

---

# Jesus in Disneyland: The Church Meets the Postmodern Challenge

David Lyon

*Dr. Lyon is the Chair of the Department of Sociology at Queen's University. His research interests include the sociology of religion, the relationship between new technology and social change, and the debate over post-modernity. The article which follows is an abridged, unrevised version of the Birks Lecture series, presented by Dr. Lyon at the Faculty of Religious Studies at McGill in October of 1994.*

---

## I. Liturgy and Cyberspace: From Word to Image?

I admit it: I have been to Disneyland. It was a fascinating day of hair-raising rides and spectacular shows. The wraparound cinema was amazing—the horses thundered towards me, and as I ducked down and turned, there they were disappearing behind me! Mickey Mouse put his arm around my shoulder for a photo, Main Street seemed more real than real and, most magical of all, the light parade after dark brought a cavalcade of cuddly Disney characters so close I could almost touch them.

However, the first thing that struck me about Disneyland was not the lights or the rides but the parking lot. It is huge! Having memorized our position, we were then taken by bus to the entrance proper, after which we were subject to a whole new set of rules. As you know, one must line up for every ride, every experience. The promise of unprecedented fun apparently makes it worth standing in line, like cattle in market stalls, for long periods of time. And woe betide those who eat in an undesignated area or, worse, take off their shoes to give their aching feet some air. Larger-than-life cartoon figures soon materialize from nowhere to ensure

compliance. If you argue, they generously offer to escort you to the gate.

You see, you leave more than your car in the parking lot. You leave behind your ability to make your own decisions about exactly where you go and what you do. You are either allured into each attraction or courteously compelled to comply. Yet the impression is given that Disneyland offers the ultimate in consumer choice. The array of options is dazzling.

All of which makes Disneyland a highly appropriate metaphor for contemporary culture and society. The obsessive focus on fun, spectacle, and choice appears in many Disneyland lookalike theme parks and malls, including Canada's Wonderland, the West Edmonton Mall, and so on. But it is hard not to be involved, to be drawn in. Hard not to see the world as a tourist, not to purchase like a consumer. I want to explore both the reasons why these modes of living are so attractive today and their deeper social and cultural meaning.

What of the other big word in the article's title? I was made uncomfortably aware that some thought this title in bad taste, or worse, blasphemous. It certainly is not my intention to trivialize the Christ. I deliberately use the name of Jesus, incongruously juxtaposing it to Disneyland, to highlight the contrast. Do we—any of us—recognize Disneyland culture for what it is? How far are we unwitting reproducers of its style, its methods? Members of religious communities may make claim to distinctiveness in belief, morals, and so on. But contemporary consumerism is seldom blatantly anti-religious so, like the air, we breathe it in without much thought for its quality. So, what are disciples in Disneyland to do?

Before commenting on the specific theme of "liturgy and cyberspace" I must comment briefly on the stance taken here. My analysis of today's social and cultural conditions springs from sociology. However, believing as I do that academic work cannot somehow be inoculated against the effects of religious world-views, and indeed that it not only does but should express them, I try to allow my own Christian commitments to inform what I do. While the kind of critique I seek often has elements in common with green, marxist, feminist or even postmodern perspectives, its sources may be traced to Christian commitment.

Today, much debate centers around the postmodern, and this is fitting. The whole massive project that made the modern world—from science-and-technology to liberal democracy—is in fundamental question. The question is not only an intellectual one, but moral and social as well: our age is not only self-critical but self-dismantling. We cannot yet be sure of the shape of things to come, so "postmodern" seems a good way to label the product for the time being. "Postmodern" phenomena were first recognized as such within art and architecture, music and novels, so

we might be forgiven for thinking that the kinds of “questions” I have in mind here are limited to aesthetic and intellectual ones. Such questions—concerning “postmodernism”—are crucial and unavoidable, but they do not arise in a vacuum. This is what I mean.

A related term, “postmodernity,” refers to the social, political, economic dimensions of the postmodern. Among these, two items deserve special notice. One is new information and communication technologies, whose development paves the way for, and is implicated in, major social-cultural changes. Computer power, yoked with telecommunications, is vitally bound up with the postmodern. My comments on “liturgy and cyberspace” start to explore this dimension.

The other feature of note is the rise of consumerism. Not that humans have not always consumed, or that the growth of capitalism did not encourage a particular culture of consumption. They have and it did. Previously, however, consuming has existed as a subsidiary activity, an aspect of living. Today consumerism has inflated into a way of life and a social order in its own right. As the bumper sticker has it, we were “born to shop.” Consumerism is also global, thanks largely to the technological development to which I have already alluded. “Customized religion” addresses issues of consumerism.

How did all this come about? Needless to say, it is a complex and contested story. Roughly speaking, we might say that the pre-modern period was characterized by a providential framework, which saw history unfolding according to God’s purpose. A secular variant, “progress,” gradually made itself felt in modern times, and took God largely out of the picture. But when the goal of progress went steadily out of focus until mere “newness” supplanted any broader horizon, the third motif, “nihilism,” entered the frame. As soon as the real point of activity is unmasked as greater efficiency, novelty, or productivity, the cat is out of the bag. The age of innocence is over. Those grand stories—whether religious or pseudo-religious—that once justified hard work, or morality, or existence itself must be relegated to the realm of fairy tales. As Nietzsche said, we now have to continue to dream knowing we are dreaming (Vattimo 1992, 7). Or so he thought.

This historical perspective is emphatically not one that proposes our situation is completely unprecedented. Not everything about contemporary nihilism is new: its antecedents lie in ancient antinomianism, in Greek Sophism and Roman Cynicism. As a motif of the postmodern, nihilism certainly did not appear chronologically after modernism (Wyschrod 1990, xiii). This means, emphatically, that we are confronted by competing world-views, not the supersession of one view by another. Of course, it may be that some *reasons* for holding certain positions may

no longer be tenable, but even that does not necessarily invalidate those positions.

### **Liturgy, Authority and Reality**

The seemingly odd juxtaposition of liturgy with cyberspace calls for some explanation. What I want to contrast is two communicative contexts that are worlds apart. Yet they are communicative contexts whose mood and method ripple out well beyond cloisters and computers. I refer to liturgy and cyberspace as signs that signify ways of speaking—even of being—that characterize a culture. While liturgy bespeaks a realm of authority, continuity, community, wholeness, and purpose, cyberspace hints at an exuberant anarchy and at the instantaneous, individualized, fragmentary and inconsequential. My immediate aim in what follows is to explore these features rather than to argue for one over the other as a preferable or superior context.

There was a time, of course, when much of everyday life found its touchstones of meaning in liturgical utterance. That ancient authority could solemnize a marriage, welcome an infant into this world, or dignify the corridor leading to the next. Besides marriage, other vestiges of the liturgical past still find their place in ceremonies today. Prayer precedes the business of the House of Commons as a—perhaps futile—reminder of the seriousness of what is said there, and oaths to speak the truth—all of it and only it—are taken on the Bible in courts of law.

Liturgy as a communicative context has some interesting social characteristics. First, authority is evident, not least from the fact that only certain people are authorized—often “ordained”—to lead liturgical events, but also that only certain statements are permitted. Changing the wording of a wedding service does not have infinite possibilities! Continuity is another feature of liturgy, connecting people over hundreds and even thousands of years with similar settings.

Liturgy also presupposes community. It is fundamentally shared and deflects decisively away from personal opinion and private practice. Even the first person, “I believe in God” is meant to be said in unison with others: the “I” emphasizing only each believer’s responsibility for the affirmation. Community in turn suggests wholeness; liturgy links us with that which is beyond and bigger than us but also reminds us of our relation to the rest of creation. Lastly, liturgy points to purpose. While placing believers within a tried and tested tradition, liturgy also has a forward thrust. The communion service, after all, is only “until He comes.”

