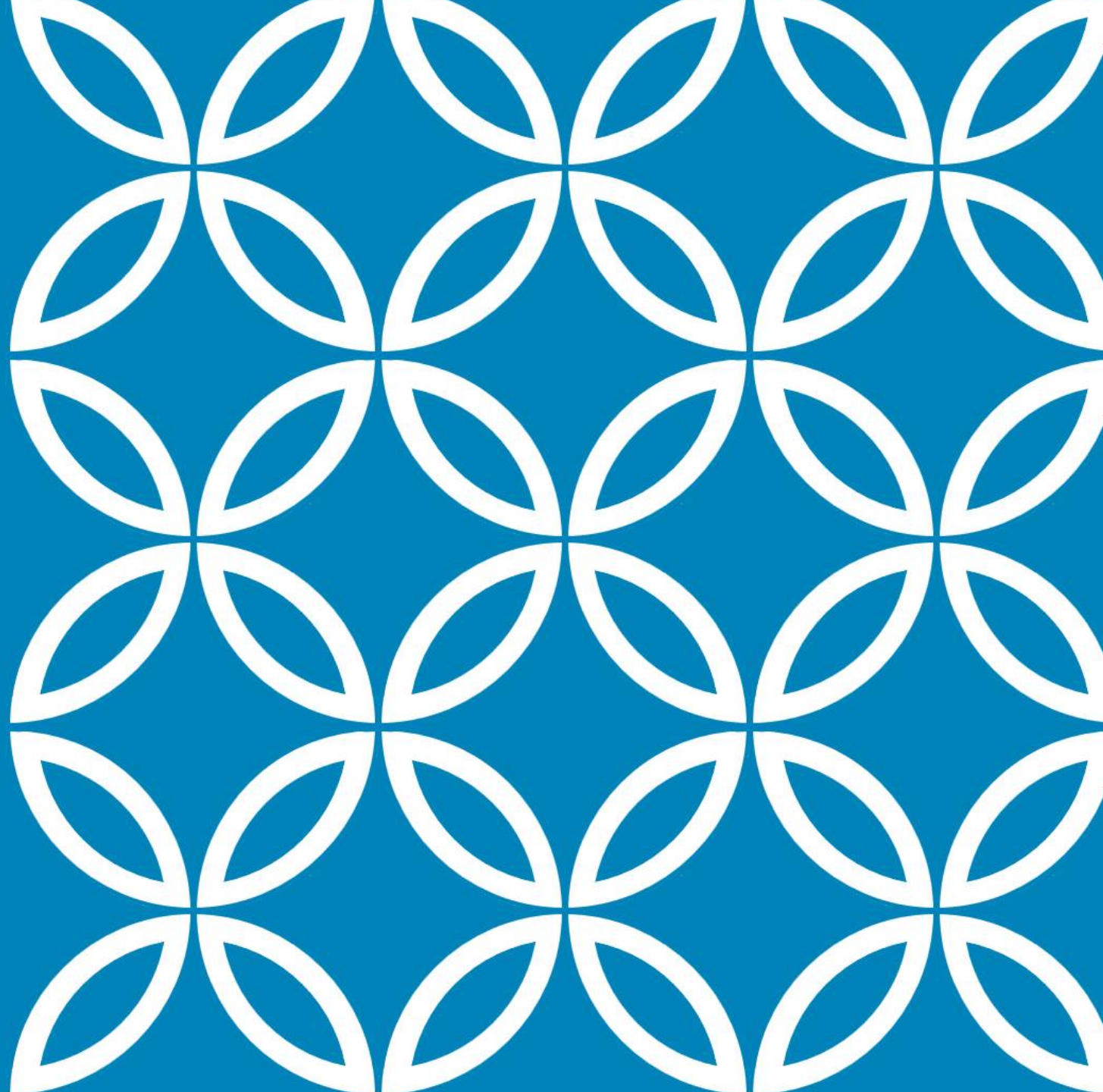
