

CHRISTIANS IN A CULTURE OF SUSPICION: REFLECTIONS ON LIVING FAITHFULLY IN A POSTMODERN AGE

I. Signs of Our Time

“Trust Looms as Casualty of a Truth Twisting Era” shouts a newspaper headline one day prior to the November 3, 2020, United States election.¹ The author, Peter Baker, observes: “The nightmarish scenario of widespread doubt and denial of the legitimacy of the election would cap a period in American history when truth itself has seemed at stake.” Baker continues: “Indeed the very idea of truth is increasingly a fungible commodity in a political environment that seems to reward the loudest voices, not the most honest.” Truth as a fungible commodity. Truth as a wax nose anyone can bend any way they like.

Conservative columnist Bret Stephens argues that in recent years, the main damage has been the corrosion of social trust—“the most important element in any successful society.”² In contrast, Stephens quotes former U. S. Secretary of State George Shultz who argues: “Trust is the coin of the realm. When trust was in the room, whatever room that was—the family room, the schoolroom, the locker room, the office room, the government room or the military room—good things happened. Everything else is details.”³ Stephens observes that Donald Trump “has detonated a bomb under the epistemological foundations of a civilization that is increasingly unable to distinguish between facts and falsehoods, evidence and fantasy.”⁴ The common mantra now is: “That which you can get away with, is true.” Is it an accident that this is a succinct re-statement of postmodern philosopher Richard Rorty’s summary of postmodern epistemology, namely, that truth is “what our peers, *ceteris paribus* [all other things equal] will let us get away with saying”?⁵

But suspicion of claims to truth is not limited to politics. Two different news outlets give conflicting reports on whether the new coronavirus vaccine is effective and safe. Both cite medical professionals to support their claims. You thought the news was supposed to be fair and reliable, and yet there seems to be much evidence of bias and partiality. Which news sources can we trust to tell us the truth? And what about science? The chief scientist at the United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is fired by a political appointee for requiring new employees to sign an integrity statement in which they promise not to alter the results of scientific research for political purposes.⁶ Can we trust scientists to tell us the truth?

Fake news? Alternative facts? Competing truth claims? Who or what can we trust? What is true? Indeed, is anything true?

¹ “Trust Looms as Casualty of a Truth Twisting Era,” *The New York Times* (Nov. 2, 2020), 1.

² “Donald Trump and the Damage Done,” *The New York Times* (Dec. 15, 2020), A26.

³ Shultz’s claims about the importance of trust are verified by research that shows that in high-trust countries people tend to flourish, while in low-trust countries they do not. For example, research done by the Pew Research Center show a positive correlation between high social trust and low crime and corruption; see www.pewresearch.org/global/2008/04/15/where-trust-is-high-crime-and-corruption-are-low

⁴ “Donald Trump and the Damage Done,” *The New York Times* (Dec. 15, 2020), A26.

⁵ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 176.

⁶ “President’s Bid to Undermine Science Agency,” *The New York Times* (Oct. 28, 2020), 1.

Such are the tumultuous times in which we live. Suspicion seems to cast a long shadow on everything we claim to know these days. Pilate's question to Jesus lingers long: "What is truth?" (John 18:38). Is that an honest question in a legitimate search for what is really real? Or is it a cynical comment in a sardonic attempt to find a phantom truth that does not really exist?

What does this mean for the church? How do we, followers of Jesus, navigate this world of suspicion and mistrust? How do we properly interpret the Bible, understand with insight our own traditions, evaluate the reliability of our reasoning, or honestly evaluate the veracity of our own experiences?⁷ All of these questions prompt a closer look at what is called postmodernism.

II. Postmodernism: An Overview

What exactly is postmodernism? Answering this question presumes some understanding of modernism, so first a (very) brief discussion of the era that postmodernism is striving to eclipse.⁸ What constitutes the "modern period in history" is notoriously difficult to pin down,⁹ with various proposed beginning and ending dates, but for our purposes here, it runs roughly from 1492 (Columbus) to 1974 (Watergate)—from foundations laid in the Renaissance and the Reformation to the major construction project of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Enlightenment to an apogee in twentieth-century global capitalism.¹⁰ The creators of modernism include Francis Bacon, Jeremy Bentham, Rene Descartes, Galileo Galilei, Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Thomas Jefferson, Immanuel Kant, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz, John Locke, Isaac Newton, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Adam Smith, Baruch Spinoza, and Voltaire. Its goals are objective science, universal morality and law, autonomous art, free-market economics, non-autocratic politics, and a secular culture liberated from all religion. Its major theme is human autonomy: that the human would be self (*autos*) legislating (*nomos*) or a law unto himself.¹¹ Never-ending progress is a key mark of modernism.¹²

⁷ These four sources of theology—Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience—constitute what is called the Wesleyan quadrilateral, named after John Wesley. Like most Protestants, we in the Dutch Reformed tradition rely especially on the Bible as a source of knowledge about God and the human condition, e.g., articles 3–7 of the Belgic Confession. But Holy Scripture does not interpret itself; we finite and fallible humans must do the hard work of interpreting Scripture; and, if we are honest, we must admit that tradition, reason, and experience shape our readings.

⁸ There is an important distinction to be made between postmodernism as an intellectual movement and postmodernity as a cultural phenomenon. Jamie Smith makes this point especially well: "Derrida's deconstruction and Foucault's genealogy of power are examples of postmodernism; adolescent absorption in virtual reality and the triumph of the mall as temple are examples of postmodernity. Although there is a trickle-down effect between philosophical currents of postmodernism and cultural phenomena related to postmodernity, much that is associated with cultural postmodernity is, in fact, the fruit of modernity. In other words, cultural phenomena tend to not (yet?) reflect the radical implications of postmodernism." See James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 20.

⁹ This discussion of the history of modernism focuses on Europe and North America. Other cultures have their own histories, with their own integrity, though they often intersect in various ways with this history.

¹⁰ For more on the history of modernity (and postmodernity), see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990) and Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹¹ The "himself" here is intentional, since this history is his-story, the story of a sexist and patriarchal culture usually told from that point of view. For more on this, see, for example, Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

¹² See, for example, Bob Goudzwaard, *Capitalism and Progress: A Diagnosis of Western Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

According to its proponents, the distinguishing traits of modernism include industrialization, urbanization, the growth of capitalism, the rise of the nation state, the expansion of representative democracies, the development of natural science, and the increasing efficacy of technology. According to its opponents, the distinguishing traits are the European colonization of the non-European world, pervasive social injustices such as racism and sexism, massive global inequities, the hegemony of church over state, blind faith in technology, and the increasing ecological degradation of our home planet. The foundational beliefs of modernism include ontological realism, epistemological objectivism, anthropocentric individualism, and unfettered capitalism. In other words, we believe we can know an objectively real world with great certainty via the scientific method so that by using increasingly powerful technology in a world of infinite resources, we can live freely as individuals.

While modernism came to dominate the intellectual, socioeconomic, and political worlds of Europe and North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, it was not without its critics—the most famous being Karl Marx, Friederich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud. These “masters of suspicion,” as philosopher Paul Ricoeur famously named them,¹³ are the precursors of postmodernism, each in their own way calling into question various assumptions of modernity.

For Karl Marx, societies and their economies are structured to privilege some and oppress others. The wealthy rule by virtue of the power their wealth affords to organize society and form culture to their advantage. Indeed, Marx explains knowledge in terms of socio-economic class. Whoever has money defines what is true. But this results in grave injustices. The upshot is that we should be suspicious of truth claims and how they are used to justify the socio-economic-political status quo, since hidden behind claims to truth are various forms of injustice.