In all these respects, liturgy points beyond itself. It refers to a reality outside, yet one that impinges on our experience. In Christian liturgy, we may discover the word made flesh—incarnated—that shares in human

life so that humans might, astonishingly, share in the divine. Daily, bodily life is hinged to a larger reality through words and through the Word. And because people experience each other as bodily presence, in face-to-face relationships, the word-made-flesh is good news indeed.

As Kieran Flanagan rightly observes, however, "It cannot be said that liturgies operate at the centre of modern consciousness. To the secular mind, these Christian rites belong to a pre-modern age, relics of past anxieties which technology and modernity have assuaged" (Flanagan 1991, 57). We are more likely to listen to the weather forecast than to pray for rain and to heed opinion polls than hold tenaciously to principles. By and large, we live in a quite different communicative context than that provided by liturgy. Wherein that earlier time was dominated by the written word and print, ours is increasingly an electronically mediated context.

I am not saying that liturgy is doomed, though clearly its impact is dulled. Nor am I saying that liturgy will not stage a comeback, although if it does it is bound to be influenced by the new media. Indeed, I want to leave such predictions on one side for a moment, and focus rather on my contrasting category, cyberspace. Here is a fine metaphor for electronically mediated communication, and one which takes us well beyond the mere McLuhanesque world of passive audiences consuming TV.

### **Cyberspace, Fluidity and (Virtual) Reality**

Only ten years ago "cyberspace" was just a new word in a sci-fi novel (Gibson 1984). Today "cyberspace" is used freely to describe a world mediated by computer networks, a world of direct and total access to a digital realm of information and communication technology. Cyberspace is inhabited both by total devotees—as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* has it, "wrapped in media...excluding daily life" (Gibson 1984)—and ordinary souls like me who simply rely on a handy means of quick, cheap, worldwide communication, e-mail. *Neuromancer* is rightly described as a postmodern novel, and it epitomizes the cultural dimension of the technological shifts it portrays. In this world, fluidity, not fixity, is the norm. New technologies are marked by their capacity to bend and melt rather than to structure and solidify reality. For millions of cybernauts, this fluid realm has become reality, courtesy of mushrooming new technologies. In a kind of realized prophecy, fiction becomes fact.

Cyberspace is used here as a metaphor for electronically mediated communication, now cranked up to another level, or even another dimension. Three aspects of this new dimension may be distinguished. In cyberspace, firstly, anything goes. In contrast with a world in which authoritative statements are made and heeded—like liturgy, royal command or legal summons—cyberspace knows no priorities, respects no

precedents, promotes no principles. Not only are there many voices, but often the messages are a melange, untraceable to any single source. Just as cynics dismiss cable television as “500 channels and nothing on” so newcomers to the infobahn are often horrified by the volume of cyber-junk flowing into the digital landfill that appears on the screen.

There is promise, of course, of educative, democratic, and emancipatory potential in cyberspace, such as British Telecom’s “electronic university” idea, and I don’t want to denigrate that. But it is also true that you have to know where to look for the intelligent, the decent or the constructive. While some cling to modern-style regulation and moderating of cyberspace, others argue that it should be a context in which, literally, anything goes.

Secondly, and this is anticipated in “anything goes,” reality slips out of focus. Virtual reality, the electronic simulation of environments, is more than a dream or movie-hype. My own university, Queen’s, boasts an advanced VR lab. Research subjects can mount and control a bike and experience many sights and sensations of riding through vastly differing landscapes and conditions without ever moving in physical space beyond the lab. Televirtuality, the capacity to share such three-dimensional environments over a telecommunications network is believed to be a next step, with enormous entertainment, work and educational potential.

All this challenges the conventional notion—common to many moderns and Christians—that a single universe exists out there, independent of our perception. Reality is not what it used to be, and now electronics, not just drugs, offer entry into virtuality. Life itself appears to be a more fluid category.

Lastly, then, consider the virtual self. Once again, nothing is straightforward, because the self is both central *and* fragmented. Cybernauts recognize that, on-line, identity is in question. One says that “we who populate cyberspaces deliberately experiment with fracturing traditional notions of identity by living as multiple simultaneous personae in different virtual neighborhoods” (Rheingold 1993, 61). At the same time, the self is believed to be at the core of the information universe of cyberspace, choosing, communicating, controlling. Kids in the electronic arcade find themselves in charge of powerful machines to fight or race, on earth or in space. This is an exhilarating contrast to the meaning-drained routines of school, street and home. As Benjamin Woolley rightly observes “the sight of someone wearing a virtual reality headset is the ultimate image of solipsistic self-absorption” (Woolley 1992, 9). God-like control is bestowed upon mortals by the power of computers and the grace of VR.

Postmodern selves are constructed in different but complementary ways. For some, as we shall see, self is the outcome of consumer choices,

where symbols such as brand-names feature strongly. For cybernauts, self is construed as the digital personae developed within electronic communication. Either way, identity is not so much given—by family name or as the image of God—or ascribed, as produced, the result of an ongoing process of discovery. Selfhood becomes a postmodern project. But while modern-style control is still sought, it is a project without end or, for those who still believe in it, without meaning.

Earlier I suggested that, in contrast with liturgy's world of authority, continuity, community, wholeness, and purpose, cyberspace offers anarchy, the instant, the individualistic, the fragmented and the inconsequential. The anarchic dimension is seen in the relative lack of law or governance in cyberspace. It remains an undefined, largely unregulated realm where authority is inherently dubitable. For one thing, multiple authorship by electronic accretion is common—on bulletin boards for example—and for another, the lack of supplementary signals such as body language or tone inflection has contributed to a blurring of conventional communicative boundaries and thus a breaking of hierarchy. A sense of limitlessness, of ecstasy, is available in cyberspace. Whether illusory or not, in more conventional terms, its devotees undoubtedly find it desirable.

While great hopes are raised for the creation of new communities in cyberspace, the jury is still out on whether this will be the net result of information highway development. Just as a peculiar kind of individualism prevails in car-use, so much evidence suggests that a similar trend is observable with computers. Electronic mediation of communication does not necessarily enhance community. Indeed, the very capacities ushered in by new technologies offer more opportunities for fragmentation. So far from presenting a world of organic wholeness, cyberspace seems to help promote an explosive multiplication of minor interests and specialized tastes. If the communicative context does not appeal, a fresh network can always start up.

There is also the fact that in cyberspace, people are literally absent from each other as bodies, however literarily close they might be courtesy of telephone lines, email text, video image or electronic impulse. When Gibson says "wrapped in media," then, several meanings are possible. People could be preoccupied, absorbed with their digital companions—as kids with Nintendo or computer buffs at their keyboards—but there is also a sense in which they are only available to others *through* these media.

Apart from the potential for less-than-desirable uses of cyberspace—such as sexual perversity or racist propaganda—another feature follows from fragmentation, which is inconsequentiality. Unlike the sense of purpose embedded in liturgy, the malleability of cyberspace means that goals

tend to evaporate. It is not that goals no longer exist but rather that none commands more attention than another as being worthy of pursuit. The cultural tendency that converted the drama of the lecture into the relatively "uneventful speech" (Fenn 1982) of the seminar is given vast new scope in cyberspace. Discerning between the different qualities of competing messages becomes more and more difficult.

### **The Church Meets the Postmodern Challenge**

A deliberate ambiguity resides in the word "meets." I mean "meets" both as "encounters" and as "comes to terms with." I want to suggest that the churches meet the postmodern challenge constantly, in the sense of "encounter." Indeed, churches can easily be cultural chameleons, taking on the colors and textures of the world around and camouflaging the differences between themselves and the "world." This makes it difficult for Christian communities to meet the postmodern challenge in the other sense, namely, to come to terms with, to confront and work out an appropriate relation with, postmodernity.

The signs that the churches are encountering the postmodern are many. There is more emphasis on the entertaining, the spectacular. There is less concern with the long-term, less evidence of commitments, especially if they are binding and lasting, doubts concerning time-honored traditions and authorities, the breaking of hierarchy and the concern to let all have a voice. Televangelism and prime-time religion, with the preacher as talk-show host and the congregation as participating audience, are but the obvious tip of the iceberg of spectacle-centered Christianity.

