THE CHRISTIAN USES OF SECULAR POSTMODERNISM

Merold Westphal

Not surprisingly, postmodern philosophy derives its name from its critique of modern philosophy, especially as developed by Descartes and Hegel. In Descartes the marks of modernity are three: certainty, clarity, and purity. Put into theses it is the triple claim: 1) that philosophy can and must attain complete certainty (objective certainty, not mere subjective certitude) about matters of ultimate importance; 2) that philosophy's medium can and must be clear and distinct ideas, a medium so transparent as to be no medium at all but the very light in which things show themselves as themselves; and 3) that philosophy can and must be presuppositionless, free from immersion in the particularity and contingency of tradition and thereby free for knowledge that in its certainty and clarity will be universal and necessary. It is easy to see that the second and third theses are in the service of the first.

Hegel shares these ideals but has his own distinctive version of how they are to be achieved. Thus 1) certainty is to be achieved not through methodological doubt but through the ontogenetic recapitulation of the phylogenetic pathway of doubt and despair that is traced in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.[118] 2) Clear and distinct ideas are not immediately at hand but become available only through a thoroughgoing critique of the categories of thought such as we find in the *Science of Logic*.

3) While beginning in the right way is important if philosophy is to be unconditioned by the contingencies and particularities of history,[119] Hegel has learned from Kant (and Spinoza) that only that is unconditioned which

---

[118] *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), Introduction. Cf. Joseph Flay's commentary on the *Phenomenology* entitled *Hegel's Quest for Certainty* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1984).

[119] *Phenomenology,* Introduction and p. 58. *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), "With What Must the Science Begin."

includes the totality of conditions. The juxtaposition of completeness with certainty and clarity in Kant's Preface to the First Edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*[120] is ominous from Hegel's perspective. For the certainty and clarity Kant is able to achieve at the level of the Understanding, without the completeness demanded by Reason, which aspires to render itself unconditioned through possession of the totality of conditions, leaves us without the Knowledge we need. The Understanding itself, whether as common sense or as Newtonian physics, gives us the conditioned and some conditions, without being able to provide the totality of conditions; and Kant's critical philosophy only shows how the Understanding works, declaring that Reason's demands cannot be met. Our "knowledge" is only of phenomena and appearances and not of noumena and things in themselves, and, what is worse, what Kant takes to be of ultimate importance, God, freedom, and immortality, do not even appear as phenomena. So Kant admits, "I have found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith."[121]

Hegel gives a historical sense both to the way thought is conditioned by what is contingent and particular, its embeddedness in social practices and traditions of interpretation, and to becoming unconditioned (presuppositionless) by embodying the totality of the conditions. Thus philosophy can reach its goal only at the infamous "end of history," the point at which it is possible to survey the whole development of the human spirit and encompass all moments in a systematic totality.

---

[120] A xiii-xv.

[121] *Critique of Pure Reason*, B xxx. Though Kant belongs to the history of "modern" philosophy, postmodern philosophy sees in his critical finitism the beginnings of a deconstruction of modernity's claims. Thus Derrida can be read as a kind of Kantian. See Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) and Irene E. Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of Difference* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1986). Derrida himself writes, "I don't know, one has to believe..." *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 129. Cf. "Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of 'Religion' at the limits of Reason Alone," in *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

The True is the whole," we are told, and the System of Science which articulates the True in Absolute Knowing is possible only now that a "new era" has dawned. Science is "the crown of a world of Spirit..."[122] In other words, speculative philosophy is always ideology. "Whatever happens, every individual is a child of his time; so philosophy too is its own time apprehended in thoughts."[123] Only because the age to which it is relative is itself absolute as the culmination of the historical process can philosophical thought itself be Absolute Knowing.?[124]

The Science of Logic, no less than the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is presented as "its own time apprehended in thoughts." It's opening sentence complains, "The complete transformation which philosophical thought in Germany has undergone in the last twenty-five years and the higher standpoint reached by spirit in its awareness of itself, have had but little influence as yet on the structure of logic."[125] Aristotelian logic stands in need of "total reconstruction; for spirit, after its labours over two thousand years, must have attained to a higher consciousness about its thinking and about its own pure, essential nature."[126] It is only because spirit has reached its maturity that the Logic can be understood "as belonging to the modern world"[127] yet still be the "Science" rather than ideology or *Weltanschauung*. Reason has its presuppositions, to be sure; but as the historically emergent, systematic totality of the history of spirit, it no longer has a partial perspective but

---

[122] *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 6-11. For the theme of the "new era" in various texts, see Schlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), Ch. 4, especially pp. 64, 71-72, 74.