Nietzsche’s fundamental claim is that knowledge can be explained in terms of power. Whoever wields power defines what is true, always to their advantage. Power in its many forms—economic (the market), social (class status), religious (priestly or pastoral authority)—drives every society. And though some people work hard to hide their power plays, not only from others but from themselves, other people unashamedly celebrate their use of power. The upshot is that we should be suspicious of any and all truth claims because they are used to keep us under the control of those in power.

The third member of Ricoeur’s triad of “masters of suspicion,” Sigmund Freud, claims that knowledge can be explained by examining the psychological roots and developmental dynamics of a person’s life. While we think we are rational beings who make decisions based on reason, in reality, we are driven by subterranean forces beyond our ken—desires beneath our conscious awareness that come to the surface only rarely, perhaps with the help of a trained psychotherapist. The upshot is we should be suspicious of truth claims because, while we believe such claims correspond to the world in which we live, they all too often veil hidden wounds and unacknowledged psychological needs.

In sum, these critics call into question some of the assumptions of modernism and lay the groundwork for the postmodern thinkers who follow. The most well-known (famous or infamous, depending on your perspective) of these postmodern voices are Jacques Derrida, Michel

¹³ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 32.

Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Richard Rorty. Their claims will be explored in more detail in the next section, but here, in brief, are their main ideas.

Derrida is the *enfant terrible* among the French philosophers who have attempted to deconstruct the taken-for-granted constructions of modernism. Known as the father of deconstructionism, Derrida's most famous claim is "There is nothing outside the text." With this claim—often misunderstood—Derrida means to say that language, and hence the interpretation of language, is an inescapable feature of being human. Smith puts it well: "When Derrida claims that there is nothing outside the text, he means there is no reality that is not always already interpreted through the mediating lens of language. Textuality, for Derrida, is linked to interpretation."¹⁴ Thus, to say that there is nothing outside the text does not mean "that everything is a book, or that we live within a giant, all-encompassing book, but rather that everything must be interpreted in order to be experienced."¹⁵ We naively think we simply read a text, when in fact we interpret any and every text, usually without realizing what we are doing and unaware of our assumptions in reading and interpreting. Indeed, this is true for any experience, not just the reading of texts. Our knowledge of the world is always mediated by our previous experience, so all knowledge involves interpretation.

Foucault's most well-known aphorism, following the lead of Nietzsche, is that "power is knowledge." He does not mean that power and knowledge are identical, but that what counts as knowledge is not, contrary to the claim of modernism, neutrally determined. There is no human knowledge not shaped by power relationships. Smith succinctly states Foucault's main claim: "At the root of our most cherished and central institutions—hospitals, schools, businesses, and, yes, prisons—is a network of power relations. The same is true of our most celebrated ideals; at root, Foucault claims, knowledge and justice reduce to power."¹⁶ Foucault the epistemological genealogist traces the lineage of what we call truth back to its secret prejudices. Or, to use an archeological metaphor, Foucault "digs beneath the surface of what goes around as objective truth to show the machinations of power at work below the surface."¹⁷ Thus, modernism's claims to scientific objectivity are false, our commonly accepted beliefs in moral truth are fabricated, and the Enlightenment belief in perpetual progress is a fiction.

Lyotard is most famous for his statement that postmodernism is "incredulity toward metanarratives."¹⁸ The French term translated "metanarratives" is *gran recites*, or literally "big stories." In other words, postmodernism has to do with suspicion about the overarching narratives we tell about ourselves and the world. So "metanarrative" means "meganarrative"—the stories that make grand claims about the whole world, hence are totalizing in the scope of their claims. However, Lyotard means more than this. The most important identifying trait of metanarratives is that they claim to legitimate themselves by appeal to universal reason. Smith makes this point especially clear:

What is at stake for Lyotard is not the scope of these narratives but the nature of the claims they make. Put another way, the problem isn't the stories they tell but the way they tell them (and to a degree, why they tell them). For Lyotard metanarratives ... are stories that not only tell a grand story (since even premodern and tribal stories do this)

¹⁴ James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 39.

¹⁵ Smith, *Who's Afraid*, 39.

¹⁶ Smith, *Who's Afraid*, 85.

¹⁷ Smith, *Who's Afraid*, 86.

¹⁸ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

but also claim to be able to legitimate the story's claim by an appeal to universal reason.¹⁹

In other words, the contrast for Lyotard is not between big stories and little stories, but between stories that appeal to supposedly universal and autonomous reason and stories that do not. His point is that many of the projects of modernism, while claiming to be free of all narrative, themselves rely on narrative to legitimate their claims to truth. Appeal to founding stories is inescapable, so we should be suspicious of any endeavor—science or philosophy, for example—that does not acknowledge its dependence on some particular story.

Rorty is famous for his assertion, mentioned above, that truth is “what our peers, *ceteris paribus*, will let us get away with saying.” To support this claim, Rorty levels a critique of the correspondence theory of truth, i.e., the belief that a statement is true if and only if what it claims corresponds to reality. For example, the claim “There is a pine tree in the yard” is true if and only if there is, in fact, a pine tree in the yard. According to Rorty, the mind is a modern invention of Descartes and Locke and thus human knowledge is not a collection of representations in our mind of the outside world. Knowledge has to do with “the social justification of belief, and thus, we have no need to view it as accuracy of representation.”²⁰ We are persons without minds; hence, there is no human mind that functions as the mirror of nature, with truth being the accuracy of such mirroring. Truth is not contact with reality but merely “what it is good for us to believe.”²¹ Truth is redefined as socially warranted assertability. Truth is simply what your friends will let you get away with saying.

In sum, all of these postmodern thinkers criticize the epistemology of modernism. There is no such thing as “objective” truth. All claims to truth are necessarily subjective and from some perspective. Furthermore, truth claims are camouflaged attempts to exert power over others. It is easy to see why postmodernism fosters a culture where people are suspicious of claims to truth, believing they are really desires, ambitions, and projections masquerading as truth, hidden even to those who make such claims.

III. Postmodernism: A Deeper Dive

Note: Portions of sections III and IV are drawn from “Yearning for Home: The Christian Doctrine of Creation in a Postmodern Age,” by Steven Bouma-Prediger, published in Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought, edited by Merold Westphal; they are used with permission from the publisher.

Given this background summary, let's dive a bit deeper, especially by focusing on ideas about knowledge and truth (epistemology) and views of what it means to be human (anthropology). There are two common elements of postmodernism: epistemological constructivism and psycho-social anomie.

A. Epistemological Constructivism and the Suspicion of Truth

The first common belief is that all truth claims or claims about reality are constructions of the human mind. To use the expression made popular by sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas

¹⁹ Smith, *Who's Afraid*, 64-65.

²⁰ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 170.

²¹ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 176.

Luckmann, reality is “a social construction.”²² Or, to quote Trudy the Bag Lady in *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, reality is “a collective hunch.”²³ All knowledge comes from and is inevitably shaped by the particular perspective(s) of the knowers.²⁴ This perspectivism, in the minds of many, necessarily leads to a strong version of epistemic relativism, illustrated in Rorty’s claim that “truth is what our peers will let us get away with saying.” Since all claims to truth are social constructions, truth is simply an honorific term used to describe our best guess at the way things are, or, in Rorty’s more pragmatist reading, simply a term to describe what works.²⁵

Related to this epistemological constructivism is a pervasive suspicion that all claims to truth—indeed all narratives—are nothing more than disguised attempts to control and dominate other people. Perhaps influenced by Marx, Nietzsche, and/or Freud, or, more likely, driven to suspicion by devious advertising, corrupt politics, and scandalous religion, many people today distrust all theories, stories, worldviews—at least insofar as they imply any universal claim to truth—as simply the will to power of a particular, historically situated person, community, or institution.