As for commitments, the Rawlyk studies showed last year that many Canadians would claim to hold orthodox Christian beliefs, but fewer and fewer express those in traditional ways (Rawlyk 1993). Believing without belonging is the order of the day.

The image we have of God may also undergo change as a result of the rise of small groups within churches. Robert Wuthnow argues that despite the rhetoric about fostering community, small groups may have a contrary effect: "Come if you have time. Talk if you feel like it. Respect everyone's opinion. Never criticize. Leave quietly if you become dissatisfied" (Wuthnow 1994, 6). Some groups do little more, he says, than allow people to focus on themselves in the presence of others.

Here indeed we may be able to discern the anarchy of anything goes, the image-and-spectacle oriented, the individualistic, instant, fragmentary, episodic, inconsequential world of which cyberspace is a metaphor. It contrasts sharply with the world of authority and its accompanying commitments, continuity and purposes. This latter world clashes with



the postmodern communicative context and is perceived either as *passé* or, worse, inappropriate. So what are disciples in Disneyland to do?

First, I suggest that concerned disciples who are at all alert to the unfolding postmodern context should spend time trying to understand what is happening, and why people enjoy cyberspace and Disneyland. Cyber-freedom may be illusory, but it is a much sought-after illusion! Vividly contrasting metaphors such as liturgy and cyberspace may help focus the mind, but the real hard work occurs in thinking through each aspect of the postmodern as it affects the faithful living of everyday life.

In particular, far more attention should be paid to two items: media-wrapped relationships and the influence of illusion. What does it mean for the church that the ways we interact with each other are more and more mediated electronically? Does the apparent potential for disintegration do its destructive work or does it find itself rebounding, judo-like, into new ways of relating? What do we understand by "reality" and how far does this include face-to-face, bodily relationships? Is electronically mediated communication another instance of "seeing through a glass, darkly" before we finally see, "face-to-face?" Or is the influence of illusion to be resisted, as a kind of virtual vice?

On the question of which reality is real, the churches are well-placed to offer some criteria. It is no accident, for instance, that cyberspace weddings are sought after: cyberbirths and cyberdeaths are more difficult. Although in the later twentieth century we are blurring these borders with talk of choice ("pro-choice," "exit") such choices are ultimately illusory (Bauman 1992b). I have no choice over whether or not I am born or I die. If there is the makings of a sacred cosmos in virtual reality, its limits are a good point of entry for Christian apologetics. If a cybernaut suffers a fatal heart attack or stroke you cannot punch in another quarter and play again.

Second, such disciples will beware the lure of nostalgic responses. The breakdown of social norms, the trampling of tradition in contemporary culture, the confusion about how to go on, these feed the temptation to retrench, to fall back on old verities, old institutions, familiar paths. A sense of history should not be confused with living in the past; disciples are called to live in the present. It is the pull of nostalgia that fuels much fundamentalism.

Third, disciples pursuing faithfulness will beware false alliances. The collapse of modernity and its vaunted authorities may well be welcomed. Christian churches, with their ambiguous relation to modernity, have clung for support to modern certainties for too long in my view. But the price to be paid for embracing the postmodern is high. Christian truth is all too easily reduced to one among many, rather than as ultimate, whole

and relational, emanating from the mouth of one whose character guarantees the reliability of the word.

## II. Customized Religion: The Sacred Self

The outside of the envelope is decorated with a slogan announcing that “David Lyon, now you can create your own cards, posters, banners and more!” Inside, the advertising flyer has my name inserted at every point at which once it would have said, anonymously, “you too can make your own individualized products!” I am urged to check the box that agrees, “Yes, I want to create posters, cards, banners and more with that special David Lyon touch—for just \$29!”

This is direct, niche marketing that uses every trick and gimmick to stop me tossing the thing into the Blue Box for recycling without opening it. It is customized, both in the sense that it is geared to a prediction of my interests and that it has my personal name all over it. This marketing is meant to appeal to me as someone who would enjoy mailing cards or displaying posters that are apparently unique—“four easy steps to a design that could only have come from David Lyon”—and that would enhance my image as someone who is above mass-produced, factory-designed, uniform and standardized products.

In this section I argue that consumerism is a defining feature of the postmodern, and that consumerism affects all of life, including religion. I also want to show how consumerism has some especially interesting implications for the self and how we construct our identities. One implication is seen in the example of direct mail that encourages me to buy in order to present a particular image of myself. Another implication is visible in the emergence of customized religion, which produces the phenomenon I refer to as the “sacred self.” Lastly, I ask how well this sacred self sits with historic Christianity and propose that a radical assessment and critique of consumerism must lie at the heart of any Christian engagement with the postmodern world.

### Consumerism and the Postmodern

Consumerism—life-styles and cultures structured around consumption—is a defining feature of the postmodern. Consumerism works in tandem with developments in new technology as one of two crucial characteristics of postmodernity. Direct mail, or computer-generated niche marketing, expresses this marriage perfectly. Contemporary consumers increasingly seem to see themselves as bundles of desires, people with manifold needs to be met in the mall and in the market. Strolling and shopping have become central pursuits in the affluent societies; leisure

and consumption may even be displacing work as the source of our identity. Disneyland—with its multitude of lookalike theme parks and shopping-as-amusement malls—draws all this together in one symbolic place, epitomizing the postmodern focus on consumption and the self, on desire and choice.

Another key symbol is McDonald's, the acme of fast food production and marketing. At McDonald's we see the modern and postmodern overlapping. Take the automated consumer. McDonald's must take credit for turning the restaurant into a factory system in which customers are processed as they walk or drive through, to be churned out, refueled, at the other end. That is modern rationalization, without a doubt.

But note that it is the consumer who has been automated, not now the worker. Moreover, customers are being automated the world over, indicating the global aspect of McDonaldization. McDonald's is part of the accelerated compression of time and space which is characteristic of the postmodern (Harvey 1990). Indeed, in a recent report (CBC 1994) a Swiss agency is now measuring the quality of life and cost of living in terms of how much a Big Mac costs. In Lagos, it requires an average worker to toil for two days, and in Chicago, fourteen minutes. McDonald's, says Allen Shelton (1993), is "an emblem of postmodernism, a moral symbol that acts as a signpost for the times."

Just as the impact of McDonaldization is felt in diverse contexts throughout the world, so that of which it is a sign, consumer-centrism, leaves no area of life untouched. As Philip Sampson warns, "Once established, such a culture of consumption is quite indiscriminating and everything becomes a consumer item, including meaning, truth, and knowledge" (Sampson 1994). Hospitals, schools, and even prisons are now talking of "delivering products and services," that is, of promotion, marketing and competition. Consumer choice is elevated to the realm of overriding, even transcendent value.

In cultural terms it seems that consumption is increasingly eclipsing the former centrality of production, as advertising, tourism, mass entertainment, and leisure activities come to the fore. This does not mean, of course, that we are somehow entering a Cockaigne-like toilless society (in that non-vegetarian world, you recall, partridges flew ready-cooked into the mouths of the recumbent revellers!), but that the focus of social interaction is displaced into the sphere of consumption. In the emerging situation people find their niche in society, their means of social integration, and their identity through consuming (Bauman, 1992a).

The consumer society needs consumers. For the individual consumer, consuming is a duty. So shopping skills rise to great prominence in consumer culture; they are central to market-dependency. People who know

the best deals, who have scrutinized their catalogues, they are truly store-wise. The broader result is that we constantly "try on" not only new clothes and new perfumes, but new identities, fresh personalities, different partners. However, there are some who cannot be seduced. Flawed or failed consumers (Bauman 1992a), as companies and governments in fact think of them, are outside this arrangement. They do not have the will or the capacity to consume, and they act as a warning to all whose lives are geared to ensuring they stay within the consuming majority.