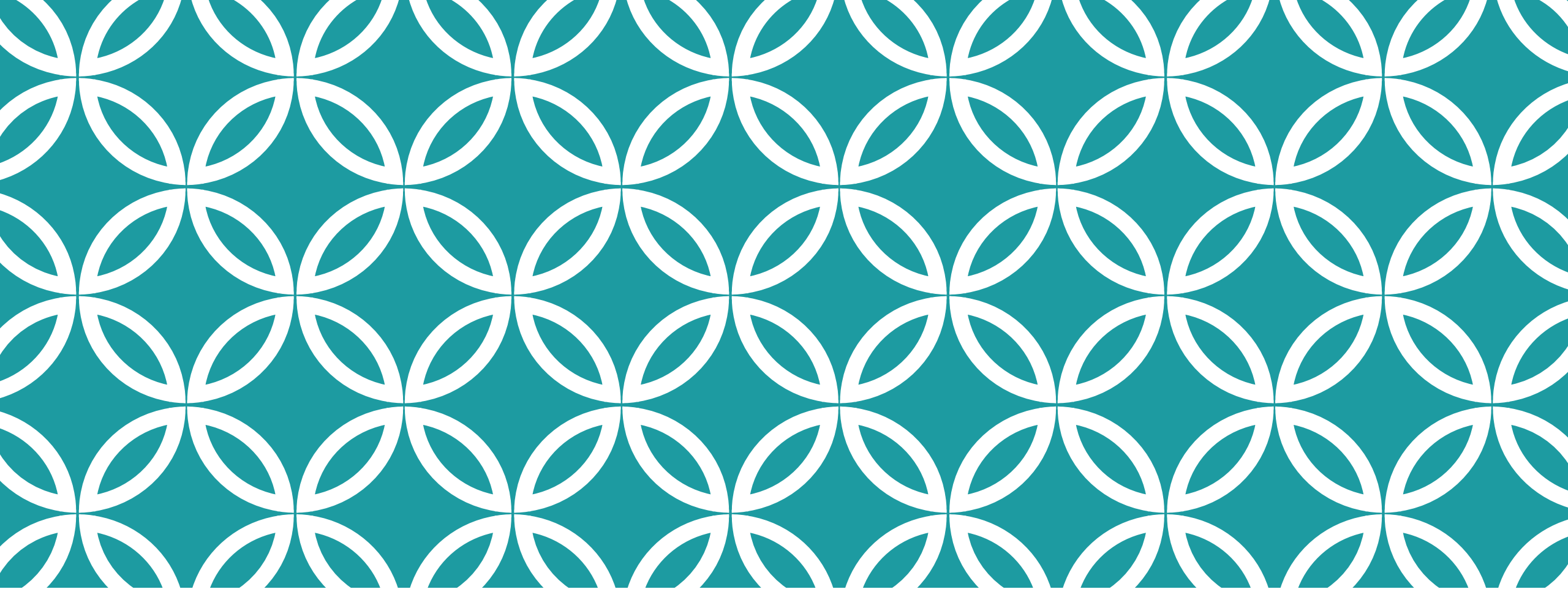