[123] *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), p. 11.

[124] For an interpretation of the Phenomenology in these terms, see Merold Westphal, *History and Truth in Hegel's Phenomenology* (3rd ed., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

[125] *Science of Logic*, p. 25. Repeating this complaint a page later, he continues, "However, once the substantial form of the spirit has inwardly reconstituted itself, all attempts to pre-serve the forms of an earlier culture are utterly in vain."

[126] *Science of Logic*, p. 51.

[127] *Science of Logic*, p. 42.

grasps the totality in its organic unity. Because its presuppositions no longer function like all penultimate presuppositions to define a particular point of view, it can be said to be presuppositionless.

Not surprisingly, the recurrent postmodern complaint against modernity's totalizing thinking is most obviously directed against Hegel. But the sense is strong that the features of "modernity" that are most explicitly in Descartes and Hegel are far more widespread than might at first be suspected."[128]

Postmodern philosophy is overwhelmingly secular. Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God rumbles like a *basso continuo* beneath the various critiques of modernity.[129] Derrida tells us, "I quite rightly pass for an atheist"[130] and his "religion without religion"[131] turns out to be religion without God. Other French postmodernists are without nuance in their atheism and profess no private religion. On the German side of the street,

---

[128] Descartes is a paradigm of foundationalist epistemology, while Hegel's holism is a paradigm of anti-foundationalist thinking. So that is not the issue between modern and postmodern philosophy. Postmodern philosophy tends to be holistic, but, for quasi-Kantian reasons, without the Whole. Moreover, those reasons tend to cut against Descartes' foundationalism as much as against Hegel's holism with the Whole.

[129] See, for example, Alan D. Schrift, *Nietzsche's French Legacy: A Genealogy of Poststructuralism* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, four volumes as two, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991); and "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead'" in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

[130] See *Circumfession* in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago. University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 155. For Derrida's gloss on this peculiar formulation, see Mark Dooley's interview with Derrida in *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003), p. 32.

[131] For a fine overview, see John D. Caputo *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997).

Heidegger insists that whatever may be true of the philosopher, philosophy itself must be atheistic.[132]

It is important, however, to notice two things here. First, the postmodern philosophers neither appeal to older arguments against the reality of God nor do they produce new arguments of their own. They speak as if it were axiomatic self-evident that we live in a world without God. Their work is in the mode (un)faith seeking understanding. Second, their arguments against philosophic modernity are not conceptually linked to atheistic premises. They see modernity forgetting that we are human, all too human and, to the degree that their arguments are successful, they show that we human thinkers, speakers, writers, and readers are not God; but they do not show that no one else is.[133] It is one thing to show that this cat, say, is not a lion, but quite another thing to show that there are no lion Given these two observations, one can say of postmodern philosophy what Pa Ricoeur has said about psychoanalysis:

> My working hypothesis ... is that psychoanalysis is necessarily iconoclastic, regardless of the faith or nonfaith of the psychoanalyst, and that this "destruction" of religion c be the counterpart of a faith purified of all idolatry. Psychoanalysis as such cannot 1 beyond the necessity of iconoclasm. This necessity is open to a double possibility, that of faith and that of nonfaith, but the decision about these two possibilities does not re with psychoanalysis ... The question remains open for every man whether the destruction of idols is without remainder.[134]

---

[132] For the relevant passages and an interpretation of them as methodological atheism, see Merold Westphal, "Heidegger's *'Theologische' Jugendschriften"* in *Overcoming Onto-Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

[133] For this kind of analysis of the famous "death of the author" motif in Foucault Derrida, and Barthes, see Merold Westphal, "Kierkegaard and the Anxiety of Authorship *International Philosophical Quarterly*, XXXIV, 1 (March, 1994), pp. 5-22.

[134] Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 230 & 235.

In *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism*,[135] I extends Ricoeur's analysis to all three thinkers he identifies as the "masters" of the "school, of suspicion"[136]— Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. There the "religious uses of modern atheism" turn out to be modes of Lenten self-examination, individual and corporate, in the attempt, with God's help, to discover and uproot the idolatry the always insinuates its way into faith.

