image-driven post-industrial capitalist culture. Religious symbols now sell everything from pizza to IBM computers to Reebok tennis shoes, to the detriment of their religious significance.

A few hours' watching commercial television or a brief foray into the polysemous milieu of America's 'New Age' religiosity illustrates well some of the more egregious ways in which religious rituals and symbols have been extrapolated from their traditional historical, cultural and theological setting and brought to the service of commercial, therapeutic and self-expressive goals or ideologies radically divorced from these sources.<sup>16</sup>

This demise in the coherence of religious symbols and in their power to signify specific institutional parameters has contributed to the demise of religious group coherence. This is another cultural syndrome feeding the 'vanishing boundaries' phenomenon. This development is especially problematic for traditions like Roman Catholicism, in which symbols and ritual are structural prerequisites to the maintenance of a distinct religious identity.

### *Religious transdenominationalism*

Another cultural symptom of the weakened social coherence and significance of institutional religion is transdenominationalism. By transdenominationalism I mean a sense of the free-play interchangeability of religious identity. Denominations may still have some historical significance, but in modern society denominational identities are essentially interchangeable.

Transdenominationalism has theological legitimation in the ecumenical movement and in the social turmoil of the 1960s, which brought religious groups together in common cause, first in the Civil Rights and later in the anti-Vietnam War movement. More recently, transdenominationalism has again emerged in the political sphere, this time centring around coalition building by religio-political operatives on the religious right in the service of the contemporary 'culture war' battles.

Another variation on the transdenominational motif is the assertion that the relevant factor in religious identity today is not the denomination to which one belongs *per se*, but where one falls on the liberal/conservative spectrum.<sup>17</sup> Or, in another version, that contemporary faith is presented primarily in terms of moral language rather than creed or doctrine, and that moral orientation, not institutional affiliation, is the defining criterion of religious identity.<sup>18</sup>

The current growth of 'mega churches' and a social movement such as 'Promise Keepers', which draw support, participation and membership from across the denominational spectrum, are other examples of the transdenominational orientation – as are situations in which individuals attend a home church for one liturgy, but a different one for other spiritual needs (better preaching/homilies, more emotionally edifying prayer) not being met in their home church.

The presumption in all of the above developments is that differences in religious institutions today are essentially cosmetic or stylistic, not substantive in any theologically or spiritually meaningful way.

*Postmodernism and religious institutions*

'Hard' postmodernism asserts that there is no fixed truth, no 'meta-narratives', no 'objective' categories of right and wrong, be they the pretensions of rationalism, of the modern scientific project, of 'true' religion or *scriptura sola*. As Huston Smith has noted, postmodernity elevates ambiguity 'to the level of apotheosis'.<sup>19</sup> In a 'hard' post-modern *mentalité*, truth and falsehood are no more than invented categories to justify the dominance of one group over another. Truth is a 'story', a 'perspective' suited to social élites, a 'fictive' construct, a 'regime'. There is no inherent truth to be disclosed – anywhere. All texts, including religious ones, are marked by indeterminacy.<sup>20</sup>

Religious traditions are carriers of 'metanarratives'. They make claims that posit objective or absolutistic premises. They postulate hierarchies of truth and tie these assertions to institutional frames. Claims of this nature, however, along with their epistemological undergirdings, are difficult to sustain in the postmodern context. They are drained of confidence, even where the hegemonic pretensions of scientific empiricism are also called into question.

Collaterally, if there are no compelling truths but only radically relative ones, there are no compelling reasons (outside of pragmatic, utilitarian or stylistic ones) to belong to one religious institution as opposed to another – or to any for that matter. Thus, in its further subversion of boundaries, postmodernism contributes to the diminished public power, presence and witness of religion.

The postmodern cultural ethos is also implicated in the evisceration of religious symbols. It is a guiding assumption of 'hard' postmodernism that there can be no fixed ideas about the form and meaning of texts. This assumption extends to the world of symbol. In addition, as Foucault and others have asserted, symbols do not actually represent the specific but function, instead, as *systems* of discursive practice.

It is the nature of a symbol, of course, to have multivariant meanings and interpretations. Nor is the contemporary context the first time the Christian tradition has had to struggle with the issue of control over the meaning(s) of its core symbols – witness the early Gnostic conflicts. However, while symbols necessarily lend themselves to multiple meanings and interpretations – beyond what is officially signified by power élites – they are, nevertheless, rooted in specific cultural, historical and communal events that involve a shared interpretive dynamic and that make the grasp of common references related to revelation possible over the ages.

In the context of postmodernity, this specific cultural, historical and communal rootedness is cancelled or negated. The postmodern cultural

premise suggests that plasticity is unbounded. Postmodernism extols eclecticism, the assemblage of discordant parts, inconsistent meanings, disparate forms and images, competing realities, stylistic eclecticism and the mixing of codes. In this context, religious symbols are made *ipso facto* problematic. They have been tamed of any compelling evocativeness in the name of the sacred.

I contend that what I have briefly described in this paper (the loss of institutional salience, the uncoupling of spirituality from religion, the loss of control over religious symbols, and transdenominationalism) are not developments directly attributable to postmodernism; they are cultural currents that have emerged from the project of modernity itself. Postmodernism has merely exacerbated these trends.