METHODS AND APPROACHES IN INTERFAITH STUDIES

Dr Angus M Slater





CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY AND INTERFAITH STUDY - POSTMODERNITY

**2: Methods and Approaches in
Interfaith Studies**

REVISION

In the last section, we examined the social characteristics and processes associated with the notion of 'modernity' and developed some awareness of how difficult this process of definition is due to historical, geographical, and social factors.

We examined the concept of meta-narratives – the stories about our society that we use to explain their characteristics and workings.

We also identified the way in which the meta-narrative of 'modernity' no longer seems to function for us – gesturing towards the 'post-modern'

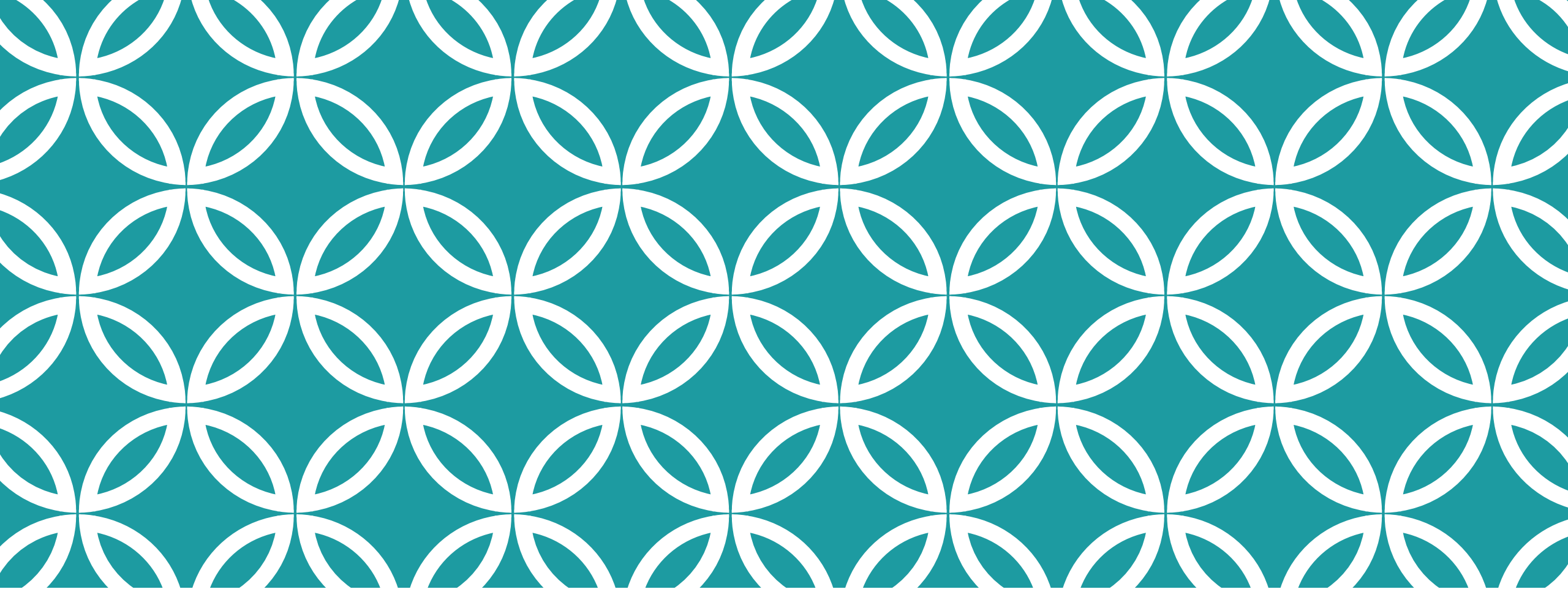


REVISION

You also had four readings to complete (Mitchell, Wagner, Hyman, & Cheetham) which sought to flesh out the concepts behind modernity and to relate this debate to the form of study you are doing in the University – we will explore this some more in this section.

Make sure that you engage with the discussion forums on Moodle and offer up a question for reflection for the group.





POST-MODERNITY





POST-MODERNITY

One of the best ways to begin this discussion is by trying to answer quite two straightforward questions:

When do we see our society as having become no longer modern?

Why does the meta-narrative of modernity no longer work so well for us?



[redacted]

POST-MODERNITY

In the last section, we led up to a realisation that the characteristics and processes we see as inherent in the modern era no longer seem to work as well for our societies as, perhaps, they once did.

We have become distrustful of science, disillusioned with the notion of inevitable progress, ground down by persistent and growing inequality, and depressed by the inability to imagine our lives any differently.

POST-MODERNITY

Lyotard defines 'modernity' as a period of time in which two key features dominate the meta-narrative:

1. a belief that history is progressing towards an inevitable social enlightenment
2. our knowledge of nature and reality is progressing inevitably towards the perfection of control



POST-MODERNITY

Take a moment to consider when in our contemporary societies began to drift from these beliefs:

When did we stop believing in the inevitability of progress, that tomorrow would be better than today?

When did we stop believing in our ability to manage financial, ecological, and social disasters?

When did our dissatisfaction with the modern social order become apparent?



POST-MODERNITY

Scholars have many varied arguments for when we might pin the turning from the period of modernity towards post-modernity:

- 1918 and social disillusionment after WW1
- 1945 and post-atomic disillusionment in science,
- 1960 and the counter-culture movement
- 1970 and political disillusionment and financial stress across the globe

All agree that, wherever is pinpointed, it only represents the culmination of a long and still ongoing changing of trends.

