

# The Church in a postmodern culture

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THE CULTURE OF POSTMODERNISM – or postmodernity – represents the greatest challenge to Christian men and women in the coming years. It is a challenge so all-pervasive and so important that we have as yet barely noticed it, except perhaps for a certain malaise and a certain weariness of heart in much of the going about of our Christian business. We have not noticed it, nor even yet begun to develop the tools with which to grapple with it, because in postmodernity everything is changed. In this total turnabout of everything, everything in changing has stayed the same and remained familiar – indeed has become *more* familiar, even *too* familiar, so that boredom has become the first marker of our relation to everything that most concerns us. Everything enduring has become replaceable, disposable: which means we have become disposable to ourselves. Just what I mean by this, I intend to make clear in what follows. Most important of all, in postmodernity our relationship to God changes in ways so subtle and yet profound that we barely notice them. Precisely those things we take as most familiar to us in the matter of God have undergone the most hidden changes. As I shall explain in greater detail, our very over-familiarity with what or who we take God to be has estranged our hope of knowing God. The proper name of this hope is faith, and yet faith itself has become plastic to us, and a mere matter of the will.

And yet the press have recently delighted in a persistent ringing of the death-knell of postmodernism. A recent review in the *Times Literary Supplement* declared ‘all quiet on the postmodern front’. The author, Arthur Marwick, goes on to describe what he understands to be the salient features of a postmodernism which is now a largely spent force: ‘many aspects of postmodernist theory had a liberating feel about them: the insistence on plurality and difference, the abandonment of “grand narratives”, of which, of course, traditional Marxism was the grandest; the recognition of the insecurities of language and the lack of a correspondence between language and reality, if not the whole-hog position of everything being constructed within language’.<sup>1</sup> The *Sunday Telegraph* in particular has been publishing in its letters pages

sniggeringly school-childish reports of postmodernism's demise, and an anti-theoretical tendency is re-emerging in many of our best-known universities, especially their English departments, so recently the finest showcases of everything that was theoretically French.

### *Familiarity and incredulity*

Two things should strike us hard in the face from all of this. First, that Marwick, in rightly identifying postmodern theory as coming after, and to a certain extent 'replacing' (or rather displacing), Marxism, interestingly does not argue that God, or Christianity, are the grandest narratives of all (which, as far as grand narratives go, they really ought to be); and second, that such often-repeated announcements of the wake suggests the corpse is very far from cold. If the last two decades have been a high-water mark of a certain kind of theoretical celebration of postmodernism, and that theoretical impulse is finished, it is only because postmodernity (an economic rather than theoretical concern), as the underlying condition that allowed the theoretical discussion of the postmodern to appear at all, has only just got going in earnest. All quiet on the postmodern front means: we are all now fully familiar with living in postmodernity.

So just what is postmodernity? Perhaps the most repeated definition of postmodernity is that it is the 'end of all grand narratives'. This, although it encapsulates something of postmodernity, is not quite accurate. The quotation is a reference to Jean-François Lyotard's foundational work, *La condition postmoderne*, but is in fact a misquotation. Lyotard actually calls the postmodern condition 'a crisis of narratives' and 'incredulity towards metanarratives'.<sup>2</sup> Metanarratives are not themselves stories or narratives as such, but rather those things which make my own self-narrating possible: they allow me to tell my story. This making-possible, which is a standing-over that allows something else to occur, is, if you like, what a grand narrative or metanarrative is supposed to do. These grand narratives over-arch, and so provide a span, from me to everything I find beyond me. In my telling of my story, they allow me to include you in the story that I am. They produce an 'us', or rather, more importantly, they are what is already at work that enables me always to find myself together-with-you, always already having been alongside you, whenever I start narrating and accounting for myself.

The word *you* here is a marker for all kinds of 'you' – from my neighbour, to my employer, or the government of a country, or a political ideology, or a religion, or even God. The use of the word

narrative, rather than value, or idea, simply marks the way that language has come to the fore in our taking account of the way we account for ourselves (as Marwick notes, above). The term narrative is a reference to the political, taken in the widest sense. In western philosophy since Plato, what lies behind and so makes possible all other things in the widest sense has been God, or the divine, or all the varying figures for the divine. The 'idea of the good', which is how we translate Plato's Greek phrase, is the idea of ideas, the idea that makes all other ideas possible. Prior to the idea of the good becoming a moral formulation is its meaning as 'what makes anything possible at all'. It is for this reason that it belongs to the divine, and so is supposed to be good and to bring blessing in the Greek tradition, an affirmation of existence – if you like, the priority of being. By the time Christianity took up the notion of the 'idea of the good' this connection between making-possible and moral rightness was already firmly established.