This hermeneutics of suspicion, as hinted at above, is powerfully presented by Friedrich Nietzsche. For example, in his assertion that “linguistic legislation” properly describes our “enigmatic urge for truth,” Nietzsche claims that truth is merely that which conforms to conventions, and thus to be truthful is simply to use the customary metaphors. Given that language cannot adequately express reality, for Nietzsche, truth is “a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to people.” Hence, “truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are,” so to be truthful necessarily involves “the obligation to lie according to fixed conventions.” Even without explicit agreement with Nietzsche’s more famous claims about the human will to power, suspicion of seemingly firm customs is called for.²⁶

This Nietzschean suspicion can be found in the more recent work of Michel Foucault. Labeled a genealogist because he digs to disclose the buried roots in the tree of knowledge, Foucault relentlessly displays “the endlessly repeated play of dominations” in the history of the West, arguing that “humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from

²² Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966).

²³ Jane Wagner, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 18.

²⁴ This has been a truism for the German hermeneutical tradition for some time. See, for example, Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), § 32, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975), second part, § 2. For an insightful discussion of these issues, see Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

²⁵ Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), chap. 9.

²⁶ See Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie,” in *Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1982), 44-47. For a lucid explanation of the kind of postmodern suspicion informed by Nietzsche’s understanding of the will to power, see Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), chaps. 35-36.

domination to domination.”²⁷ Whether in sexual mores, the penal system, or the organization of knowledge, the various social practices of modern Western civilization are nothing more than the will to power. Put in other terms, each society has its “regime of truth” which legitimates certain beliefs and practices, and in so doing inevitably sanctions the domination of those on the margins.²⁸ Hence, for Foucault, “everything is dangerous.”²⁹ Anything can be (mis)used to do violence to the other. And so, to borrow the language of Merold Westphal, to a hermeneutics of finitude must be added a hermeneutics of faultedness, in which sin becomes an epistemological category.³⁰ Our claims to truth are not only shaped by our perspectives but also distorted by our sin. Hence, we have a double rationale for suspicion.

The deconstructive scalpel cuts even deeper, however, for it is not just claims to truth that are called into question, but also certain assumptions about meaning, namely, that meaning is (or ever can be) fixed. In other words, there is a kind of semantic homelessness underlying the above-mentioned epistemic homelessness, as Derrida makes clear. For example, in his early essay, “Différance,” Derrida argues that because words are “irreducibly polysemic,” there is an ineradicable undecidability to meaning.³¹ Over against Descartes, Derrida argues there is no “Eden of originary presence”—no time when meaning was pure and true, absent all human construction. And in contrast to Hegel, Derrida argues there is no “Eschaton of organic totality”—no time when meaning will reach its final completion. Hence, meaning is always on the way and never at home. We are all homeless hermeneuts yearning for a homeland of meaning that never was and never will be.³²

As Middleton and Walsh cogently argue, epistemic and semantic perspectivism wedded to a hermeneutics of suspicion is acidic to any stable sense of truth for two reasons. First, the recognition that one’s own meaning-giving worldview is arbitrary can easily produce anomie.

Since it is precisely the function of a social construction of reality to shield us from the abyss of meaninglessness by providing us with a “sacred canopy” of meaning and order, the realization that this canopy is humanly constructed (not an inevitable given) leaves us with a sense of vertigo, unprotected before the abyss.³³

In other words, “becoming aware of our worldview *as a worldview*, of its particularity, subjectivity, and limitations, can have a profoundly anomic effect.”³⁴ Claims to truth lose their authority in a world absent any sense of meaningful order.

²⁷ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 85.

²⁸ Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 131.

²⁹ Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” *Foucault Reader*, 343.

³⁰ Merold Westphal, “Taking St. Paul Seriously,” in *Christian Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Flint (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1990); and “Christian Philosophers and the Copernican Revolution,” in *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge*, eds. C. Stephen Evans and Merold Westphal (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

³¹ Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 8-9.

³² Derrida, “Différance,” 20. As Caputo states: “the hermeneut is an exile longing for the native land” (*Radical Hermeneutics*, 117).

³³ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 36.

³⁴ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 37.

Second, the acknowledgment that one's sacred canopy is violent elicits a sense of complicity and guilt. As Middleton and Walsh put it: "If reality is socially constructed, then we have to admit that we have participated (whether actively or by acquiescence) in the construction of what is often a nightmare."³⁵ As many African Americans will readily and powerfully attest, the sacred dream of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" has been for them a brutal nightmare.³⁶ As many women will easily and tearfully declare, the dominant androcentric sacred canopy still disempowers and often abuses them.³⁷ And, to take only one more of many possible examples, we members of the so-called "developed nations" are only recently, if at all, waking up to the ecological nightmare no longer merely looming on the horizon but frighteningly real for those with the eyes to see.³⁸ The disorienting deconstructive therapy of postmodernism, if taken seriously, is, as Middleton and Walsh put it, "profoundly painful."³⁹

B. Socio-Psychological Anomie and the Nomadic Self

Mention of pain leads to the second characteristic of postmodernism, namely, the experience of self as nomad. As many perceptive culture watchers have noted, in the absence of traditional means of identity formation and given assumptions about the social construction of reality (including the self), part of the postmodern condition is that people find that they are multiple selves on an endless quest for a stable identity. The rootlessness of the nomadic self produces socio-psychological anomie. For example, Walter Truett Anderson claims that we often feel like refugees because we have been "deeply dispossessed" of "old bases of personal and social identity," and so he finds extensive evidence of what he calls the three A's: alienation, anxiety, and anomie.⁴⁰ Albert Borgmann speaks of this phenomenon as "the expatriate quality of public life," whereby "we live in self-imposed exile from communal conversation and action."⁴¹ And Paul Wachtel perceptively notes that the changing views of Faust (from villain to hero) support the claim that restlessness and rootlessness have become modern virtues. As Wachtel observes:

The rift in community and continuity that so characterizes our lives and the tendency to throw things away—whether possessions, relationships, or ties to a particular place or community—account in substantial measure for why we are so preoccupied with our "identities." In the modern world we must make an identity for ourselves; we do not inherit one.⁴²

Unlike the heroic self-construction characteristic of modernity, the selves under construction in the postmodern age have an identity crisis. As Anthony Thiselton succinctly puts it, "postmodernism implies a *shattering of innocent confidence in the capacity of the self to control its own destiny*."⁴³ Given the violence perpetuated on human and non-human alike by the

³⁵ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 37.

³⁶ See, for example, Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Random House, 1994).

³⁷ See, for example, Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

³⁸ See, for example, Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Doubleday, 1989).

³⁹ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 37.

⁴⁰ Anderson, *Reality*, pp. 36-37. See also Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven Tipton, *Habits of the Heart* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), chaps. 3, 6.

⁴¹ Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 3.

⁴² Wachtel, *Poverty*, 93-94, 99.