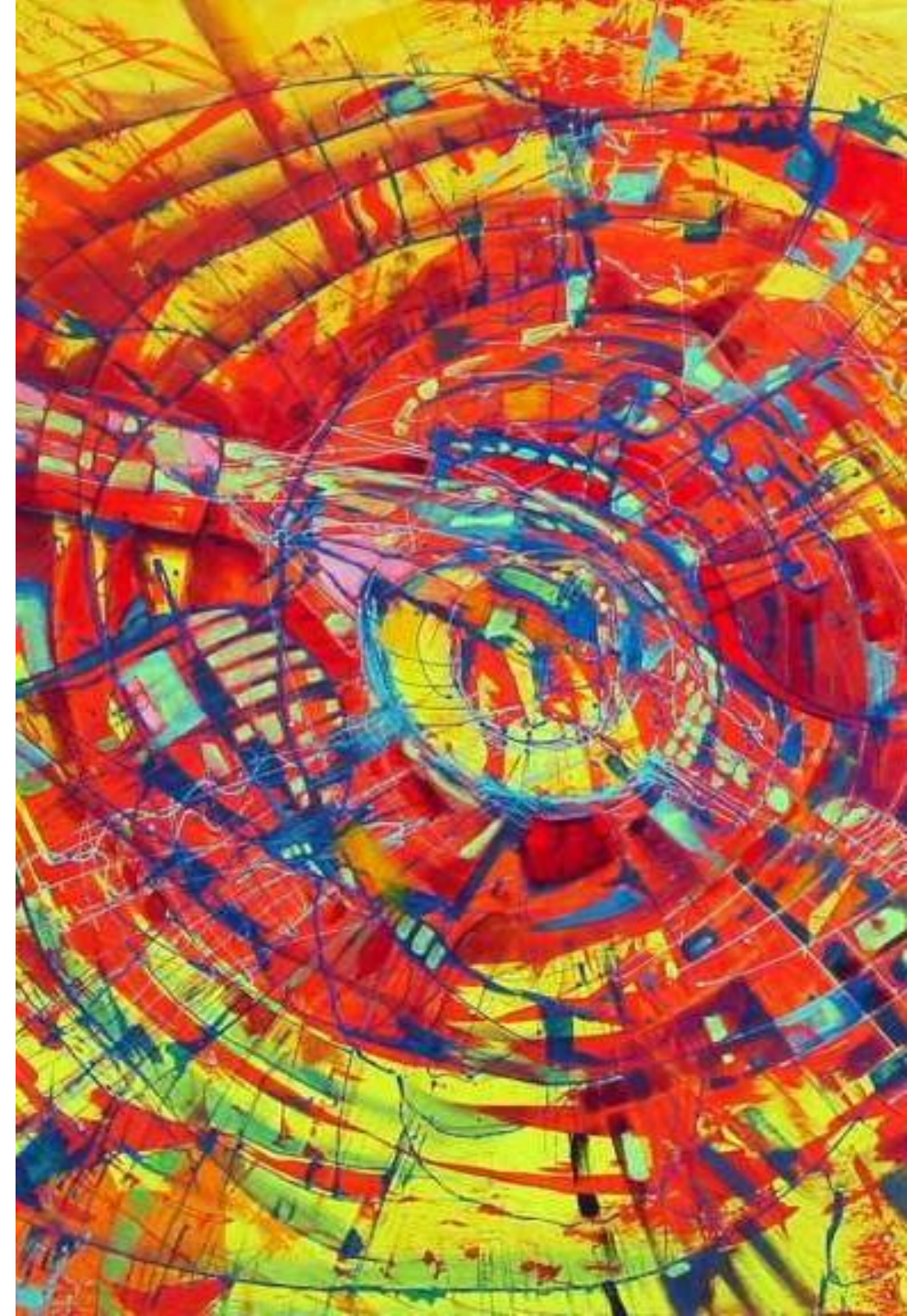


POST-MODERNITY

So, if the persuasive narrative power of modernity is breaking down, what comes next?

For Lyotard, post-modernity can be best defined as an era characterised by a general 'incredulity towards metanarratives' – that is, a suspicion towards neat explanatory stories that uphold and support our social organisation – with the promotion of this characteristic being embodied by the ideology of **postmodernism**.