Subsequently I have found it helpful to extend this strategy to the secular postmodernism of the twentieth century. My triple claim is that whether we are talking about the hermeneutics of suspicion in its modern mode (Marx and Freud or its postmodern posture (Nietzsche) or about subsequent secular postmodernism which draws heavily at times on Marx and Freud as well as Nietzsche, a) the critiques are all too true, all too much of the time; b) they neither logical] presuppose nor entail an atheistic ontology; and 3) they can be recontextualize within the framework of a Christian understanding of creation and the fall. I relation to creation, postmodernism can be read as a hermeneutics of finitude which expresses, however unintentionally, the radical difference between Creator and creature. Thus St. Paul insists that "we walk by faith, not by sight" and that"we have this treasure [the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God] in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us" (2 Cor. 5:7, 4:4-7). I read the metaphor of clay jars epistemically and not just ethically, anticipating the subsequent contrast between faith and sight, especially the autonomous sight which is the hallmark of the Enlightenment. Secular postmodernism can also be read as a hermeneutics of suspicion which expresses, however unintentionally, the noetic effects of the fall. St. Paul teaches that "all ungodliness and wickedness... suppress the truth" (Rom. 1:18). I read this to signify not just outright denial but "editing" to bring the truth within various human comfort zones and putting revealed truth to work in the service of human, all too human projects.

---

[135] (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), originally published (Grand Rapid MI: Eerdmans, 1993).

[136] *Freud and Philosophy*, p. 32.

These latter two forms of suppression are the idolatries that are the target of Kierkegaard's attack upon Christendom, which permeates his entire authorship. If Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are the founding fathers of Christian and atheistic existentialism, respectively, we can also see them playing the same roles in relation to postmodernism. Kierkegaard's critique of Hegelian speculation has its roots in the passion of faith and its target in the totalizing thinking in which he finds modernity to culminate. Thus his pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, writes, "Existence itself is a system – for God, but it cannot be a system for any existing spirit. System and conclusiveness correspond to each other, but existence is the very opposite"[137] In Kierkegaard we see the possibility of a Christian postmodernism, one which finds in the paradox of the Incarnation and the offence of the Atonement a divine alterity that "shatters" the cogito[138] and "supplements" the system.[139] So we can ask the question, What uses might Christian thought, which has its own postmodern possibilities, have for the secular postmodernisms of the twentieth century?

Most of the thinkers who are called postmodern do not call themselves by that name. But Jean-Francois Lyotard has at least described what he calls "the postmodern condition" and given us the closest thing we have to its definition. He uses the term 'postmodern' to describe "the condition of

---

[137] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), I, 118. Derridean deconstruction can be read as a sustained argument for the later claim, namely that the totality that would convert any faith into sight is simply not available to any human knower, thinker, speaker, writer, or reader. On this point, Christian and secular postmodernism are in complete agreement. See note 16 above and my "Kierkegaard's Climacus— a Kind of Postmodernist," *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997).

[138] The term is Paul Ricoeur's, who associates this shattering with Nietzsche but could just as easily have linked it to Kierkegaard. See *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blarney (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 11-16.

[139] Jacques Derrida speaks of the "dangerous supplement," dangerous because what is open to supplementation is not the totality that the System claims to be. See *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), pp. 141-64.

knowledge in the most highly developed societies,"[140] and he writes, "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives."[141] Since he calls metanarratives grand narratives and since the biblical story that stretches from Eden to the New Jerusalem, from "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3) to the city that "has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Rev. 21:23), is a grand narrative indeed, it is often assumed, by friend and foe alike, that postmodern incredulity is the antithesis of Christian faith. But a closer look shows that this is not the case. There is something iconoclastic, to be sure, about this incredulity, but whether "the destruction of idols is without remainder" remains to be decided.

The first thing to notice is that the metanarratives that concern Lyotard are those of modernity, and biblical faith has not been a conspicuous component of modern philosophy. Nor does Lyotard mention the Christian story. He makes allusions to thinkers like Descartes, Locke, and Adam Smith, but his primary focus is on Hegel and Marx. Their metanarratives, once called philosophies of history, have often been described as secularized versions of the biblical story. Modernity, either as the extant capitalist nation state or as the classless society about to be brought in by the revolution, is the eschatological fulfilment of history. But in the context of Hegel's pantheism or Marx's atheism the God of the Bible has quite disappeared from the scene. These stories are no longer the biblical story.