The pressure to spend occurs at two levels: social and systemic. Socially, there is symbolic rivalry—Levi's, ESPRIT, Bennetton—and self-construction through acquiring commodities that bestow distinction and difference. For the system, pressures come from companies who monopolize the definition of the good life, of what our needs are, and how they are to be satisfied. This process works alongside and is reinforced by marketing companies, who constantly seek more data to put us in their very precise consumption niches. You may not be aware of it, but marketers use your postal code to classify you into types: "bohemian mix," "shotguns and pickups," "pools and patios," "young influentials," and so on. They know not to send yoghurt and granola coupons to "shotguns and pickups," or diaper deals to "bohemian mix."

This, then, is the postmodern consumer society. Its effects are felt well beyond the store and market, as more and more institutions—schools, hospitals, museums, universities, libraries—see their users as consumers. "Will it sell?" and "Can I buy it?" have become metaphors commonly used in all sectors of life, including religion. Nothing is immune, or, should I say, non-marketable. In universities, excellence is increasingly defined in terms of success, success in terms of competition, and competition measured in dollars. Both the consumer orientation and the quest for better marketing strategies can also be found in the churches. And in a curious twist, religion can also be found in the mall.

Consumerism and religion. It is no wonder some commentators have noted the ways in which today's religious world looks increasingly like a supermarket. Peter Berger first commented that people today seem to approach religious possibilities like they would a supermarket, picking and choosing from available options (Berger 1967). Public opinion pollsters and government departments ask for our "religious preferences." Advertising for church services or religious books or magazines seems little different in its quest for market niches than any other advertising. It is no accident, of course, that this phenomenon was amplified after the consumer boom in the affluent societies during the 1960s.

In Canada, Reginald Bibby has described an increasing movement "from religious commitment to religious consumption" (Bibby 1987, 80).

Churches display their wares, compete in the field of advertising and marketing, and allow their potential customers to browse among an ever more exotic array of religious possibilities, from the razzmatazz of TV faith-healers to the nostalgia of liturgical traditionalists. It appears that the churches are far from immune to cultural co-option into a form of consumerism.

As the shift of emphasis from production to consumption occurs, religion also moves more decisively from its erstwhile public place to the private sphere. There, people are free to choose on their own what to do with their time, their homes, their bodies and their gods (Featherstone 1991, 112). Of course, the privatizing of religion antedates the consumer society. It was a response to the systematic uncoupling of institutional religion from segment after segment of social life. Agencies born in religious contexts, such as law, education, health, and welfare, eventually forsook their origins, claiming independence. And as the steeple's shadow shrank, so private life appeared as the natural locus of religiosity. The privatizing process is certainly not arrested and in some ways is accelerated by consumerism. The acquisitive quest and the growth of consumption for its own sake, along with religious privatization, is often seen as destructive of religion. But is it really so?

Certainly, in terms of conventional, Christian-based religion in the West, the trend towards present pleasures, egoistic life-styles, and freedom from obligation represents a radical departure. The frequently caricatured puritan ideals of asceticism and self-denial that would lead to delayed enjoyment, saving for a rainy day, and marriage for life is clearly out of kilter with the culture of the "me generation" that "does its own thing" and where "anything goes." The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism does seem to have been supplanted by a "Romantic ethic and the spirit of consumerism" (Campbell 1987).

However, if anything can become "sacred," as Emile Durkheim's perspective suggests, then this could include commodities which are seen by some as mere "utilities." The symbolic charge of Levi's jeans or Doc Martens, the Super Bowl or the Stanley Cup may actually heighten the sense of the sacred. If the realm of religion is restricted to institutional churches and their social reach, then consumerism could be seen as an erosive force. But the proposal here is just the reverse: more shopping does not necessarily mean less sacred.

This implies that more consumption may mean less puritan-style religion, but not less sacred. The new symbols that excite, inspire, or give a sense of connection with others may actually be cultural commodities, available in the mall, on TV or CD. In this light, we see the sacred not so much reduced as relocated, a process that has huge implications for

understanding both the postmodern and its relation to contemporary Canadian churches. While the grand narratives of modernity or of the so-called Christian West might in some respects be fading, this does not mean that no narratives, no stories are available any longer, or that what remains does not have some sacred aspects. Rather, the stories are much more fluid, malleable and—crucially—personalized.

### **Trying Them On: Self-Assembly and Identity Construction**

The modern world is one in which tradition steadily loses its grip on individual and social life. Where once we might have identified ourselves in terms of the village or clan we came from, and located ourselves within a social hierarchy stretching down from Queen to pauper, now nothing is fixed. International processes like migration, trade and communications mean that our local lives are connected with the global. Simultaneously, choice has opened up tremendously for most people in the affluent societies, giving us unprecedented opportunities to pick life-styles from a range of options (Giddens 1991).

To put this in an historical context, in the Western world the Reformation and puritanism taught that humans are special creations of God, with specific tasks by which they would glorify God. Modernity put people, not God, at the center and turned the quest inward—looking for the inner self. As the postmodern gains ground, however, even that search is abandoned, at least in part. The self is now assembled. There is no longer any past or future, only an endless present. Drawing on a variety of fragments, we construct ourselves for the occasion. This is the world of the point-and-click personality.

So what is happening to the self in postmodernity? As people flit like butterflies from store-to-store and from symbol-to-symbol they are constantly constructing themselves, trying on this fashion, that life-style. A sort of pastiche persona results, so the self—and life itself—becomes transient, ephemeral, episodic, and apparently insignificant. This is what we might call the “plastic self,” flexible, amenable to infinite reshaping according to mood, whim, desire and imagination. This self is most at home in Disneyland, where pleasures may be consumed continuously and personae donned like so many outfits.

Paradoxically, even as the plastic self appears to rule, much is also invested in the self. Significance is still sought. Being authentic, expressing oneself, is raised to a high status. The voice within assumes a new authority at just the time when other, traditional authorities are being more radically questioned. The process is obvious within contemporary therapeutic approaches in which a “manipulable sense of well-being” is central (Rieff 1966). This is the obverse of the apparently postmodern,

an internalized metanarrative that persists despite the poor standing accorded other metanarratives. At the same time, freedom *from* those metanarratives—including truth and morality—could be the occasion of freedom *for* the self. This we could call the “expressive self” (Heelas 1994).

Thus while it may be the case that the quest for the inner self was abandoned, at least in part, a strand of this remains in the discourse of the expressive self. Although older self-quests may have been cast aside, the idea that some kind of inner self still exists may yet be significant. On the one hand there is the properly postmodern self that is only a consumer. The person collapses into a multiplicity of desires, seen symbolically in Disneyland. On the other is a self relating to counter-cultural trends; a self reacting against the modern world of technological manipulation and economic calculation. This one is really only “post”modern in the sense of being “anti-modern.”

The second self finds its roots in an older Romanticism, but more recently in the “expressive revolution” of the 1960s. Insofar as the sixties’ movements were counter-cultural they were loosening the ties of tradition and the mass-produced, mechanical ways of modernity. Both conventional religion and modern metanarratives were abandoned, but not in a nihilist way. Rather, the authentic self was sought, often in relation to some new metanarrative. The therapeutic would be one manifestation. The connection between personal and political in feminism or between person and planet in green movements would be others. The expressive self, then, retains some sense of its own story, even though it is found in the same detraditionalized milieu as the properly postmodern plastic self.

These two selves are not personality types by which we might classify different people. In fact, I suspect that the pure postmodern identity assembler is a pretty rare if not non-existent bird. Much more likely is some combination of the two selves where a larger, more stable story gives meaning in much of the daily round. The sacred self, in other words, could apply to either, only more clearly so to the expressive.

### **Customized Religion: The Sacred Self**

The two selves, plastic and expressive, may also be discovered in religious contexts. In both the conventional religion of the churches and in New Religious Movements, especially New Age, one can find traces of the Disneyesque plastic and the Romantic expressive self. In a sense, this is hardly surprising, given that these selves are secularized versions of earlier forms. A Lutheran or Calvinist stress on the bondage of the will could be set against the pivotal Pelagian act of will; Puritans pressed home

responsibility for personal choice.