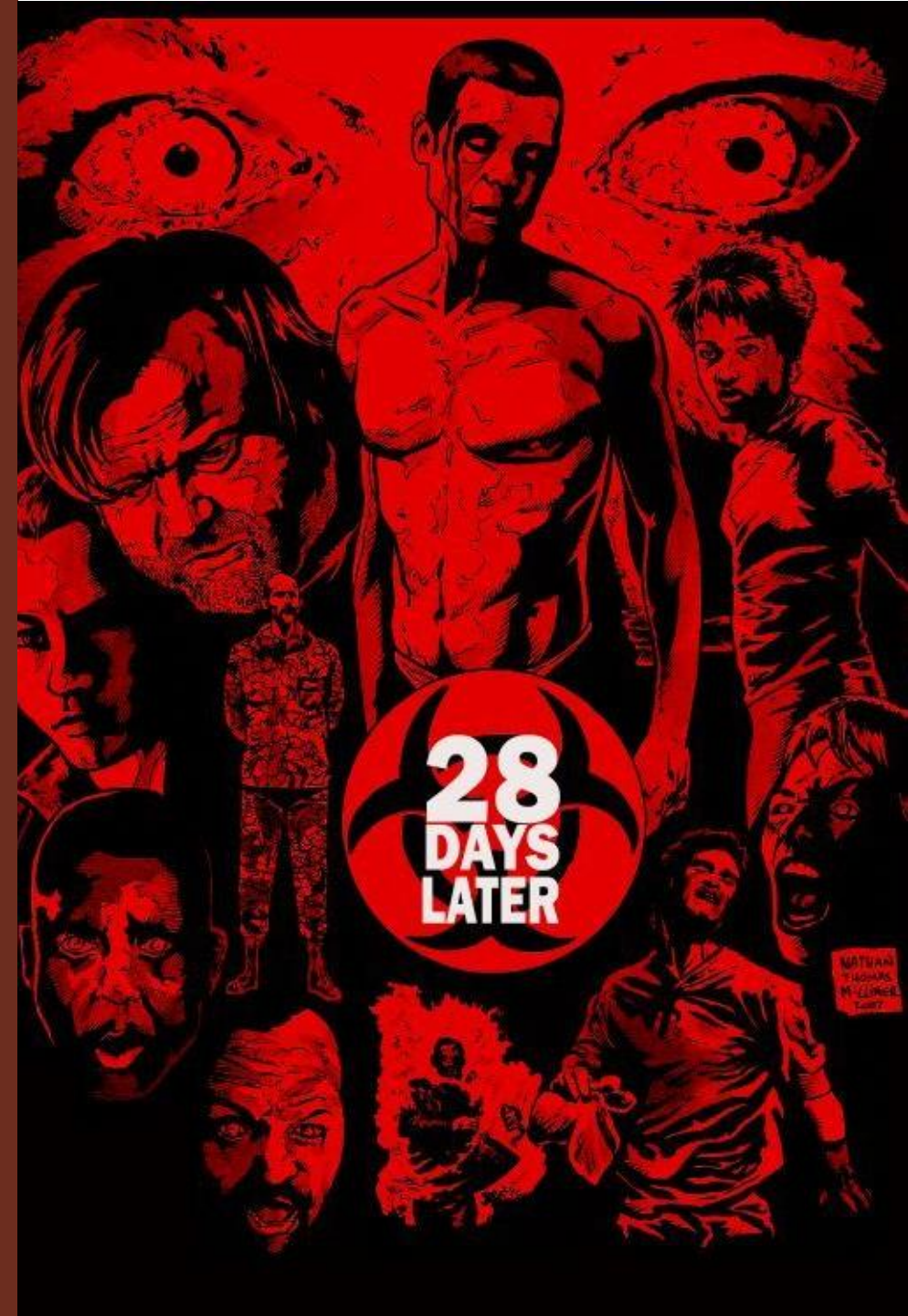
For Lyotard, he suggests the 1960's-1970's as the historical time period of change.



POST-MODERNITY

We can see the impact of this suspicion about meta-narrative explanations in plenty of our contemporary popular culture – movies about ecological or scientific disaster are popular, populism with its distrust of current politics is popular, conspiracist thinking and theories have huge sway.

All in some way demonstrate a frustration or distrust of the status quo and the stories that are used to legitimate it – Lyotard's suspicion!



CHARACTERISTICS OF POST-MODERNITY

Beyond the suspicion of already existing meta-narratives, what characteristics do we see emerging in our current societies?