That leads to a second important observation, namely the radical, threefold difference between the metanarratives of modernity and the grand narrative of Christian faith. First, the former are *meta*narratives, and for philosophers meta-languages are second order discourses about first order discourses, in this case the scientific theories of which modernity is so proud. They are the narratives within which the non-narrative discourses of modernity are placed. The first order discourses of Christian faith include

---

[140] N. B. He purports to be describing something already "out there," not seeking to introduce, much less to impose something new.

[141] *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. xxiii-xiv.

liturgy, sacred music, preaching, creed, and catechesis. But so far are these from being non-narrative discourses that the biblical story is their very heart and soul. So we can call that story, grand as it is, a *mega*narrative rather than a *meta*narrative to signify that it belongs essentially to all the first order discourses of the Christian faith. Prior to scholarly reflection, and subsequent to it as well, that faith is nothing but placing the life of the believer and the believing community within that story, hearing it, believing it, telling it, and trying to live it. The grand narrative does not first come on the scene with the metadiscourses of Christian faith, the scholarly reflection of biblical and systematic theology. It is rather the task of these discourses to be faithful to the mega-narrative to which they owe their existence.

Second, if we ask why modernity finds it necessary to place its non-narrative discursive practices within the framework of some metanarrative, Lyotard's answer is direct and simple: legitimation. Premodern societies, he argues, legitimate their language games, the complex mixture of discursive and non-discursive practices, with the help of narratives. Lyotard seems to be thinking of both myth and biblical history at this point. But the scientific discourses of modernity have tended to discredit these narratives in modern eyes and, ironically, leave both themselves and the non-theoretical, political and economic practices with a legitimation deficit. To keep this from becoming a legitimation crisis, modernity hires philosophers to tell it the grand stories, which now function precisely as metanarratives, that will legitimate its practices.

But the biblical story has normative significance in a very different way. Its proper function is more nearly delegitimation than legitimation. It tells the story of what God is up to in human history in such a way as to make clear: a) that human practices, discursive and non-discursive, personal and collective, are legitimate only to the degree that they are in conformity with and in the service of God's purpose, God's sovereignty, God's kingdom; and b) that the human story is always one of incomplete conformity to God's requirements and of service to human, all too human purposes, sovereignties, and kingdoms. It is the constant reminder of what is obvious to honest observation in any case, that in spite of the grace that invites us to conformity and service, the saints remain sinners and that the church is not

the Kingdom. The New Jerusalem is an object of hope and thus of faith but not yet of sight.

This difference about legitimation can also be expressed as a difference about totality. Within the Hegelian and Marxian stories, our practices and our theories mutually reinforce each other, and there is no need to go beyond them. Together they form a closed circle, a self-sufficient whole. Metanarratives are instances of totalizing thinking. By contrast, to live within the Christian meganarrative is to know the perennial penultimacy of both our theories and our practices. We see "through a glass, darkly," "in a mirror dimly," in an "enigma" (1 Cor. 13:12). Moreover, "what we shall be has not yet been revealed. What we know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). The believer and the believing community participate in the Kingdom; they are changed by its presence within them and they bear witness to it by word and deed. But they do not confuse their present life with the Kingdom, which they await in hope.[142]

Third, the metanarratives of modernity are the product of the philosophers hired by modernity to make it solvent by solving its legitimation deficit. By contrast, the biblical meganarrative is told by prophets and apostles and, in the gospels, by a Son who is greater than the prophets who came before and the apostles who came after him. These were not exactly welcomed by the "modernities" of their own time. Nor is this surprising, since their purpose was not to legitimate the practices of their times. Modernity's philosophers present their grand stories as the flowering and fruit of human reason. There assumption is that deepest truth is already within us and needs, as it were, only to be recollected (with the help of their genius).

By contrast, the biblical narrators present a word from the God whose thoughts are not human thoughts and whose ways are not human ways (Isa. 55:8). Thus St. Paul insists that the word of the cross (ὁλὸγος τοϋ σταυροϋ) is

---

142 The Marxist revolutionary awaits the classless society, but in a different mode, confident that the theory and practice already in hand are sufficient for the "church" (read: party) to bring about the "Kingdom" (read: classless society) without any wisdom or power from without (read: God).

a σκάυδλαου (offence, stumbling block) in Jerusalem and simply foolishness in Athens. "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:18-25). Here the assumption is a) that revelation is necessary to go both *beyond* created reason and *against* sinful reason, not only because we do not already possess the truth but because we lack the ability to recognize it as the truth even if someone should present it to us,[143] and b) that both its form and its content embody a heteronomy that challenges the modernity's pretensions to epistemic and moral autonomy.