### *Pluralism and fragmentation*

Why are we suddenly with the ancient Greeks when we are supposed to be discussing the most momentary, the avant-garde, the postmodern? What I have wanted to indicate in the sketchiest of ways (given the space available to me) is that what underlies Lyotard's definition of postmodernity is something as old as thinking itself. Postmodernity is not so new that it re-orders all previous thought (which is what many of its theorists have attempted to suggest). In much the same way, before the recent crash in stock-values that ended the whole pretension, we were being told the 'new' (and thoroughly postmodern) economy of the internet and information technology behaved according to economic laws we had never seen before. Significantly, it is only because this idea had already taken hold (as a kind of grand narrative) – that the most up-to-date and avant-garde behaved according to different laws than anything which had preceded it – that it became possible for those stock values to reach the stupendous levels of over-inflated value that they did.

In suggesting that the postmodern condition is one of crisis of narratives, Lyotard does not mean that narrative itself – ideas, values, call them what you like – has come to an end in our giving account of ourselves. Rather the crisis is in the singularity of narrative and its ability to over-arch. In fact, any one of a whole range of narratives now accounts for each one of us. Because the spheres in which we move appear to be fragmenting, so each one of us can be explained, but not exhaustively, by religion, state, employment, history, and so forth. Even

within the same street or workplace just for one instance, black history and European history explain two neighbours differently. Women have uncovered histories separate from but related to those of men. Narratives no longer produce a unitary 'us'. This in turn proffers the illusion that we can be who we want to be. The extraordinary fragmentedness of contemporary life means that we can slide between accounting narratives and claim and lose each of them either in succession, or according to where we go, or who we are with. It seems that I can choose the 'us' that is going to include and explain me. Who I am, and how I narrate myself, have come apart, apparently.

Narrative is in crisis because it no longer explains exhaustively. There is not one idea of ideas, not one thing lying behind that makes all things possible. Meaning itself has appeared to become plastic, which means, I appear to be plastic to myself. I'll be who I want to be. However, Lyotard also speaks of 'incredulity towards'. If, as I have already suggested, narrative has not come to an end, but rather fragmented into a multitude, 'incredulity towards' suggests our relation to the bewildering fragmentation of possible self-explanations that lie around in contemporary culture. Everything from the grandeur of a religion to my choice in purchasing a particular perfume or brand of chocolate can 'say something about who you are' (to quote a recent advertisement). 'Incredulity towards' is a way of naming the extraordinary experience of stepping back, and choosing, that appears to characterize our daily life. As a leader in *The Tablet* put it a few months ago, we live in a supermarket society, where we have before us a bewildering range of lifestyle choices. This 'having before us' produces in us the sense of our constantly stepping out to choose this or that from a free, prior, space which I inhabit alone. There is no 'us' in this space – I alone (and so prior to any 'us') must choose, and commit myself to the choices to be made. Who am I before I choose?

### ***Freedom and free-will***

This is the experience of freedom and free-will in postmodernity. It also explains the euphoric and melancholic moods of contemporary culture. Euphoria and melancholia are two of the lightest of moods, and the most fleeting. Having purchased the best of all possible washing-machines, I may for a moment both fizz with the excitement of having done so, and mourn over the loss of the power to exercise more choice in purchasing. It is only at the point of purchase that the true postmodern delight of the purchase is realized. Built-in obsolescence means that, by the time my washing-machine is got home, it is over,

finished, no longer the signifier for the pure ecstatic possibility which having the power to purchase and holding back from doing so gives me. Purchasing expresses my power economically over all towards whom, and in whose face, I am normally most powerless. It is a point of over-arching; it enables me to touch *back* the advertisers who constantly touch me with the stimulus to desire what it is they have to sell. Touch back and command – that this purchase be mine and so I can possess and be all that it promises too.

For Christians, above all this choice appears to be exercisable towards God. Now any of us can be incredulous towards God – indeed a major force in the origins of postmodernity has been the ability to take up this stance towards God. Nietzsche's declaration 'God is dead' lies at the basis of the postmodern in ways that have only barely been understood. It is not for nothing that, in the article I quoted above, Marxism and not God was taken to be a grand narrative worth quibbling over. God, above all, is dead. The question that remains to be asked is: just who is the God who has been declared to be dead? It is this question, more than any other, that will help Christians to respond to postmodernity.