⁴³ Anthony Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 11.

modern culture of heroic individualism, confidence in our ability to control the world is waning.⁴⁴ For example, in our attempts to master ourselves, we find ourselves caught in dilemma after dilemma. In our schemes to manage “human resources,” we dehumanize our sisters and brothers. In our efforts to subdue nature, we degrade a world whose wounds cry out for healing. As Middleton and Walsh assert, the “anthropological self-assuredness” of modernity is “difficult to sustain in a postmodern world.”⁴⁵

In addition, many people today suffer from what could be called “the Zelig syndrome.” Faced with the daunting challenge of creating oneself ever anew—of constructing a self in a world largely devoid of familiar rules or normative guideposts—they stumble to achieve some semblance of a self. Like the main character in Woody Allen’s “Zelig”—who literally changed shape and identity depending on his personal circumstances—postmodern nomads metamorphosize, chameleon-like, into a nearly endless string of identities to conform to the latest fashion or to cope with the unceasing flux. The postmodern self, in short, is an “infinitely malleable self” who takes on the constructed identities proffered by the carnival of contemporary culture.⁴⁶

Of contemporary philosophers, Richard Rorty perhaps most clearly champions this postmodern self. For Rorty, “getting the facts right ... is merely propaedeutic to finding a new and interesting way of expressing ourselves, and thus of coping with the world.”⁴⁷ This “edifying philosophy,” as Rorty describes it, is characterized by “the poetic activity of thinking up such new aims, new words, or new disciplines.”⁴⁸ The mark of truly good philosophy is that it be interesting; thus, the philosopher should be “the maker of new words, the shaper of new languages” who is “the vanguard of the species.”⁴⁹ Indeed, for Rorty, a kind of postmodern redemption is possible only through the project of self-creation exemplified in the work of the poet and in the creation of a “poeticized culture,” where the goal is “the creation of ever more various and multicolored artifacts.”⁵⁰ This making of a self is an endless process in which we “redescribe ourselves, our situation, our past, in those terms [the terms of past heroes like Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche] and compare the results with alternative redescriptions which use the vocabularies of alternative figures,” thereby hoping “by this continual redescription to make the best selves for ourselves that we can.”⁵¹ Such is the postmodern vision of the human: the plastic self always on the prowl.

But is this vision of human flourishing even possible, and, if possible, is it advisable or exemplary? There are a number of reasons to think not. First, a nomadic self always under construction is not easily able to make commitments or enter into lasting relationships, since

⁴⁴ Not all agree with this claim. Some champion what could be called cybernetic global optimism. The pillars of this worldview include unquestioned faith in science and technology to deliver us from our current and future dilemmas, supreme belief in human agency not bound by limits either internal or external, and unbounded confidence in a McWorld culture of shopping malls and online markets. Cybernetic global optimism, in other words, is another (souped up) version of modernism.

⁴⁵ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 49.

⁴⁶ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 52.

⁴⁷ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 359.

⁴⁸ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 360; cf. 364-65, 370, 389.

⁴⁹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 9, 20.

⁵⁰ Rorty, *Contingency*, 53-54.

⁵¹ Rorty, *Contingency*, 80.

such relationships necessarily require some relatively stable self to do the relating.⁵² As Middleton and Walsh perceptively put it in reference to a marriage ceremony: “Who would the *I* be in the *I do*?”⁵³ The postmodern view of the human person as a series of multiple selves offers precious few psychological resources for making and keeping authentic and satisfying commitments. Because we are a plethora of selves, we do not know who we are; and because we do not know who we are, we are unable to decide what to do. How can we ever be a coherent moral agent if our “selves” are constantly in flux? A reading of the world as the endless play of domination combined with this view of the self as nomad makes it easy to understand why some people insist that the most prudent course of action to take in making one’s way in the world (to use an image from a student) is to be an M-1 tank: become impervious to all attempts by others to befriend you and steamroll over anyone who dares to stand in your way. The pain and isolation in such a self-image are painfully clear.

Second, the sense of anomie is not only internal but external. The undecidability characteristic of the nomadic self is also seen as an inextricable feature of the socially constructed world. So, for example, in the face of moral undecidability and the perceived absence of any moral standards which exist independently of the (all too human) will to power, there appear to be no norms for action. Hence, as Alasdair MacIntyre has argued persuasively, morality is seen merely as an expression of individual preferences.⁵⁴ How often have you heard some version of this: “Doing [fill in the blank] may be wrong for you, but that doesn’t make it wrong for me”? In sum, as Middleton and Walsh conclude: “deconstructive patterns of thinking may have therapeutically served us well by uncovering our biases, interests, assumptions and reifications, but they leave us in a normless universe.”⁵⁵ In yet other words, in a culture where “neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain,” and identities “are constantly subject to mutation,” there is little or no sense of order to be found.⁵⁶

This sense of anomie is both caused by and contributes to our deafness to the groaning earth. Our home planet is being rendered inhospitable, and we its inhabitants made to feel not at home on the only home planet available to us. Global warming, holes in the ozone layer, toxic wastes, oil spills, acid rain, drinking water contamination, overflowing landfills, topsoil erosion, species extinction, destruction of the rain forests, leakage of nuclear waste, lead poisoning, desertification, smog. Such is merely a partial litany of the despoliation of our earthly home.⁵⁷

Of the cast of postmodern thinkers, Martin Heidegger is most helpful in shedding light on this issue.⁵⁸ For example, in his discussion of modernity as an expression of the unconditional will to power, Heidegger explains how our objectification of the earth is, in fact, an assault on the earth: “The earth can show itself only as the object of assault, an assault that, in human willing,

⁵² See, for example, Lewis Smedes, *Caring and Commitment* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), chap. 5, and Margaret Farley, *Personal Commitments* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), chap. 2.

⁵³ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 57.

⁵⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, second ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

⁵⁵ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 60.

⁵⁶ Ian Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 5.

⁵⁷ If our own non-scientific observations need any confirmation, there are plenty of highly trained earth watchers speaking out about the current state of the planet. For example, see any recent *State of the World*, published by the Worldwatch Institute.

⁵⁸ Most of the other postmodern thinkers implicitly, if not explicitly, endorse the dominant anthropocentrism and utilitarianism that underwrites the ecologically destructive modern Western worldview. As Borgmann accurately observes: “The postmodern theorists ... have failed to see their own anthropocentrism” (*Crossing*, 117).

establishes itself as unconditional objectification. Nature appears everywhere ... as the object of technology.⁵⁹ In other words, modern Western culture is so suffused with a technological habit-of-being that everything is seen as an object to be used in the service of our own individual or collective human will. All things are viewed as valuable only as a means to our human ends. But, avers Heidegger, “what a thing is in its Being is not exhausted by its being an object.”⁶⁰ There is so much more to reality than our objectifying attitude can ever know. As Hamlet insists to Horatio: “There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Elsewhere, Heidegger points to this enthrallment of technique when he decries the “circularity of consumption for the sake of consumption” which so characterizes our technologized culture. Unlike the birch tree or the honey bee, which never overstep their possibilities, our way of living includes a “technology that devours the earth” in “exhaustion and consumption” and thus transgresses the proper limits of the earth.⁶¹ In other words, we postmodern nomads are all too often deaf to the groanings of the earth and its creatures—a deafness rendering our earthly home increasingly uninhabitable. These insights emphasize the need to learn how the world works and, in so doing, develop the requisite skills and virtues to fulfill our calling to be earthkeepers.⁶²

In summary, at the heart of postmodernism is suspicion of all stories, generated by various forms of epistemic constructivism, and a nomadic sense of the self, fostered by a kind of socio-psychological anomie. Both contribute to our deafness to our non-human neighbors, which has in large measure produced the growing ecological crisis.