In consumerist religion the holy hedonist is visible, shifting from church to church, denomination to denomination, seeking new experiences, new stimuli. In this stained-glass window-shopping, the plastic self consumes sermons, old and new liturgical forms, and choir or folk-band music without ever stopping long enough to be seriously involved in any. Such a tendency is even more evident in the New Age movement, which in consumer-style cornucopia offers choices galore. Staying at a New Age bed-and-breakfast a couple of years ago I was offered as part of the service spirit guidance, crystals, advice about ley-lines, vegan cuisine, and massage. But I was also assured that I was under no obligation to follow any particular path except that of maximizing my experience.

At this point one self blurs into the other. The New Age quest of experience also accents the inner life, the voice within. Religion in this case is less merely consumed, more internalized. The voice of ancient tradition or of divine revelation is muted or ignored altogether, but the inner voice is taken to be thoroughly authoritative. Needless to say it takes little imagination to see that similar motifs are present within conventional church religion. Belief is demoted, experience promoted. "Divisive" doctrine diminished, a unifying stress on "spirituality" magnified. Feminization of church leadership fosters some aspects of this, a process that we could be tempted to connect with the shift from male-oriented production to female-oriented consumption.

Within New Age proper, if we take Shirley MacLaine as its prophet, self religion is central. "God is within...everyone is god." In certain respects, New Age represents a shaking off of the institutions of modernity. Adherents no longer feel "at home" in them. The reality within is reality itself. At the same time, New Age has now been harnessed by modernity's classic institution, the business corporation. When IBM and Pacific Bell turn to self religions for help in management and marketing something curious is afoot. "Zen and the art of telephoning," "Creative visualization to tap inner resources," "dissolving your limitations"—courses such as these are now on offer.

It is easy to be cynical about what seems like a sixties sell-out to the corporate culture of the nineties, but the old danger of logs in the eyes of those who would remove sawdust from others is ever present. Also, the range of connections between religion and capitalism is neither new nor limited. The point is that in a culture that stresses choice and diversity, and that denies old categories such as good and evil, all kinds of alliances, holy and unholy—depending only on the eye of the beholder of course—become possible (Heelas 1992).



## **After Consuming, After Self**

For all the ways in which consumerism has come to dominate late or post-modern times, its rule is still incomplete. As we have seen, consumerism may be thought of as a new social as well as symbolic order, but this does not mean that the inherent contradictions of this social order have been, or will be, overcome. And where the self is concerned, I have argued that not only are there multiple, self-constructed, plastic selves, but that an expressive self also haunts the detraditionalized, but not yet fully postmodern, world.

By way of drawing threads together, let me now highlight the lack of completeness and the contradictions of consumerism and their implications for the future. These apply both to social order and to the self. At the same time I wish to suggest that, rather than continuing to collude with and be co-opted by consumerism, the Christian community, in its varied manifestations, could actually contribute to its critique and act as a counter-cultural force.

Firstly, consumerism is incomplete and contradictory as a social order. Just as capitalism necessarily entails a class society, where exploitation is bound to occur, so consumerism implies by its very dynamic that some will not consume. Failed and flawed consumers are as necessary to the system as a proletariat to capitalism, in this case as a reference point for consumption and a threat of otherness to be avoided. The consumer order of capitalism attempts to deny that some are automatically excluded from full participation. But the underclass—the poor of both the industrialized and developing nations—cannot remain hidden. In addition, the very potential for further consumption is itself consumed as rain forests fall and the ozone layer leaks.

Another contradiction of consumer order is that, even for those it seduces, it cannot finally fulfil its promises. A deception lies at its heart. As Bauman observes, at least capitalism acknowledged there would be winners and losers. Consumerism pretends that if everyone is let into the store, everyone will be happy. A linked lie is that consumer freedom is the only kind there is. "Free to choose" becomes a slogan that shows up in the most incongruous places. But in doing so it reveals the extent of the hegemony of consumerism, and how it denies other forms of freedom (Bauman 1992a, 224).

As far as the consuming self is concerned, further contradictions rear their heads. During modern times, the moral questions posed by daily life were increasingly repressed as efficiency, control, and management took over as pseudo-values, implicitly denying satisfactory answers. More and more, the individual self had to bear the burden of judgement and decision. As self-construction becomes the order of the postmodern

day, and the meaning of life is reduced to mere consumption, so this burden is felt more acutely. Moral questions and meaning questions refuse to go away—indeed, they multiply, mockingly; think of the cyborg, or the risks of AIDS, pollution, and famine. But sometimes the flippant laughter of the postmodern is the loudest reply they hear.

The main alternative reply comes from the expressive self, who, feeling robbed by modernity of the moral resources to live a worthwhile life, seeks a new means of relating to the world. Moral debate having been reduced to conflicting demands within the same soul, the expressive self may seek life-style choices as the means of reinstating morality. Hence the growth of what Anthony Giddens calls “life politics” (Giddens 1991, 9ff.) where self-actualization and choice are central. In this realm aspects of feminism are important, though more broadly the connection between the person and the body is involved. If we make ourselves, what is a human being and what role does our—now more malleable—body play? At the other extreme life politics also relates to the planet, where risks to human survival are increasingly felt to be located. Approached as modern problems, where control is dominant, self-actualization is morally stunted. Yet the quest for remoralizing attempts precisely to go beyond the constraints of modernity’s (and now postmodernity’s) self-contained, self-referring style, and this, I believe, offers space for dialogue.

While what I think is a genuinely moral quest may be seen in, say, some green and feminist movements, it is not entirely clear that within these the flawed self is an acceptable way of approaching things. As Mestrovic (1993, chap.1) says, *homo duplex*—the idea that in human beings there is an inevitable interplay between the peaceable and the barbaric—is not a popular concept, and the shift towards self-actualization or self-assembly will not make it more so. Without doubt, certain groups of people can easily be demonized, but this is not the same as recognizing a basic lack of goodness in all human beings, as Christianity traditionally asserted. The presence of evil, of moral ineptitude within us all, is hard to accept in any culture.

At the end of the day, when social and cultural analysis is contextualized within some larger frame, the implications of phenomena like customized religion and the sacred self must be spelled out. For example, if there is a whiff of sacredness associated with social analysis of postmodern consumerism then would we be out of order in asking whether this is like the idolatry of which the biblical scriptures warn us?

Certainly, characteristics of classic idolatry are present. Good things become god-things. The idol is justified and supported by innocent-sounding hegemonic beliefs about the nature of the good life, for example. But, critically, the quintessential idol binds and blinds, and this too

is visible in consumerism. We are now bound by subtle seductive forces, and blinded by the deep deceit of the system. If these things are so, then not only iconoclasm but religiously-rooted alternatives are appropriate.

Three components of such an alternative, as far as Christian churches are concerned, might be these. One, a theology of enough. This is a basic theme throughout Hebrew and Christian writings and could be linked with what William Leiss has called "the limits of satisfaction" or Ursula Franklin's "conservator society." It celebrates the adequate and generous provision that satisfies needs enjoyably, while also displacing pleasure as a human priority. This is one means of escaping the self-referentiality of consumerism.

Two, a recognition that though *homo duplex* is an important concept, it is not the end of the Christian story. Again, the self requires a larger context than narcissistic self-assembly within which to find its place, its meaning. Accepting that humans are flawed beyond the possibilities of mere self-correction is a start, but it cannot stop there. The New Testament makes it plain that in Christ lies the possibility of putting on a new self which, paradoxically, is not self-constructed.

Third, if it is true that the Christian community shows signs of being co-opted by consumerism, then the problem lies in the sacralizing of self. The god/dess within, from this standpoint, is no god. The Christian gospel bids us first look upward, to a transcendent God who is also incarnate in Jesus, then outward, to our neighbor. It is the voice of the Other, first the divine, then the neighbor, that we should hear first. Only then will the insistent voice of the sacred self be silenced.