In other words, properly understood, Christian faith is very different from both modernity and the philosophies to which it turns, willing, all too willing to justify itself (Luke 10:29). The Christian uses to which secular postmodernism can be put will be to remind us of this difference. Lyotard's analysis of modernity's metanarratives, which enables us to see how different is the Christian mega-narrative, embodies at least three such reminders for Christian thinkers who have ears to hear them.

First, there is a delegitimation motif, directed against all forms of triumphalism, the implicit realized eschatology of complacent assimilation of those who purport to be citizens of the City of God into the human, all too human cities in which they find themselves. This is not because the biblical story is not a story of grace as well as law, of mercy as well as judgment; it is rather because grace and mercy make no sense apart from divine law and judgment. The word of forgiveness is not good news to those who feel no need of it; and the word of reconciliation can only be puzzling to those whose God has been edited down to being the *imprimatur* of the language games they all too comfortably play.

---

143 For this account of the difference between reason as recollection and revelation as divine gift, see Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 9-54. Cf. "The Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle," in Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, same translators and press, pp. 93-108.

This is not to say, of course, that discourses that call themselves Christian cannot function as ideology. Indeed, all too often, both at the level of first order discourses (e.g. preaching) and second order discourse (e.g. academic theology), the prophetic, apostolic, messianic No has been edited out in favour of a discourse that legitimates "us", often by self-righteously vilifying "them", whoever they may be at any given time. The suggestion is rather that heard through the ears of faith, Lyotard's version of secular postmodernism can be heard as an editorial "stet"— a call to restore what has been edited out.

Second, there is a specifically epistemic version of this reminder. Because the Christian meganarrative belongs essentially to every first order Christian discourse, it is to be understood as kerygma rather than apologetics. In other words, because its origin is revelation and not human reason, it is a matter of faith and not of sight (2 Cor. 5:7). The primary task of theology as second order scholarly reflection on Christian discourse is to guard against the ever present temptation to dilute the heteronomy of its form as revelation and its content as counter-cultural in every epoch of human history. If there is a secondary, apologetic task, it is to articulate to believer and unbeliever alike,[144] the inner rationale of the prophetic/ apostolic/ messianic word in terms of which it makes sense to the believer. But this task of faith seeking understanding is different *toto caelo* from showing that the word of the cross makes sense to the wisdom of this world, which both the believer and believing community may well have internalized without fully realizing the opposition between the word of the cross and the wisdom of the world. Lyotard can remind the believer who has ears to hear that faith is willing to appeal with Socrates to "the superiority of heaven-sent madness over man-made sanity."[145]

---

[144] Is it not always the case that the primary consumers of apologetic discourse are believers?

[145] Compare Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 23 with Plato, *Phaedrus*, 244d. Where St. Paul speaks of offence and foolishness, Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms speak of offence and madness, making the same point that the world's wisdom is not the criterion of Christian faith but ultimately a form of resistance to it.

Third, Lyotard's analysis can be a reminder, however unintentional, that theology needs to guard against becoming so "scientific" that it forgets its narrative origin and purpose. In the case of biblical theology, this happens when it desires to ground itself in historical criticism to such a degree that it tells us more and more about the (supposed) history of the text (both in terms of its production and transmission, the so-called "higher" and "lower" criticisms) and less and less about the *Heilsgeschichte* to which the text points and in which it belongs. In the case of systematic theology, this happens when the discourse becomes so metaphysical (or, for that matter, so existential), so wedded to categories whose provenance is Athens rather than Jerusalem, that "the mighty acts of God in history" are reduced to parables. The temporal self is supposed to relate directly to eternity, defined by static categories of metaphysical essence or existential possibility which render historical mediation unnecessary if not ultimately impossible.

***

The metaphysical version of this flight from the Christian meganarrative has been called onto-theology by Heidegger. In his critique of "the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics"[146] we encounter another landmark of postmodern philosophy. It is secular insofar as it fits fully within Heidegger's requirement that philosophy be atheistic; but in this case Heidegger himself points to its possible Christian uses.