IV. Postmodernism: Critique and Response

Let’s take stock. If in modernism, metanarratives are taken as true and benign, in postmodernism, metanarratives are seen as socially constructed and inherently violent. Is it possible to acknowledge the dangers of metanarratives and yet affirm a non-violent story of God’s love affair with the cosmos?⁶³ If in modernism there is complacency and naiveté, in postmodernism there is cynicism and suspicion. Is it possible to move beyond both complacency and cynicism to a second naiveté of humble yet robust faith refined by honest questioning?⁶⁴

If in modernism, human finitude is falsely believed to be overcome and we humans declared *de facto* divine, in postmodernism, human finitude is rightly seen to be ineradicable, but the judgment wrongly rendered is that there is no God. Is it possible to acknowledge our inescapable finitude as humans, but in so doing to rejoice that though we are not divine, God is?⁶⁵ If in modernism, we have the rationally superior individual self, in postmodernism, we have

⁵⁹ Martin Heidegger, “The Word of Nietzsche,” *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 100.

⁶⁰ Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” *Basic Writings*, ed. David Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1977), 228.

⁶¹ Martin Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” *The End of Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 107, 109.

⁶² For an explication of ecological virtues, see Steven Bouma-Prediger, *Earthkeeping and Character: Exploring a Christian Ecological Virtue Ethic* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020).

⁶³ To learn more about this, see Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, chap. 5.

⁶⁴ For more on a second naiveté, see Paul Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon, 1967), 349, 351.

⁶⁵ For more on this, see Merold Westphal, “Postmodernism and Religious Reflection,” *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 38, no. 3 (December 1995): 135.

the socially constructed, historically conditioned self. Is it possible to speak cogently of the person-in-relation, gifted and called by God, neither the measure of all things nor the prisoner of all things?⁶⁶

If in modernism, God is either a projection or perhaps real but on holiday, in postmodernism God is either dead or real but unknowable. Is it possible to affirm a trinitarian God who is a source of overflowing love, known preeminently in the humble carpenter from Nazareth whose *raison d'être* was to suffer with?⁶⁷ If in modernism, we believe utopia is just around the corner and coming our way fast, in postmodernism, we know that utopia is literally “no place,” and thus have doubts about any good future. Is it possible to speak coherently of and bear witness to God’s good future of shalom, with the clear-eyed recognition that this future—God’s will done on earth as it is in heaven—is both present and yet not fully realized?⁶⁸

In short, in a culture of incredulity toward metanarratives, of rootlessness and isolation, of deafness to the groaning of creation, is it possible that the Christian gospel could speak words of healing and shalom? And most importantly, can the Christian community—the church—redemptively address the hopes and fears of suspicious postmodern nomads living on an increasingly inhospitable earth?

These questions contextualize the challenge of both criticizing and learning from postmodernism. They also point to various fruitful ways of articulating an authentic version of Christian faith that addresses the legitimate concerns of postmodernism. At the heart of the gospel is the message that we humans are home-seeking pilgrims who will by God’s grace find a home where our yearning hearts find rest.⁶⁹ In this narrative, creation is a place of grace, as surely as our Creator and Redeemer is a God of unfathomable love. The Christian story, in other words, is a grand story of redemptive homecoming that is at the same time a call to grateful homemaking. What follows are some key theological affirmations in light of the challenges posed by postmodernism.

A. *Stories of Suffering and Texts of Trust*

There are a number of ways to address the deeply held suspicion of stories and texts at the heart of postmodernism. One way is to honestly acknowledge how stories often perpetuate systems of injustice and violence. Another is to call attention to stories new and old that narrate a world of justice and love. In either case, a perceptive analysis of culturally founding stories builds trust—that most needed coin of the realm.

For example, Middleton and Walsh point out two features of the biblical metanarrative that “incline the Christian story toward delegitimizing and subverting violent, totalizing uses of the story by those who claim to live it out.” First, there is “a radical sensitivity to suffering that pervades the biblical narrative from the exodus to the cross.” Indeed, sensitivity to suffering is a major theme throughout the entire biblical story. The God of the Bible hears the cries of those

⁶⁶ To explore this approach, see James Olthuis, *The Beautiful Risk: A New Psychology of Loving and Being Loved* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

⁶⁷ For one powerful articulation of this way of doing theology, see Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), chaps. 2, 5.

⁶⁸ For more on this, see Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, chaps. 8, 9.

⁶⁹ The classic reference here is Augustine, *Confessions*, book I, where Augustine confesses that our hearts are restless until they find rest in God.

who suffer and responds with acts of care. The second feature “consists in the rooting of the story in God’s overarching creational intent that delegitimizes any narrow, partisan use of the story.”⁷⁰ Through the election of the Jews as a particular people, God intends that all people would be blessed, thus subverting any nationalistic or ethnocentric reading of that story. Jesus’s vision of the kingdom of God includes Gentiles and prostitutes and tax collectors, thus ruling out the exclusion of those seen to be unclean or unworthy. The God of the Bible is a God of justice and love for all. Indeed, as Romans 8 reminds us, the biblical story is about the redemption of all creation. In other words, each of these characteristics of the biblical metanarrative offer an internal critique of any readings of the Bible that attempt to justify injustice or narrow the inclusive reach of redemptive love. As Middleton and Walsh put it: “Far from promoting violence, the story the Scriptures tell contains the resources to shatter totalizing readings, to convert the reader, to align us with God’s purposes of shalom, compassion, and justice.”⁷¹ In short, properly understood, the Bible does not legitimate oppression or sanction injustice.

In similar fashion, Jamie Smith shows how the French postmodern philosophers can actually help the church be more honest, more self-aware, more passionate about justice, and more caring to those in need. For example, taking Derrida seriously would force us to acknowledge that all readings are interpretations and thus encourage us to be humble about our claims to have our readings right. No more asserting, “You interpret, while I merely read” when arguing over different understandings of Genesis 2 or Ephesians 5. Furthermore, taking an interest in marginalized voices would cultivate “a concern for justice by being concerned about the dominant, status quo interpretations that silence those who see differently.”⁷² Taking Lyotard seriously would force us to admit that autonomous reason is a myth and thus all knowledge is implicitly if not explicitly rooted in a faith commitment of some kind. Hence, all academic disciplines (philosophy, sociology, biology, etc.) are on a level playing field, none disqualified because of “religious bias.” If there is no such thing as a neutral secular public square, then “postmodernity should signal new openings and opportunities for Christian witness in the broad marketplace of ideas.”⁷³ Taking Foucault seriously would force us to become more aware of how we are formed by the worldviews of our culture, e.g., how materialism forms us into consumers par excellence. Such newfound awareness should encourage us to engage in “counterformation” by the use of “counterdisciplines that form us into the kind of people God calls us to be.”⁷⁴

In an age of cynicism and suspicion—when all is seen as a covert bid for power by competing self-interests—the only truly credible witness will be flesh-and-blood non-manipulative regard for the other. So, in response to the postmodern presumption that all Christian claims to truth (indeed, all actions by Christians) are but disguised attempts to control and dominate, Anthony Thiselton insightfully points to twentieth-century German pastor-theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, since it was Bonhoeffer who, by example as well as by word, powerfully railed against cheap grace and testified to the way of the cross. As Thiselton puts it, “It is as if Bonhoeffer said to Nietzsche from his Nazi prison: ‘But not all Christians are as you suggest.’”⁷⁵ So, Thiselton concludes, “A love in which a self genuinely *gives* itself to the Other *in the interests of the Other*

⁷⁰ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 87.