### *Capital and commodity*

Before I go further, however, I would like to make one assertion for which I am not going to be able to argue more deeply, because of constraints of space. You will have to take my word for it. Postmodernity is only possible, and actually *exists at all* only in virtue of late capitalism. The link I made earlier with two of the fundamental determining moods of postmodernity, euphoria and melancholia, and the distribution of power in Western society as a distribution mediated through purchasing, and more specifically, the concentration of economic exchange, is not accidental. If the precursors of theoretical postmodernism have resolutely been Marxist, this is in no small part due to the fact that Marxism still explains with powerful theoretical acuity the fundamental distribution of power and (in)equality in a market system that is now global.<sup>3</sup> More than ever, postmodernity illustrates Marx's central claim that in the course of the constant global self-enthronement of the workings of capital, every social relation is converted into a commodity value. Understood like this, in late capitalism even God will come to have a price, and God will become a value.

The apparent collapse of the validity of Marxist claims with the collapse of the Soviet Union has, however, appeared to obviate any

serious further questioning of capitalism's status. This collapse provided a powerful impetus to the understanding of the market as both ubiquitous and inevitable, and moreover, the best *and only actual* solution to the organization of human activity. The market is now so much a grand narrative that its truth is no longer narrated – it is simply accepted as self-evident, something to be taken for granted. The market is also understood as the best possible guarantor of human freedom, with its inalienable association with democracy. Freedom and the market are the same – a proposition the truth of which is now actively being tested (and often enough found wanting) by millions in the former eastern bloc. However, I am less concerned here with the correctness of this analysis (I have asked you to take it on faith) than with its consequences. In postmodernity the one thing that is always taken for granted and allowed to reign is the market – indeed, to answer my earlier question about what postmodernity is, is simply to say that postmodernity is the condition within which late capitalism occurs, and nothing else. Late capitalism means: everything can become a saleable thing, everything is potentially commodifiable.

To use the language of Naomi Klein, everything can and does become a brand, whose success or failure then depends on that brand's ability to compete alongside other brands. *Everything* can be taken as an exchangeable thing. The relations surrounding the exchange and sale of the thing thereby become infinitely complex and sophisticated for the sake of the system of exchange itself.

### ***Faith and fundamentalism***

How does God become a brand? Let me give just one example. Christians have become, understandably, increasingly disturbed by the fragmentation of culture that postmodernity represents, and we have not always stood idly by. We have, however, failed to notice that, even while remaining faithfully Christian, it is *our own* meaning that has been fragmented along with everything else. I said earlier that *not only* the narrative of Christianity explains me, but now also my employment in the modern British University system, my history as a white European, my gender configuration with regard to equality and so on *ad infinitum*. I am no longer self-constituting, but am mediated and distributed by a complex web of possibilities of narration whose interlockedness is far less clear than it would have been even ten years ago, let alone fifty.

One possible Christian response to this has sometimes been to resort to fundamentalism, though there are many others. Fundamentalism,

however, will serve well to illustrate what I mean. Let us say, for the sake of argument, I become an ecclesial fundamentalist, as a way of resolving for myself the question of postmodernity and the fragmentation of culture. The Church is the sole source of truth (I hear myself saying), which seems a fair enough thing to believe. Now I find myself arguing that the pope's infallibility should be strengthened, so that some consistency and clarity can be gained with respect to doctrine, morals and so forth. Surely strengthening the Church in this way will overcome the fragmentation of ecclesial life, and provide a standard, a beacon for society as a whole? Surely this will sort out all the disobedience of wilful thinkers who seem to oppose the Church? The argument I reproduce here is a caricature, I accept, and can have a variety of expressions – biblical fundamentalism, liberal fundamentalism, and so forth: please bear with me. Each form of fundamentalism can adduce to itself an effective narrative in its self-support, and appear to strengthen the very basis for the thing under attack – the Christian faith.

Except it does nothing of the sort, for in each case the token of the fundamentalism – the pope, the Bible, freedom of conscience – whatever it is, becomes the headline for a brand. God is branded – papal brand, biblical brand, liberal brand, and so on. Moreover (and here's the rub) the truth of each thing – the papacy, the Bible, freedom with regard to God, is destroyed in its history for the sake of a position orientated to a question of power that appears *now, here* to be exercised. The complex history of the papacy, unfolding over centuries and in delicate and careful balance and debate with local churches and the history of the Church itself, as the safeguarding Petrine office in the Church, *this whole delicate history* is instrumentalized to a present need. Similarly, the truth of the Bible, in its complex of allegorical, anagogical, literal, metaphorical, parabolic, modes of truth is flattened out to a simple binary of absolute, singular, truth and falsity. Every sentence within it is detachable and reproducible out of context for the sake of securing an answer that is needed *now*. And so on. The very things we Christians have been given to treasure, to love and to harbour in care (which form us as Christians in the harbouring and treasuring, and shape us for the sake of what is God-given in them) are turned into things – dead things – for mere exchange and acquisition of power.