Heidegger's definition of onto-theology comes in two stages and so, correspondingly, does his critique. Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is the paradigm for Stage One. In the text that came to be known by that name, Aristotle starts out to do ontology, to give an account of being as such— not, like the other sciences, this or that specific region of being, but the entire domain of being in terms of its most universal features. But he ends up doing theology, for him to complete his account he finds it necessary to posit the Prime Mover. The result is not two sciences but one, appropriately named onto-theology. *It*

[146] *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 42). The task of "overcoming metaphysics," which is so central to Heidegger's later thought, stems precisely from the fact that metaphysics is onto-theology.

is the theory that posits a Highest Being who is the key to the meaning of the whole of being.

Heidegger thinks Aristotle is anything but unique; rather, this structure informs the entire history of metaphysics "from Anaximander to Nietzsche,"[147] with Plato and Aristotle, Leibniz and Hegel, and Nietzsche, yes, Nietzsche as paradigmatic instances. Usually Heidegger doesn't even mention Christian theology, and when he does it is to note that metaphysics is older than Christian theology[148] and that scholastic theology "is merely a doctrinal formulation of the essence of metaphysics."[149] It is clear that a wide variety of beings, even Nietzsche's will to power, can play the role of the Highest Being who is the key to the whole of being and that the Christian God is only one of these. But at this stage Christian discourse is inevitably onto-theological, and not just in its scholastic forms. As soon as God is affirmed as Creator in one or another first order discourse (e.g., hymn, creed, sermon), we have a Highest Being who is the key to the meaning of the whole of being.

So what's the objection? What's wrong with this? At this stage, Heidegger's answer is that onto-theologically constituted metaphysics in all its forms is *Seins-vergessenheit*. He takes it to be the task of philosophy to think Being, which is not to be identified with any being, even the Highest Being. Metaphysics is the forgetting of Being simply because in its preoccupation with the Highest Being it never leaves the realm of beings to thing the Being of beings. This critique will have force only for those who 1) wish to be philosophers and 2) accept Heidegger's account of the philosophical task; in other words, it will have force only for the true believers of the Heideggerian church. The Christian theologian need not be under any compulsion to be a philosopher, as Heidegger himself points out; and the Christian philosopher is free to operate with a different understanding of the philosophical task,

---

147 "Introduction to 'What is Metaphysics', in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cam-bridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 280.

148 *Hegel's Concept of Experience*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 147.

149 *Nietzsche*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1987), IV, 209.

especially since 1) Heidegger has had great difficulty explaining what it means to think Being and 2) since 'Being' so often functions in his thought as a surrogate for 'God'.

So we turn to Stage Two, where Heidegger extends his definition of onto-theology. He asks the question, "How does the deity enter into philosophy, not just modem philosophy, but philosophy as such? And he answers that "the deity can come into philosophy only insofar as philosophy, of its own accord and by its own nature, requires and determines that and how the deity enters into it"[150] In other words, God can be taken into account by philosophy only if God is willing to play philosophy's game on its terms and in the service of its project. Heidegger describes that project in terms of such notions as representational thinking and calculative thinking, which try to bring all beings under the control of the principle of sufficient reason. He tells a complex story,[151] but we can summarize it by saying that onto-theology is now to be understood not merely as affirming a Highest Being who is the key to the whole of being but also as using that Highest Being to explain the whole of being, *to render the whole of being intelligible to human understanding*. It is at this point that onto-theology becomes an instance of totalizing thought.

Here at Stage Two of his account, Heidegger has two further critiques. First, the onto-theological project seeks to eliminate mystery from the world and from our understanding of it. Heidegger's own engagement with poetry and poetic thinking is his positive attempt to reawaken the sense of mystery that modernity has sought to suppress.[152] His critique of modern technology is his negative protest against the hubris of the demand that the whole realm of beings be subject to human mastery, first in thought and then in action.[153]

---

[150] *Identity*, pp. 55-56.

[151] Especially in *The Principle of Reason*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991). For an overview, see the title essay of *Overcoming Onto-Theology*.

[152] See, for example, the essays collected in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) and *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

[153] See, for example, the essays collected in *The Question Concerning Technology*.