⁷¹ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 107.

⁷² Smith, *Who’s Afraid*, 56.

⁷³ Smith, *Who’s Afraid*, 73.

⁷⁴ Smith, *Who’s Afraid*, 106.

⁷⁵ Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*, 23. The locus classicus for Bonhoeffer’s treatment of “cheap grace” is *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), chap. 1.

dissolves the acids of suspicion and deception.”⁷⁶ Other exemplars come to mind, such as Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Martin Luther King Jr., but for the church to dissolve the acids of suspicion and exhibit the kind of integrity that builds trust, it will take more than a few famous people to walk the way of the cross.

The Christian message of reconciliation (with God, with others, with ourselves, with our non-human neighbors) rides on the shoulders of those of us who, like Bonhoeffer, resist the temptation to use God and others for our own advancement. In other words, the claim that all metanarratives are violent will be shown to be false only if and when we Christians embody the non-violent metanarrative of the cruciform Christ. Perhaps we ought to take more seriously a bit of advice attributed to the Franciscans: “Preach the gospel always; if necessary, use words.” Talk is cheap. Actions are what matter. Suspicion can be overcome only by trust built over time. Only if we followers of Jesus walk our talk about loving God and serving our neighbors will the creeds we profess, the sermons we preach, the Bible verses we recite and the words we say be taken seriously by those around us.

B. Gracious Creator and Creation as Gift

Central to the Christian faith is the claim that creation is the sheer gift of a gracious creator. God did not have to create any world at all, and God was not obligated or forced to create this particular world. Creation need not be. It is, rather, a gracious act of a loving God. For example, neither a Platonic cosmogony, in which the creator is externally limited by recalcitrant matter, nor a neo-Platonic cosmogony, in which a principle of plenitude necessitates that God create, adequately describes the nature of creation or creator. Creation exists only because of God’s gracious decision.⁷⁷

God is not only an agent able to freely intend and effect action—unconstrained by anything except the divine nature itself—but, more importantly, God is the epitome of self-giving love. As Middleton and Walsh assert:

God’s love is not only at the root of the divine decision to create the world (answering the question *why* God created) but also describes the most fundamental character of reality (*what* God created). Creation is wrought by the extravagant generosity of God’s love.⁷⁸

Indeed, the Christian confession of God as triune affirms that God is a perichoretic family of love—a community of mutually indwelling love characterized by overflowing generosity.⁷⁹ This strikingly unusual understanding of God—of both divine power and divine love—is well stated by Langdon Gilkey:

To the amazement of all, the disciples and enemies of Christ alike, the divine power reveals itself in precisely that which is most vulnerable and powerless: self-giving love.

⁷⁶ Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*, 160.

⁷⁷ For more on this idea of decision, as one of “The Seven D’s of Creation,” see Steven Bouma-Prediger, “Creation as the Home of God: The Doctrine of Creation in the Theology of Jürgen Moltmann,” in *Calvin Theological Journal* 32, no. 1 (April 1997).

⁷⁸ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger*, 49.

⁷⁹ For more on a social or interpersonal theory of the Trinity, see Cornelius Plantinga, “Social Trinity and Tritheism,” in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, eds. Ronald Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

Truly here was one of the most radical transformations of values in all historical experience: not the avoidance of suffering, but its willing acceptance in love, became the deepest clue to divinity.⁸⁰

Or as Jean-Luc Marion affirms, “a properly Christian name of the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ ... is agape.” Given this name, predication “must yield to praise,” for, as Marion reminds us, “Love is not spoken, in the end it is made.”⁸¹

These theological affirmations, as Gilkey and Marion note, find their source in the Bible—in stories about Jesus (Matthew 5-7, Mark 10, Luke 10, John 10-11); in summaries of Jesus’s teaching in the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-34, Luke 10:25-28) and the New Commandment (John 13:34-35); and in any number of Paul’s commentaries on the words and deeds of Jesus (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12-14, Galatians 5, Ephesians 2-4, Philippians 2-4, Colossians 3). Perhaps 1 John 4:21 captures the central behavioral implication most clearly: “The commandment we have from him [Jesus] is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” These biblical texts that we know intellectually call out to be lived in our everyday lives. Only the living, breathing, incarnated embodiment of this vision of love for all, rooted in God’s love for us, will soften and dismantle postmodern suspicion.

By affirming that creation is crafted and redeemed by a trustworthy God of extravagant grace, the confession of creation as gift both bursts the bubble of modernism, which rests comfortably in the supposed security of its violence-producing stories and also casts the light of suspicion onto postmodern suspicion itself. If in modernism, there is overweening presumptuousness regarding claims to truth and in postmodernism, there is unremitting suspicion of all claims to truth, an affirmation of creation as the gift of that love that fires the sun (Genesis 1) and freely tented among us (John 1) renders it possible to wed trust and suspicion and forge a way of knowing that looks the sharp and bent edges of reality full in the face but nevertheless recognizes the world as real and understands that we can truly know it, if only in parts.⁸²

The theme of creation as gift also addresses the postmodern view of the self as malleable and homeless nomad for two reasons. First, the phenomenology of gift and giftedness suggests that when given a gift, the appropriate response is gratitude to the giver and care for the gift. In other words, the experience of gracious provision readily and rightly evokes a response of gratitude and care. Christians from the Reformed tradition ought to find this analysis familiar, since gratitude is one of the theological themes emphasized within that tradition. For example, commenting on the most loved of the Reformed confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism, with its triadic structure of guilt/grace/gratitude, Henry Stob affirms: “What drives the Christian to love and obedience is thankfulness. This gives to the moral life a characteristic note of joy. Appreciative of God’s mercy, thankful for his unspeakable gift, happy in his gracious

⁸⁰ Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1959), 217. See also “Creation, Being, and Non-Being,” in *God and Creation*, eds. David Burrell and Bernard McGinn (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 233, where Gilkey states that it is no surprise that most theologians in the twentieth century have questioned the priority of the definition of God as Absolute Being and have, rather, “empathized with Moltmann’s effort to understand the divine nature also in terms of the divine suffering present in and revealed through the crucifixion.” For an eloquent expression of the truth that suffering love is the deepest clue to divinity, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

⁸¹ Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 82.

⁸² For more details, see the books by Middleton and Walsh, Smith, and Westphal in the bibliography.

conferments, the Christian seeks with might and main to show forth his praises and to do his will.”⁸³ Creation as gift thus implies an identity: we humans are *homo gratus*. More exactly, we are grateful caretakers of God’s gift of creation. We find our identity not in endless Zelig-like permutations but in responding to God’s bountiful and gracious provisions with humble gratitude and joyful care. We care for God’s creatures because it is a fitting response to God’s providential care for us. We are grateful because God is gracious. Grace begets gratitude, and gratitude begets care.⁸⁴

Second, we express that gratitude and exercise that care on this blue-green earth. We are not rootless and homeless, for this is our home. As the Genesis creation narrative states, we are earth creatures (*‘adâm*) made from the earth (*‘adâmâh*). We are humans from the humus and thus kin with all other creatures. We are not independent, isolated, autonomous selves, but rather persons-in-community, including our biotic community. We know who we are not only because we know where we are but also because we know with whom we are. As Joseph Sittler clearly states: “I am constituted by my relationships [within the human world] ... But I am also constituted by my encounters with the nonhuman world.”⁸⁵ And so, declares Sittler, “I am stuck with God, stuck with my neighbor, and stuck with nature (the ‘garden’), within which and out of the stuff of which I am made.”⁸⁶ We humans are thoroughly relational, bound up not only with God and not only with other humans but also with the plants, animals, oceans, and mountains of this exquisitely complex and beautiful planet.