The fundamental insight of the biblical nation of Israel into the essence of God, an insight delivered in faith and out of which all Trinitarian theology flows, is that God is unknown in God's self except to God, and is a mystery for human beings. When this mystery is

converted into a thing, an object, both the God converted and the thing into which God is converted appear as dead – this founding insight of Christian faith is therefore precisely what is most in peril, in the danger I named at the beginning of this discussion.

When God is branded, both God and the ones selling the brand are dead. And yet the only way in which God could be branded would be for us Christian people to take up the things of our faith – the sacraments, the tradition of prayer, the texts of sacred scripture – and convert them into things, plastic commodities to be traded and juggled in response to the fragmentation of our society.

That God might be dead, in other words that God might not exist, however, is perhaps one of the most fruitful possibilities of postmodernity. If I say that God does not exist, I find myself immediately in good company, and with perhaps surprising results. Amongst my friends I find saints and philosophers, poets and thinkers, Christian and otherwise. That God might not exist seems to be a matter more concerned with existence than with God. When everything (including human beings) exist as things, and above all commodifiable things, things whose value can be traded, then to have amongst us a non-thing, something beyond commodifiability, will begin to be a way back into who God is, and a way back into the world in which we have forgotten how to dwell. How have human beings become things? You do not have to be bought and sold to be involved in trading: you can be the one buying and selling, and believe that is all there is for you to do. If your life is determined out of thingliness, commodities, first and foremost you will have made of yourself a commodity.

The freedom of postmodernity is an illusion. To take the example from the *Tablet* leader I cited earlier, there is no-one lying prior to the acts of choice in postmodernity, no-one who says, 'I will choose this lifestyle and not that, this product and not that.' Rather, as every advertisement presupposes and tantalizes us in its very saying, *in the choosing, I become what I stretch out my hand towards*. Real choice is not to choose between Heinz and Campbells baked beans, but to know that I might need neither; and in that I need beans at all, to know why I need them. The illusion of freedom we all have is based upon complex deceptions – not deceptions that have been worked upon us by evil deceivers – devils in ad-men's (and women's) suits – but rather our own self-deception of having forgotten what freedom is at all, that freedom from desire is not the same as freedom to choose between desires or freedom for desiring. We have forgotten that just being who I want to be is not the same as growing into who it is I am called to be.



*Resistance and re-entry*

At the beginning I noted how much we have accommodated ourselves to postmodernity, how familiar it has become (how its death is now so easy to announce – postmodernity is so *over* in its familiarity), and yet this very familiarity means it has become a self-evidence. A self-evidence is something which I take for granted. I no longer have to think about what it is, I know already, in advance of it, so that in coming across every instance of it, its meaning is immediately accessible to me.

When something can be taken so much as a self-evidence that I no longer think about it, then insofar as I do not think about it, I am thought by it, it determines me for what and who I am. The disquiet we all face, the weariness and boredom we experience in the face of postmodernity is not the mark of its failure to explain us and think us through, but rather the opposite. Postmodernity is extraordinarily successful in mediating the entire world of experience and knowledge to us through its means of dissemination, through the thingliness and commodity-like brandedness of all things.

In postmodernity, everything – even God – is now too familiar to us, too accessible. Is there a resistance to this? There is much talk in contemporary theology of resisting the postmodern. As I hope I have shown already, much of this resistance – precisely because we are already so conditioned by postmodernity – already carries with it all sorts of dangers. What does resistance really mean? It is not resistance that is required, but rather, a re-entering into the very things that have become too familiar to us. A re-entering into scripture, the sacraments and the life of the Church, the life of Christ, the life of prayer, with simplicity and with an openness to what we do *not* know already, what is *not* familiar to us. A re-entering into the call to be ‘othered’ into God, to enter into holiness. As the pope recently reminded us, the whole hierarchical structure of the Church, to which we might add the texts of sacred scripture and the practice and love of the sacraments, is ordered to the holiness of the people of God – to making us holy. It is not an end in itself, or a thing (which means I can never be a *holy* ecclesial fundamentalist, even if I quote the pope). What distances you and me from holiness? When this becomes clear, a less familiar journey can begin.

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## NOTES

1 A. Marwick, 'All quiet on the postmodern front' in the *Times Literary Supplement* 23 (February 2001), p 13.

2 J.-F. Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979), p 7. Translated as *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge* by G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). See pp xxiii and xxiv.

3 An extraordinarily powerful, even if still controversial, defence and explanation of this position has been made in the recent book by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, entitled *Empire* (Harvard, Massachusetts, 2000). See also the equally influential book by Naomi Klein, *No logo* (London: HarperCollins, 2000).