It is not coincidental that the orientations I have described are most pronounced precisely among those most immediately exposed to the cultural ethos of modernity/postmodernity: the better-educated, affluent social élites. However, while weak institutional attachment and the proclivity to set one's own conditions for religious belonging is not the sole prerogative of this social class (consider 'popular religiosity' or 'folk religion'), few individuals are left unexposed to the radically relativizing cultural impact of modernist/postmodernist ideology that is conveyed through the educational, media and pop culture veins of contemporary society.

It should also be noted again that while mainline liberal and progressive churches have declined, many of those on the religious right have grown. This development too, however, is not a consequence of postmodernism *per se*; it is rather a residual reaction stemming from Christianity's troubled encounter with modernity since the Enlightenment.

Fundamentalism in its various modalities is intrinsically reactive. Its genesis lies in the crisis of modernity, not postmodernity. The radical relativism and incipient nihilism of 'hard' postmodernism has merely exacerbated this reaction – as have other political and social developments totally unrelated to postmodernism. There is, however, every reason to believe that certain types of religious institutions may thrive in the culture of postmodernity precisely because they are seen as an antidote to the radical relativism of an age that proclaims not only the death of 'God' but also of 'man', and that raises in even more dramatic fashion the spectre of nihilism, despair and catastrophe.

#### *The future for religious institutions in postmodern culture*

It is both sociologically and theologically naïve to think that religion endures without some form of institutional expression – any more than

we can conceive society itself without institutions, or as though there is anything of value that we do not perpetuate without some type of institutional expression. Religious institutions will endure in the culture of modernity/postmodernity not only because they are intrinsic to religion, but because they are maintained by the imperatives of social reality itself in reference to age cohort, social mobility, family patterns, ethnic ties, conformist cultural trends and so forth.

The question today is not how postmodernism will destroy religious institutions; it is how these institutions will be transformed by and strategically react to postmodernism. In the Christian context, this is but another version of the age-old 'Christ and culture' question. The particular problem today is that some of the values at the heart of modernity/postmodernity – openness, diffusion, pluralism, relativism, anti-hierarchy, anti-bureaucracy, small-scale organic co-ordination – do not generate strong institutional commitment.<sup>21</sup>

Institutions that creatively channel these new social and intellectual energies will survive; as, paradoxically, will those that do not. Such is the enduring church-sect dialectic in premodernity, modernity and postmodernity.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Douglas Kellner's essay on 'Postmodernism as social theory: some challenges and problems' in Mike Featherston (ed), *Theory, Culture and Society* vol 5, no 2-3 (June 1988), pp 239-269.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory Baum has noted that postmodernism has had little more than limited impact on the global dominance of capitalist modes of production, on the hegemony of transnational organizations, knowledge-based economies and on the massive bureaucratic and administrative infrastructures that dominate social life in most affluent industrial nations. See Gregory Baum, 'Theories of postmodernity', *The Ecumenist* vol 29, no 2 (Spring 1991), pp 4-12.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of these and other trends see Berry A. Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman, *One nation under God: religion in contemporary American society* (New York: Harmony Books, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> See Nathan O. Hatch, *The democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent contemporary study of these issues see N. J. Demerath III and Rhys H. Williams, *A bridging of faiths: religion and politics in a New England city* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American mainline religion: its changing shape and future* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), p 236.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Tim Miller (ed), *America's alternative religions* (State University of New York Press, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> See Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American mainline religion: its changing shape and future* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988); also Dean Hoge and David Roozen, *Understanding church growth and decline, 1950-1978* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979) and Dean M. Kelly, *Why conservative churches are growing* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

<sup>9</sup> Dean R. Hoge, Benton Johnson and Donald A. Luidens, *Vanishing boundaries: the religion of mainline Protestant baby boomers* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Wade Clark Roof, *A generation of seekers: the spiritual journeys of the baby boomer generation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> See Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the heart: individualism and commitment in American life* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> There is, of course, an important distinction between private and personal religion. All religious experience is in some sense personal and *ipso facto* relational. Private religion does not exist. For a discussion of this distinction see David Steindl-Rast, 'Campbell's spiritual challenge' in Lawrence Madden (ed), *The Joseph Campbell phenomenon: implications for the contemporary church* (Washington DC: The Pastoral Press, 1992), pp 111–112.

<sup>13</sup> Philip Rieff, *The triumph of the therapeutic: uses of faith after Freud* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

<sup>14</sup> In the moral realm, this individualist orientation leads to the rejection of any normative claims that are not derived from personal experience and choice. See Monika Hellwig's essay on 'Reciprocity with vision, values, community' in Cassian Yuhus CP (ed), *The Catholic Church and American culture* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1990).

<sup>15</sup> I have elaborated on this issue in an article on 'American Catholics and the Joseph Campbell phenomenon', *America* (20 February 1993), pp 12–19.

<sup>16</sup> This is especially conspicuous, for example, in reference to the current expropriation of Native American religious symbols and rituals by non-Indian denizens of the 'New Age' milieu.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Restructuring of American religion: society and faith since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> See Roof and McKinney, *American mainline religion*, esp. chapter VI, pp 186–228.

<sup>19</sup> Huston Smith, 'Postmodernist impact on the study of religion', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol 58 no 4 (1990), p 661.

<sup>20</sup> Wesley A. Kort, '"Religion and literature" in postmodernist contexts', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol 58, no 4 (Winter 1990), p 576.

<sup>21</sup> See David Ray Griffin (ed), *Spirituality and society: postmodern visions* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1988).