In short, we are persons-in-relation at home on planet earth, called to respond to God’s provisioning grace with gratitude and care. This confession of creation as gift and of humans as embedded caretakers challenges the modern self-image of the human as autonomous, rational individual and also calls into question the postmodern image of humanity as hopelessly isolated and unstable. If in modernism, we have the heroic self and in postmodernism, we find the resigned self, this acknowledgment of creation as gift makes it possible to see each of us humans as responsive and responsible creatures gratefully loving God and faithfully serving our neighbors in need.

This affirmation of creation as gift also speaks to our deafness regarding the earth’s creatures and our despoliation of creation. For the giftedness of creation, as the Bible reminds us, includes the conviction that all creatures exist to praise God. For example, Psalm 148 calls upon all created things to praise God: angels and the hosts of heaven, sun and moon, fire and hail, snow and frost, hills and mountains, fruit trees and wild animals, women and men. All creatures are invited to sing a symphony of praise to the God of unsurpassing glory.⁸⁷ Albert Borgmann refers to this speaking non-human other as “eloquent reality.”⁸⁸ Creation is eloquent, if only we have the ears to hear. In affirming creation as gift, we are called to confess the ways we have

⁸³ Henry Stob, *Ethical Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 78; see also Allen Verhey, *Living the Heidelberg* (Grand Rapids: CRC, 1986), chaps. 8-9.

⁸⁴ For more on this, see Steve Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), chap. 7.

⁸⁵ Joseph Sittler, “The Sittler Speeches,” in *The Center for the Study of Campus Ministry Yearbook 1977-78*, ed. Phil Schroeder (Valparaiso: Valparaiso University Press, 1978), 45.

⁸⁶ Joseph Sittler, “Evangelism and the Care of the Earth” in *Preaching in the Witnessing Community*, ed. Herman Stuempfle (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 102.

⁸⁷ See also Isaiah chaps. 42-44, 55 and Psalms 96 and 98.

⁸⁸ Borgmann, *Crossing*, 117-119.

muffled the voices of our non-human neighbors, and we are challenged to listen for the groaning of creation so that we might work for its redemptive flourishing.

Creation as gift implies not only that creation is eloquent, but also that non-human creatures are valuable regardless of their usefulness to us. God has created and continues to create and sustain beings whose value extends beyond human utility. Psalm 104, for example, speaks of a world in which all creatures (wild asses, cedars of Lebanon, storks, marmots, young lions) are valuable not only because of their usefulness to humans—some are useful, indeed essential, to us—but because they are valuable to each other. The cedars are valuable as habitats for birds to nest, and the mountains are valuable as places of refuge for the wild goats. Most importantly, they are valuable simply because God made them.⁸⁹ Christian theology has no room for anthropocentric utilitarianism that finds non-human creation valuable only insofar as it serves human needs.

In sum, the affirmation that creation is eloquent and valuable above and beyond human usefulness repudiates both the modern view of “nature” as a mere resource to be pillaged and the postmodern view of “Nature” as quasi-divine. If modernism advocates an unbridled anthropocentrism, and postmodernism posits an unfeasible biocentrism, then confession of a gracious God and creation as gift invites us to embrace a theocentric worldview that espouses both the eloquence and value of creation and the goodness and grace of its creator.

C. Good and Evil

One of the distinguishing features of Christian theology is the belief that creation is essentially good. The fall is contingent, not necessary. Evil is a perversion of God’s intentions for creation—an adventitious quality rather than an essential property. Evil is all too real, but it is an alien intruder that has no legitimate place in God’s good creation. Evil is not intrinsic to creation; it is, rather, a defect. Neither a Manichean cosmology, in which evil is seen as a cosmic principle or power equal to good, nor a Babylonian cosmogony, in which creation is the product of a violent battle, accurately conveys the way things are. In the biblical view, God wages no war in creating, but rather peacefully speaks creation into existence. As Middleton and Walsh perceptively note:

Rather than beginning with a conflict amongst the gods, the Scriptures begin with the effortless, joyous calling forth of creation by a sovereign Creator who enters into a relationship of intimacy with his creatures. Therefore, creatureliness qua creatureliness is good.... This means that a biblical worldview will grant no ontological standing or priority to evil or violence. Indeed, violence is seen, in this worldview, as an illegitimate alien intruder into God’s good creation. In contrast to an ontology of violence, then, the Scriptures begin with of an ontology of peace.⁹⁰

God is overflowing goodness. Creation is very good. Evil is not part of the plan. Peace (shalom) is primordial.

⁸⁹ Reformed folk have good reason to feel at home with this affirmation since John Calvin speaks of creation as “this magnificent theatre of heaven and earth, crammed with innumerable miracles”—valuable for its own sake as well as for its provisions to humans. See *Institutes*, 2.6.1, and 3.10.2; cf. 1.6.2, and 1.14.20. For an excellent exposition of Calvin’s view of nature, see Susan Schreiner, *The Theatre of His Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

⁹⁰ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 153.

These claims are extremely significant given the postmodern suspicion of all stories as necessarily violent and manipulative. Over against the postmodern belief that violence is primordial and hence ineradicable, the claim that there is a good God who sustains a broken but fundamentally good creation is good news indeed. That evil is not woven into the warp and woof of reality—that evil is real but not ontologically necessary—is gospel. As Pedro Trigo puts it: “God creates out of free will, out of love. God creates out of the divine word of benediction. What exists, then, is blessed, good, primordially good, only good, transcendently good: not only good in principle, for the creative word of blessing resounds everlastingly.”⁹¹ Because this is so, we can move “from ambivalent experience to faith in goodness.”⁹² Primordial goodness implies a God of grace. But what exactly is grace? Lewis Smedes’s description is unparalleled:

Grace does not make everything right. Grace’s trick is to show us that it is right for us to live; that it is truly good, wonderful even, for us to be breathing and feeling at the same time that everything clustering around us is wholly wretched. ... Grace is rather an amazing power to look earthly reality full in the face, see its sad and tragic edges, feel its cruel cuts, join in the primeval chorus against its outrageous unfairness, and yet feel in your deepest being that it is good and right for you to be alive on God’s good earth.⁹³

Suspicion is often necessary, but it need not be the only posture. Grace allows us to believe, even in the midst of tragedy, that it is good to be alive on God’s good earth.

In sum, evil is all too real but is a surd that has a beginning but no origin in God’s good world. Hence, we reject as naive any modern notion of human perfectibility while also refusing to accept the postmodern presumption that violence will always have the last word. If in modernism, there is creation without the fall (and thus little need for redemption) and in postmodernism, there is the fall without creation (and hence little hope of redemption), believing that creation is the good gift of a gracious God makes it possible to hold creation and fall together (with redemption) in a grand story that tells how the Maker of heaven and earth willingly absorbs evil in order to bend a warped world back to its intended harmony while prodding it forward to its ultimate destiny.