Second, echoing Pascal's contrast between the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and Kierkegaard's contrast between the system and personal faith, Heidegger complains that in the service of its project metaphysics resorts to such abstract concepts as *causa prima, ultimo ratio, and causa sui*, with the result that even when the Highest Being is called 'God' the term is religiously meaningless. The right name for "the God of philosophy" is *causa sui*, he tells us, but we "can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before the *causa sui* man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god."[154]

While the *Seinsvergessenheit* critique that accompanies Stage One of Heidegger's account of onto-theology has no significant Christian uses, this double critique that accompanies Stage Two does. In fact, Heidegger suggests as much himself in the following three important passages.

> The god-less thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy, god as causa sui, is thus perhaps closer to the divine God. Here this means only: god-less thinking is more open to Him than onto-theo-logic would like to admit.[155]

This "god-less" thinking might take the form of silence about God, as in Derrida's non-theological appropriation of negative theology and Heidegger's own philosophy.[156]

> Someone who has experienced theology in his own roots, both the theology of the Christian faith and that of philosophy, would today rather

---

[154] *Identity*, p. 72.

[155] *Identity*, p. 72. The "god-less" thinking to which he refers may include not only his own philosophy with its commitment to methodological atheism, but also Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God. See "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead'" in *The Question Concerning Technology*.

[156] See "Différance" in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982): "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials" in *Derrida and Negative Theo-logy*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992); and "*Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum) in On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).

> remain silent about God when he is speaking in the realm of thinking. For the onto-theological character of metaphysics has become questionable for thinking, not because of any kind of atheism, but from the experience of a thinking which has discerned in onto-theo-logy the still *unthought* unity of the essential nature of metaphysics.[157]

But just as the patristic theologians, Greek and Latin, including Pseudo-Dionysius himself, did not remain silent about God in spite of the apophaticism that permeates their thought,[158] so Heidegger recognizes the open space for a discourse about God that will not be onto-theological. Speaking of "the possibility for Christian theology to take possession of Greek philosophy," Heidegger writes:[159]

> whether for better or for worse may be decided by the theologians on the basis of their experience of what is Christian, in pondering what is written in the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians ... "Has not God let the wisdom of this world become foolishness?" (I Corinthians 1:20) ... Will Christian theology one day resolve to take seriously the word of the apostle and thus also the conception of philosophy as foolishness?

Here our question about the Christian uses of secular postmodernism becomes the question: what Christian uses for Heidegger's Second Stage critique can be found for a theology that wants to opt out of the onto-theological project while still speaking of God. I speak of the Second Stage in order to note that the "step back" out of metaphysics (in Heidegger's sense

---

[157] *Identity*, pp. 54-55.

[158] Pseudo-Dionysius turns from the silence of *The Mystical Theology* to speech in *The Divine Names*. It is the latter text on which Aquinas writes his commentary, and the fruit of his encounter with apophaticism is not silence but analogical predication, speech that knows its own inadequacy to its intended referent. St. Thomas is a Kantian when it comes to our knowledge of God. He knows that it is phenomenal, knowledge of God under the limiting conditions of the human capacity to receive, and not noumenal knowledge of God as God is *an sich*. See John Wippel, "Quidditative Knowledge of God" in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1984)

[159] "Introduction", p. 288.

of the term) is not an abandonment of the notion that there is a Highest Being who is the key to the whole of being; and I speak of the onto-theological *project* to put the focus on philosophy's attempt to set the rules for our God talk in terms of its purpose. At issue is the "how" rather than the "what" of discourse. Thus, what is problematic about *causa sui* talk is not its content, for as the uncreated cause of all creation, the Christian God can rightly be designated as *causa sui*. The danger is that instead of being put to use in the service of wonder at the mystery of creation, praise and thanks for the gifts of creation, and responsible action in the service of creation, the causal language will be put to use for the purpose of rendering the whole of reality transparent to human under-standing, as if the human intellect were the measure of truth and the light in which beings finite and Infinite can fully show themselves.

This is already the first Christian use to which Heidegger's critique can be put: the preservation of mystery rather than its elimination. On this point Heidegger is a reminder of the overwhelming testimony of Christian tradition that God is incomprehensible, that God's being, wisdom, purposes, and love (which may not be as distinct as human language makes them seem) exceed our ability to grasp them, whether by nature or by grace, by reason or by revelation. A corollary of this lesson is that theology (both first and second order discourse about God) might well think of itself less as science and more as poetry (both lyric and narrative).