### III. Highways in the Desert: Beyond Babel

How best to see America? According to Jean Baudrillard, it's through the windshield of a car. Cruising through the desert with the air-conditioner on and country music playing. Gliding along freeways, sliding right on the ramp to a strip of neon-lit fast food bars, gas stations and supermarkets. Stopping only for a photo opportunity at a designated "scenic lookout" or by a giant Yogi Bear or Mickey Mouse. This is what you see, as it were, on the screen. Baudrillard wrote his book *America* in this style; it is all about highways in the desert.

Baudrillard's travelogue from the USA must be among the most controversial in the postmodern canon. His tone at times suggests repulsion for what he finds but the overall sense is that of seduction; he is enveloped in what he calls the hyperreal. With an ironic backward glance at supposedly European preoccupations with tradition, origins, and authenticity he asserts "It is Disneyland that is authentic here! The cinema and

TV are America's reality!...the skylines, speed, deserts—these are America, not the galleries, the churches, the culture" (Baudrillard 1988, 104). Perpetual simulation, a timeless now of signs, is all there is. Ghost towns and rust belts may bespeak economic decline and social dislocation but Americans do not acknowledge these, hints Baudrillard, because they inhabit a fantasy, a Disneyworld, a "sunny screen memory" (Baudrillard 1988).

Baudrillard certainly succeeds in evoking the experience, the feeling of depthlessness, of shiny surfaces. But he doesn't paint the picture in order to criticize it, unless it's a very subtle judgement. He seems to go along with it, to accept it. Indeed, he thinks of the empty, silent space of the desert as an "ecstatic critique of culture" (Baudrillard 1988). Is this what it means to "come to terms with" the postmodern world—to make peace with it? Do we just go with the flow, accept our lot, living in Disneyland?

Christian churches, which have in the later twentieth century become more and more aware of the need to consider the social and cultural contexts of faith, now face the same challenge as everyone else, how to come to terms with the postmodern. If the churches are not simply to succumb to the status quo and become either nostalgic havens for the reactionary or spiritless spectacles to seduce the searching, new strategies must be sought. But from what position can critique be mounted today? Is there any place left for ethics? And can dialogue with the postmodern yield any fresh ways of living "the Way"?

In this section I shall revisit first the multi-voiced character of contemporary culture, and comment on its meaning for ethics and history. Some see hope while others are horrified at its implications. Secondly, I ask whether this pluralism means that no vantage points exist from which critical leverage can be found. Baudrillard's desert doesn't offer much, but even that might have some clues. Are there other clues, I ask, thirdly, that might connect with the Jewish-Christian story as a resource for social-cultural renewal? The voice of the "other" and the pull of the future might be two. But, fourth, to find a properly critical cutting edge the Babel episode must be rethought. I conclude by taking a trip back to Isaiah's desert highway and contrasting it with Baudrillard's.

### **Mickey Mouse Media**

Let me start with Mickey Mouse of the outstanding ears, the most easily recognized symbol of Disneyworld. Ease of recognition is one thing, the meaning of the symbol another. Many suggestions have been made, but let us assume the ears are a cinema projector, which would be an appropriate universal code. But as such, the ears would be a misleading symbol,

for contemporary media recognize no universal codes. Soundbites, channel-changing and variety are all they know. The mouse-ears are in this sense ambiguous. American-Disney values—"land, family and beliefs"—lay claim to universality (Spy 1994, 63), but the media on which they depend contribute to the denial of just such universality.

Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo traces much cracking up of universal codes to today's communication media (Vattimo 1992). The would-have-been universal Western way lies shattered at the foot of modernity's mountain. In its place, not a single new alternative voice but a whole cacophony of voices crowd the airwaves, the blessing of Babel against the accursed unitary tower of technology. Media messages are multiple; plurality pervades communication.

For Vattimo, modernity ends when we can no longer think of history as unilinear. Most modern history recounts the story of those in power, but once this is demonstrated it is a short step to Vattimo's "There is no single history, only images of the past projected from different points of view" (1992, 3). The demise of imperialism and colonialism in the twentieth century is one crucial corrosive undermining the intellectual superiority of the West. And if no single history, then the idea of human events proceeding towards a better future is also aborted.

The other major corrosive is the mass media. However, for Vattimo this is not cause for lament. It's exactly in the chaos, the disorientation (even of five hundred TV channels?) that emancipation lies because centralized perspectives, the "grand narratives" of the Western Enlightenment, are dissolved by the media. Newspapers, radio, television, and now telematics and cyberspace all undermine the idea that there is one reality "in itself" "out there."

In place of the world of reality which can be measured, suggests Vattimo, is a world of consumer goods, experiences, and images. Do we want to go back to the authoritative world of techno-science, with its constant threat of *authoritarianism*, or forward to accept what the media gives: an explosion of "a multiplicity of 'local' rationalities—ethnic, sexual, religious, cultural or aesthetic minorities—that finally speak up for themselves" (Vattimo 1992, 9)? No longer cowed into silence by the thought that they must conform to a fixed "reality," each discovers their own voice, their own dignity.

Thus what appear to some to be endings—the end of universals, of foundations, of history, and of purpose—are for many the chance for new, postmodern beginnings. Even, says Vattimo, the opportunity of a new way of being human. Zygmunt Bauman sees something similar. Modernity, he says, attempted to substitute sets of supposedly rational rules for the former moral supervision of the church, rules that would

hold in check the human propensity to do wrong. Some clever combination of inner restraint and outer pressure would have to be found, it was thought, in order to make the rules work. Jeremy Bentham's panopticon prison design, where prisoners learn to discipline themselves because they are constantly watched by unseen observers, is a prime example. But social engineering always runs up against twin obstacles, the anarchic impulse to rebel, and the totalitarian temptation to tighten one's grip, a situation that modernity consistently denied or tried to hide (Bauman 1993, 8).

Another way opens up in the postmodern. Not to deny or decry ethics, but to find another footing. Social life, thinks Bauman, could even be remoralized through this postmodern turn. Such remoralization seems a far cry from the apparent relativism of "anything goes." In this account, the demise of universals and of foundations does not mean the end of ethics. The corrosive activity of the mass media cannot on its own present a new way forward (indeed, Vattimo should take more note of questions like who controls the media, who has access to the airwaves, and who can travel the information highway) but the pluralism it portends offers a new window on ethical options. How can this be so?

### No Vantage Point?

The Babel of voices set loose by the decline of tradition, the collapse of colonialism, and the multiplying media could just sound cacophonous. Without the authority of God's voice or its rational, order-seeking modern substitutes, it seems that any and every voice may find some airspace. From the appearance of previously obscure minority groups making themselves heard to the freewheeling communicative anarchy of cyberspace, we might assume that a kind of relativism has taken root (if that is not an oxymoron) fed and watered by postmodern prophets. However, as Ernest Gellner has pointed out, some postmodernists seem to smuggle very modern-sounding assumptions back into their theories (Gellner 1992). I want to focus rather on the apparently religious leanings of some postmodern analysts and on denials of relativism among others.

The argument can be made in different ways for different postmodern authors, but for many the extreme case would be that of Baudrillard. In what sense could his work be seen as religious? *America* has a style all its own, juxtaposing maxims with photos, apparently more playful than serious, and yet a self-conscious device is used, the travelogue, and he deliberately places himself in the tradition of transatlantic cultural comparisons. The United States is an "achieved utopia" where such is the self-perpetuating power of global capitalist commercialism that no alternative can be conceived. Europe, on the other hand, exists in a "crisis of

historical ideals facing up to the impossibility of their realization" (Baudrillard 1988, 77) Baudrillard's response, as we saw, is not lament or attack. The European sociologist succumbs to State-side seductions, with defiant good cheer.

What are we to make of this? More than one commentator suggests that when Baudrillard says his "hunting grounds are deserts" he sounds like an Old Testament prophet, cursing the wealth and corruption of Jerusalem (Turner 1990, 10). *America* could be read as a moral pilgrimage to a New Land, in which the "submerged religious paradigm" is a "quest for the real" which nonetheless "disappears before his eyes like a mirage in the desert."