This motif of creation as good also speaks to postmodern self-understanding. An implication of the goodness of creation is that finitude is good. In particular, human finitude is good, not something from which we must escape. We have, however, a deep desire to avoid looking our finitude, especially our mortality, straight in the face, for to acknowledge the temporally limited nature of our existence raises the question of whether death is the end of life or whether there is Someone who is sufficiently able and willing to preserve our life beyond biological death and in whom we can rest despite our fear and anxiety.⁹⁴ Not surprisingly, the Bible speaks often of human finitude. For example, Psalm 8 refers to humans as having been created a little lower

⁹¹ Pedro Trigo, *Creation and History* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1991), 87.

⁹² Trigo, *Creation and History*. This quotation is the title of chapter 3.

⁹³ Lewis Smedes, *How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong?* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), 3.

⁹⁴ For a powerful analysis of the human tendency to deny mortality and in so doing create and perpetuate evil, see Ernest Becker, *Denial of Death* (New York: Macmillan, 1973) and *Escape from Evil* (New York: Macmillan, 1975).

than God and crowned with glory and honor, but also reminds us that we humans are mortal and hence finite.⁹⁵

But we are not just finite; we are faulted. Though often confused, the two are not the same. Finitude is a good feature of human existence. It is simply how God made us—a feature of our humanity to joyfully accept. Faultedness, however, is not God's intention. The brokenness we know in ourselves and see around us is something we acknowledge with regret and seek, with God's grace, to overcome. This feature of human existence is also powerfully depicted in the Bible. For example, in Genesis 3, we learn that Adam and Eve desired to transcend their creaturely finitude and become like God in knowing good and evil. They fail to trust in God and thus experience alienation. Their relationship with God is broken, they become estranged from each other, they lose touch with their own true self, and they are out of joint with the earth. In all these ways they, and we, are alienated. Our lives are tainted with a contagion called sin. The Bible confirms what we know in our hearts: the world is not the way it is supposed to be.⁹⁶

In sum, the Christian understanding of good and evil unmasks the pretensions of modernity, which would like us to believe in the godlike capabilities of human power (technology) and ingenuity (creativity), and also makes us aware of our need for *nomos* when facing the abyss of postmodern anomie. Because we acknowledge that we are finite and faulted creatures, we ought to put our claims to truth forward with genuine modesty and self-critical honesty, knowing that we can trust in the God whose grace hounds our guilt and whose love embraces us when facing our own mortality.

Finally, belief that creation is good means not only that goodness is more primordial than evil and that finitude is good, but also that difference is built into creation itself and harmony need not be purchased at the price of dominating the other. For example, the Genesis 1 creation story speaks of a great diversity of creatures. Through God's "let there be," the earth brings forth living creatures of every kind: birds, fish, animals both domestic and wild, flying and creeping things, even sea monsters. God sees this plethora of creatures and declares it to be good. Indeed, God sees everything created (not just humans) and declares that it is very good. Creation is a diverse place of beauty and blessing and delight. Because of God's wise creative work, the different kinds of creatures fit together into a harmonious whole. But Middleton and Walsh remind us: "This [ontology of peace] is not, however, the peace of an imposed homogeneity. That would be violence all over again. Rather, the biblical worldview perceives in the world a wonderful variety of different *kinds* of creatures living together in fundamental harmony."⁹⁷ As any biology course will confirm, the world contains what sometimes is taken to be evidence of violence: predation, parasites, and pathogens. But notwithstanding nature red in tooth and claw, biology and theology concur in affirming that creation is a place where diversity is a fundamental feature of health.

⁹⁵ The finitude of humanity is also powerfully portrayed in the book of Job. In the deluge of questions put by God from the whirlwind (Job 38-41), Job is forcibly reminded of his finitude. Job has not commanded the morning or entered the storehouses of the snow or provided prey for the ravens. He does not know when the mountain goats give birth or who let the wild asses go free. That the hawk soars and the eagle mounts up is not Job's doing. Job's power and knowledge are finite. He is a creature, not Creator.

⁹⁶ Two books that illuminate the phenomenon of sin with great insight are Ted Peters, *Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) and Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed To Be* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

⁹⁷ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 154.

Furthermore, God calls us to serve and protect the garden which is the earth (Genesis 2:15). We are to offer hospitality to the other—including the non-human other—in a way that gives evidence of genuine openness, receptivity, and attentiveness.⁹⁸ Rather than seeking to dominate, we are to exercise the kind of loving care that befits us as God's image-bearing representatives.⁹⁹ Care, not wanton disregard or ignorant misuse, should characterize our way of life.¹⁰⁰ And, as many attest, we need the wild otherness of the natural world to foster our own sense of humility and joy.¹⁰¹ In other words, our serving and protecting the earth and its creatures is fostered by spending time in places where our own need for control is diminished and our sense of dependence is magnified.

In summary, the basic Christian beliefs about good and evil affirm that while evil is very real, in the end, love wins. These basic beliefs also affirm that difference is good so harmony need not be attained by jailing those people who don't conform or banishing those ideas that are different. These fundamental Christian affirmations offer a critique of both the hubris of the modern project of technological control and the hopelessness of the postmodern belief that finds difference inimical to any form of authentic community. Believing that creation is good prompts not despair but the kind of joyful keeping of creation that is fitting of creatures grateful for God's gracious provisions.

V. Faithful Witnesses in a Tumultuous Time

Flux, rootlessness, and suspicion permeate our lives. Who can be trusted? What is trustworthy? Is anything true? Is truth a casualty of our contemporary culture? Does anyone feel at home? Does a profound homelessness pervade Western modern/postmodern culture?

We are all of us pilgrims and wayfarers. But the stories we tell of our earthly pilgrimages are not all the same. Many today describe their sojourn as one of perpetual homelessness. Suspicious of all claims to truth, restless and anxious about the future, fearfully aware that we are despoiling our earthly home, many people feel awestruck in the postmodern world. The home they knew is at best a happy memory, and the home they dream is a chimera. These postmodern nomads find themselves longing for some place to rest. They long for a dwelling place where they belong, where they are loved, where they are safe, sound, and secure.

We Christians, too, yearn for home. We, too, are pilgrims. But our tale of home seeking is a story about a sojourning people at home in creation because of a good God who gifts us for the journey and who comes in person to comfort us. We, like our forebearers, walk by faith and not by sight. But the day is coming when God's glory will fill heaven and earth, all tears save those of joy will disappear, and our mourning will turn to dancing. We will experience a heaven-on-earth homecoming of comfort and belonging and delight. Shalom will prevail and our yearning

⁹⁸ See, for example, Ronald Sandler, *Character and Environment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

⁹⁹ See, for example, Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). See also *Beyond Stewardship: New Approaches to Creation Care*, eds. David Warners and Matthew Heun (Grand Rapids: Calvin Press, 2019).

¹⁰⁰ For example, in *Caring for Creation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) Max Oelschlaeger argues that care should be the centerpiece of an "ecumenical approach to the environmental crisis."

¹⁰¹ Many classic wilderness writers make this claim, e.g., Henry David Thoreau and John Muir. For a more recent defense, see Bill McKibben, *The Comforting Whirlwind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), chap. 4.

hearts will find their home in the heart of God—a God who makes a home among mortals. Such a story is truly good news in these troubling times.

But this good news of healing and wholeness will be believed and adopted by people anxiously adrift in the flux, degradation, and suspicion of the postmodern world only if we the church bear witness to this gospel in our everyday lives. Our faith tradition has what is needed to redemptively address the hopes and fears of our postmodern age, but our beliefs about guilt, grace, and gratitude will be embraced by others only if we the church put these beliefs into practice.

May the God who made us and redeems us also empower us to embody this good news in all we do. To God be the glory. Amen.

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