Here are a number of other lessons that Christian theology might learn from Heidegger, or, if you prefer, other Christian uses to which his critique can be put:

1) No philosophy, whether secular or religious, should be allowed to set the agenda and make the rules for Christian God talk, which rather should find its rules in its own sources and norms as found in Scripture in relation to tradition.[160] This does not mean that philosophy must be ignored, but that it is reduced to a maieutic role, helping theology to "recollect" what it already

[160] No attempt will be made here to address the question of the proper relation of tradition to Scripture.

knows on the basis of its own sources and in terms of its own norms. Secular philosophies (e.g. Lyotard and Heidegger) can play this role for theologies that are willing to listen to them carefully but unwilling to grant them the hegemony they often claim.

2) In the passage from I Corinthians cited by Heidegger, Paul identifies the source and norm of his theology as a logos that is foolishness in the eyes of the wisdom of the world, which he specifically links to the Greeks. Obviously it would be foolish on his part to subordinate his logos to that of Greek wisdom, especially when he identifies the former as the "word of the cross". The "step back" out of metaphysics will be a "step back" to a theology of the cross and away from every theology of glory.[161] On the epistemic side, this means the primacy of revelation over reason, for the cross is not something that can be "recollected" by any species of human reason. Thus Augustine finds much of value in the books of the Platonists, but does not find the Incarnation or the Atonement.[162] On the ethical side, this means the call to an *imitatio Christi* on the *via crucis* in sacrificial servanthood (Phil 2:5-8); nor is such an ethic "recollected" by any philosophy not under the tutelage of Scripture. In this context onto-theology would be a theology of glory that opens the door to glorying in the power of human reason to discover the truth and the power of human action to accomplish the good.

3) I have been using the terms 'theology', 'God talk', and 'discourse *about* God' more or less interchangeably. But first order God talk includes prayer, to which, on Heidegger's account, onto-theology fails to lead us; and prayer (along with other modes of worship) is not talking about God but talking to God. Moreover, prayer as talking to God does not originate with those who pray but is always a response to the God who has already spoken to us. First order discourse about God belongs to a language game (form of life)

---

[161] Luther draws this distinction in his *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518, especially in sections 19-24. See *Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), Vol. 31, pp. 52-55. For a brief analysis, see Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 25-34.

[162] *Confessions*, VII, 9, 20-21.

decisively shaped by listening to God and talking to God. The general principle to which Heidegger's critique directs our attention is that second order discourse about God needs to be in the service of first order discourse both to and about God on pain of being religiously otiose. The more specific principle, a corollary if you like, is that theology must lead from prayer to prayer. It must arise from a personal and communal life world saturated with prayer,[163] and it must lead back to prayer. It must, if it would overcome onto-theology, a) contribute toward overcoming the legitimation crisis of prayer by talking about God in such a way as to illuminate the necessity of talking to God, and b) contribute toward overcoming the motivation crisis of prayer by talking about God in such a way as to encourage and evoke prayer.

***

These examples from Lyotard and Heidegger are but two of many ways that secular postmodern philosophy can be useful to Christian thought. I believe there are numerous other modes of postmodern philosophy that can have similar Christian uses, including Derridean deconstruction and Foucauldian power/ knowledge genealogy. I leave these and other instances for the reader to work out, along with three reminders. First, finding such thinkers useful to Christian thought does not mean following them blindly or swallowing their thought uncritically. Neither in intention nor in result are they Christian thinkers. Second, the kind of appropriation I'm proposing is possible just to the degree that various postmodern critical analyses are conceptually separable from the secular, atheistic contexts in which they are to be found. Finally, I hope that by now it is clear the very thin soup one finds in Derrida's "religion without religion"[164] is not the only piety that one could call "postmodern". Rather, some postmodern critiques open the door for a kind of Christian thought that is robustly theistic and quite specifically Christian. No doubt such theology is not new but is to be found throughout the history of Christian thought, if never fully free from onto-theological tendencies. Perhaps one of the most important Christian uses to which secular postmodernism can be put is to help contemporary Christian thinkers

[163] *Confessions*, VII, 9, 20-21.

[164] See note 14 above.

sort of the wheat from the tares in our own traditions. The postmodern can lead back to the Premodern, or, more precisely, a critically appropriated postmodernism can lead to a critical re-appropriation of Premodern resources.

(Courtesy: *Revista portuguesa de Filosofia*, Portugal, Vol. 60, Fasc. 4, 2004.)