If this is so, why would he plunge back into the pit of hyperreal consumerism? Two reasons could be offered. One, that simply by describing what he finds he helps us see our world with a raw freshness. As Turner says, "Baudrillard has been noticeably successful in capturing the fragmented, ironic, constructed, simulated features of mass culture, and he has accurately perceived the erosion of the authority of high culture in an age of advanced electronic technology" (Turner 1993, 85). Two, Baudrillard could be recovering a prophetic voice by challenging God to reappear. He is self-consciously preoccupied with "holes," both God-shaped (after Nietzsche) and Marx-shaped (after 1968) and, suggests Andrew Wernick, could be seen seeking a hidden God in the style of negative theology (Wernick 1992, 69). Baudrillard certainly offers nothing like a "vantage point" for social critique or ethics, but perhaps one should pause before writing him off as a relativist. Perhaps.

In quite different veins, other analysts of the postmodern refuse the relativism charge. Vattimo and Bauman, like Baudrillard, are aware of their historical location in a post-Christian context, and both also seek means of "coming to terms with" the postmodern. Yet they each strenuously deny that this entails relativism.

Bauman, for example, argues that postmodern ethics has to give up the pretences that have plagued ethics in modern times, above all the ideas that ethics has a foundation and is universal. As he says, these principles "drew their animus from the faith in the feasibility and ultimate triumph of the humanist project" (Bauman 1993, 9). Loss of that faith leaves us with moral selves who recognize their moral ambivalence rather than thinking of themselves as naturally good or naturally evil. And let's not imagine, Bauman goes on, that morality can be "rational" in the modern sense; it is not amenable to means-ends schemes. Do we want people merely to obey rules or to act as responsible beings? Let us admit that moral choices are not black-and-white. They are nearly all aporetic—contradictory, creating conflicts that are not easily resolved.

More positively, postmodernity pushes us, according to Bauman, to moral responsibility as "the first reality of the self," which means "being *for* the Other before one can be *with* the Other." In other words, for Bauman, there is no "foundation" for morality but there is an *a priori*, the moral self that precedes the social self. And he blames modernity's "power-assisted legal drill and philosophical indoctrination" for persuading us that the opposite is true.

This approach to ethics drops the self-deception perpetrated by modernity, while also resigning itself to the thought that irreparable damage was done to pre-modern conceptions of ethics. Could the reference to the Other offer an opening to dialogue with ethics originating in Jewish-Christian sources? I am encouraged to think so, not least because Bauman, along with a number of other postmodern thinkers, leans on the work of Emmanuel Levinas. This work focuses on the "Other" and has strong theistic overtones (see also Brow and Pinnock 1994).

### The Voice of the Other

For Emmanuel Levinas, the moral self, who is *for* the other before she is *with* the other, is the starting point for ethics. So Cain's question about the identity of his brother's keeper represents the breakdown, the antithesis of morality. The difficulty today is that the Disneyesque, consumer culture encourages just such a breakdown. Unless Baudrillard's *America*, where the cruising consumer seems to be sovereign, is a cautionary tale of how far one can fall, then in the end he too deflects us from moral responsibility in the Levinian sense. The cult of tourism, in which more and more of daily life must be like a carnival, a circus, seems well served by Baudrillard.

How we know and treat the other in postmodern society is also complicated by the absence of the other. Electronic technologies, as we have seen, enable many more relationships with those physically absent from us, extending even further the compression of time and space that began with print, telegraph, and telephone media. How we see and treat the others with whom we live, whether close by or at a distance, depends on what we know of them (Bauman 1993, chap. 6).

In intimate relationships we know a great deal about the other. After 22 years of marriage I wonder what secrets remain. At the other end of the spectrum, anonymity, we know nothing of the other. In between are degrees of "strangers." For most of human history physical and social closeness coincided. We just distinguished neighbors from aliens. In the modern world, as Georg Simmel pithily observed, we have become a "society of strangers." All the more so with the depopulated bodies of postmodernity.



What would the alternative to the consuming, self-for-self-first approach look like? For Derrida, and behind him for Levinas, it is not some foundational, universal claim, but the subject to whom the other lays claim. The supposed autonomy of the ethical agent slips from sight to be replaced by the *heteronomy* or rule of the other. But behind Levinas, in turn, is someone else. For him, a Jew who philosophizes out of the Holocaust experience, the face of the other makes him hear the words "thou shalt not kill." In other words, while others lift from Levinas his emphasis on alterity, otherness, he himself connects it with the commands of YHWH.

This is what makes Levinas's work such an important and interesting point of entry for ethics in postmodern times. He sees the significance of the other emblematically in the "widow, the orphan, the stranger" (Caputo 1993, 466), the helpless or marginalized, in other words, who has valid claims on us. Read the Bible from this standpoint and Christians will soon see our own complicity in forms of injustice and immorality, including those rationalized by "righteous" arguments. Equally, starting from this point, Christians may also contribute to the postmodern debate over ethics. Resources not yet recognized may yet make a real difference.

### **Beyond Babel**

Vattimo, you recall, argues that the collapse of colonialism and the rise of new information and communication technologies permits new voices to be heard. No one, Western, authoritative, scientifically-warranted voice now dominates. Rather, a profusion of voices, a diversity of dialects, a confusion of languages characterizes postmodernity. And Vattimo welcomes this as liberating, emancipatory. The disorientation which results reminds each of us that our language is not the only one and propels us into a process of interpreting and understanding others, the Other.

Vattimo is not blind to the resemblance between the contemporary confusion of voices and the biblical story of Babel. That account stands in a highly significant position within the Judeo-Christian narrative. Building the infamous tower on the plain of Shinar was an act of rebellion against YHWH, a concerted impulse to totalizing technological idolatry. The name for the tower is a double-entendre. For the Babylonians it was *Bab-ili*, the "Gate(way) of God," while the Genesis story connects it with *balal*, the root of "confusion." The effect of this word-play is obvious; it turns into a bitter joke against the builders (Blocher 1984, 207).

The joke is not entirely bitter, however. Halting the grandiose building project half-way, through the breakdown of communication, was a means of preventing further self-destructive idolatry. The attempt to

construct an alternative reality with its self-contained concept of truth and right practice disintegrates into a sea of senseless signals and slogans. Meaning and community suffer. No doubt about the severity of punishment. But the other side of the coin is that blessing is built-into the curse. The hubris that produces would-be total schemes and all-encompassing dominion has a fatal weakness that serves to protect humankind from its worst effects.

So what of the present-day parallel, the end of modernity and the explosion of postmodern pluralism? There is a sense in which Vattimo is right to welcome the new Babel. The puncturing of the technological hubris of modernity, with its secular commitment to unlimited progress, deserves no sympathy, no lament. The western way has ruled for too long, often suppressing the voices of women, minorities, and the weak. The modern era has also been one of unprecedented violence and bloodshed, the connection being perhaps most vividly seen in the meticulous management of the Holocaust, that acme of efficient death-production. If the new Babel of languages indicates the collapse of faith in unaided human reason to overcome all human problems and to engineer the future, rejoicing seems appropriate.

Like the original Babel, however, the situation today is more complex, more ambiguous. For one thing, some now suggest that the quest for reason itself is flawed, rather than seeing the problem as having inadequate contexts for reason. For another, the end of modernity spells the end of history, in the sense that seeing any purpose, any *telos*, is ruled out. This two-pronged challenge, to the basis of knowledge and the purpose of history is one that must be faced squarely by any would-be Christian thinker at the end of the twentieth century.

The Babel episode, however, is only one point in the narrative. Contradicting many postmoderns, who foresee only chaos and disorientation as a permanent condition—apocalypse forever—the story goes on. Pentecost heralds a reversal of Babel—not, *nota bene*, the reintroduction of one tongue—a kind of charismatic esperanto—but the capacity to recognize and respect difference within a wider framework. As one of the church Fathers put it “...what had been torn apart by strife is joined together by charity” (Blocher 1984, 211). Jew and Greek, slave and free, woman and man now find a new sociality in “harmonious difference” (Milbank 1990, 5). The social and ethical implications of Pentecost have yet to be elaborated for postmodern times, but this moment of anti-Babel denies permanence to Babel and offers a profound perspective, a signpost in the mist, that reorients those who mistook Babel for the terminus. Babel is already relativized but not yet reversed, fully.

## Highways in the Desert

Baudrillard's highway in the desert does not immediately give a lot of guidance for coming to terms with the postmodern. The desert experience has its sublime moments, by his account. But they appear rather pale and trivial next to the kind of spiritualities spawned in other deserts. He does, however, help us grasp the speed, the surfaces, the shiny dazzle of Disneyland's postmodern allure.

The endless now of *America*, or for that matter of any depiction of our times that recalls in Cohen's words, that history "ain't going any further" (Cohen 1992), may be fine for those time to be tourists, but it is bad news for the poor, the dislocated, the marginalized. The truncated timeline, the amputated perspective is both dangerous and dismal. Dangerous because the past is a faded memory, just when we should remember, for instance, the Holocaust. Dismal because no imaginative hope is available of alternative futures to act as plumbines for the present. And as far as the churches offer only shopping cart Christianity, they join the junking of history, furthering the famine of future hope.

Several postmoderns join the company of others in antiquity who, lacking any teleology, lapsed similarly into hedonism, apathy or despair. On ancient pagan tombs have been found inscriptions enjoining the living to "eat, drink and be merry," ruminating on the thought that "Once I had no existence; now I have none...It does not concern me," and the question, "Charidas, what is below? Deep darkness. What of the paths upward? All a lie" (Green 1968, 139). As I stressed earlier, the debate over postmodernity represents a clash of world-views, some elements of which have hoary histories. But in the multi-voiced present, who is to deny providence a new airing? Against those who would perform a sort of historical lobotomy upon us, Isaiah's words offer to give back our sense of history.

Isaiah's highway in the desert has crucial contrasting features, yet still speaks to the postmodern situation. It tells of a voice in the wilderness calling for a way to be prepared. And it is located at a specific moment, emerging from exile in Babylon. The cultural captivity to Babel, the hard labor of struggle against political and economic odds, is over, yet the effort must go on. The construction task still lies ahead, beyond Babel, and it starts with the God-respecting remnant itself. That's where the highway must be built, a royal carriageway to welcome the reigning monarch.

Note that both cutting and construction are required. The road must be blasted through the hills but built up in the valleys. Social critique is involved, the demand of justice where injustice has reigned, but this is linked with the call for righteousness in each situation. The Baptist, who

would fulfil this prophecy, had to offer different directives to business people, soldiers and civil servants as to what carving the highway would mean in their own daily lives. Risk is also entailed. The prophetic voice is a lonely one and those who heed the prophet's words may find themselves misunderstood, slandered, disenfranchised, excluded. There is also the pain of realizing that the prophetic message hits hard at the church. That's the price paid for prophecy—when it is worth hearing.

The other side of the coin is that this highway leads somewhere. It signposts the *shalom* described in Isaiah's other chapters. This gives shape and direction to the concern with the other, highlighting the ways that immorality, injustice and violence will yet be excluded from the harmonious difference of *shalom*, and its creation-wide scope.

But the highway doesn't just lead to a another kind of virtual reality, cut off from our bodily and social existence in the here-and-now. The *shalom* to which the highway goes is supposed to be prefigured in the people of God. This humbling, and to some, shocking thought, given the stained record of the church, means that harmonious difference should already be sought within contemporary communities of Christians. That stained record does not in itself render invalid the good offered by Christianity, as Charles Taylor affirms (1989, 519). But it does repel some from faith, and it does make some Christians reticent to declare that they have any "good news" left. The here-and-now search for *shalom* is a risky, precarious and sometimes thankless business.

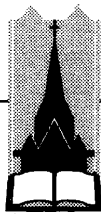
To leave it there would be to leave out its most vital factor. The route to harmonious difference is promised in the Messiah, Jesus, who became flesh to walk the risky, precarious paths with us. He, scandalously, ate and drank with sinners like us, taking our immorality, injustice, mixed motives and violence on himself. He knew the plight of the marginalized, the other, even to death. But that cross-scarred death turned out, even more scandalously, to be the very achievement of *shalom*.

## Works Cited

- Baudrillard, Jean. 1988. *America*. New York: Verso.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1993. *Postmodern ethics*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 1992a. *Intimations of postmodernity*. London and New York: Routledge.
- . 1992b. *Mortality, immortality and other life strategies*. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity.
- Berger, Peter. 1967. *The sacred canopy*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

- Bibby, Reginald. 1987. *Fragmented gods*. Toronto: Irwin.
- Blocher, Henri. 1984. *In the beginning*. Leicester, U.K.: InterVarsity Press.
- Brow, Robert and Clark Pinnock. 1994. *Unbounded love*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. 1994. CBC Stereo News. 17 September.
- Campbell, Colin. 1987. *The romantic ethic and the spirit of modern consumerism*. Oxford and New York: Blackwell.
- Caputo, John. 1993. The good news about alterity: Derrida and theology. *Faith and Philosophy* 10(4).
- Cohen, Leonard. 1992. The future. Columbia Records.
- Featherstone, Mike. 1991. *Consumer culture and postmodernism*. Beverly Hills: Sage. Quoting Thomas Luckman. 1967. *The Invisible Religion*. London: Macmillan.
- Fenn, Richard. 1982. *Liturgies and trials*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Flanagan, Kieran. 1991. *Sociology and liturgy*. London: MacMillan.
- Gellner, Ernest. 1992. *Postmodernism, reason and religion*. London: Routledge.
- Gibson, William. 1984. *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace Bks.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and self-identity*. Oxford: Polity.
- Green, Michael. 1968. *The second epistle general of Peter, and the general epistle of Jude: An introduction and commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Harvey, David. 1990. *The condition of postmodernity*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Heelas, Paul. 1994. *Postmodernity, sociology and religion*. London: MacMillan. Ed. Kieran Flanagan and Peter Jupp. Forthcoming.
- . 1992. Sacralization of self and new age capitalism. *Social change in contemporary Britain*. Ed. Nicolas Abercrombie and Alan Warde. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity.
- Mestrovic, Stjepan. 1993. *The barbarian temperament: Toward a postmodern critical theory*. London: Routledge.
- Milbank, John. 1990. *Theology and social theory*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Rawlyk, George. 1993. God is alive! *MacLean's*. 12 April.
- Rheingold, Howard. 1993. *Global networks*. Ed. Linda Harasim. Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press.
- Rieff, Philip. 1966. *The triumph of the therapeutic: Uses of faith after Freud*. New York: Harper & Row. Quoted in Roger Lundin. 1993. *The culture of interpretation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 5.
- Ritzer, George. 1993. *The McDonaldization of society*. Newbury Park, CA: Pine Forge Press. Quoting Allen Shelton, unpublished paper.

- Sampson, Philip, Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, eds. 1994. *Faith and modernity*. Oxford: Regnum Lynx.
- Simmel, Georg. 1968. Society of strangers. *The conflict in modern culture*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Spy. 1994. September/October.
- Taylor, Charles. 1989. *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Turner, Bryan. 1993. Baudrillard for sociologists. *Forget Baudrillard*. Ed. Bryan Turner and Chris Rojek. London: Routledge.
- . 1990. Periodization and politics in the postmodern. *Theories of modernity and postmodernity*. Ed. Bryan Turner. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Vattimo, Gianni. 1992. *The transparent society*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wernick, Andrew. 1992. Theological themes in Baudrillard's *America*. *Shadow of spirit*. Ed. Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick. London: Routledge.
- Woolley, Benjamin. 1992. *Virtual worlds*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wuthnow, Robert. 1994. *Sharing the journey*. New York: Free Press.
- Wyschrod, Edith. 1990. *Saints and postmodernism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



DIOCESAN BOOK ROOM  
LIBRAIRIE DIOCESAINE

(514) 843-9387

625 St. Catherine Street West,  
Montreal, Quebec  
Les Promenades de la Cathédrale  
H3B 1B7