Some suggestions include:

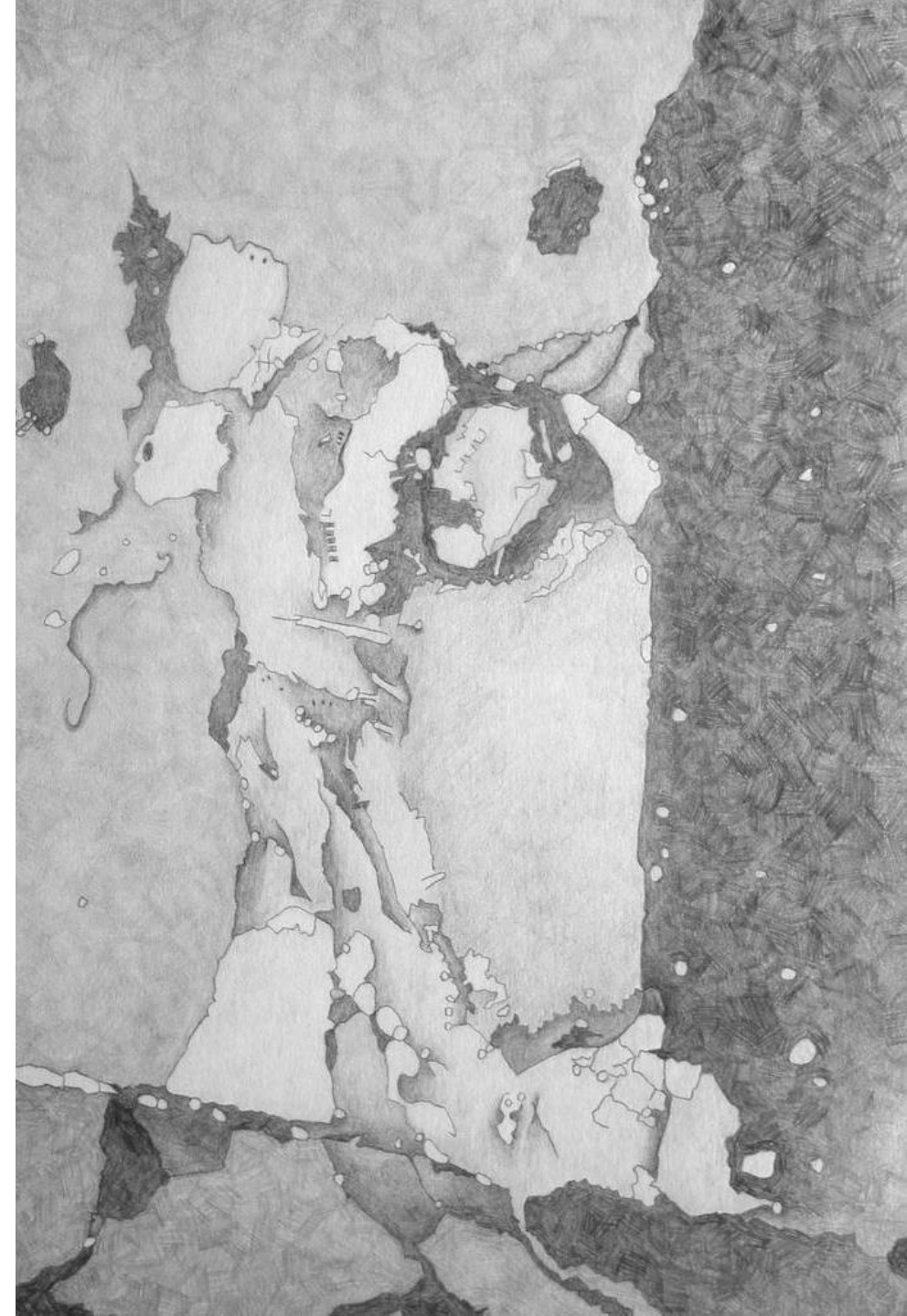
A distrust of universalism - the idea that there is a universal experience

A turn away from authoritarian and hierarchical systems

Isolation from social groupings – eg family, nation, etc

A rejection of the idea of the objective in favour of the subjective

A pluralisation of “truth” and “meaning” according to context and different experiences



CHARACTERISTICS OF POST-MODERNITY

These characteristics of post-modernity may appear as good or bad things, depending on the value you attach to them.

This change is often viewed equivocally – the detachment of the individual from systems of control can be liberating, but also potentially dislocating, or the critique of universalism may allow for greater diversity, but less solidarity.

Note:

Post-modernity just is. Postmodernism argues for more post-modernity.



LATE, POST, HYPER...

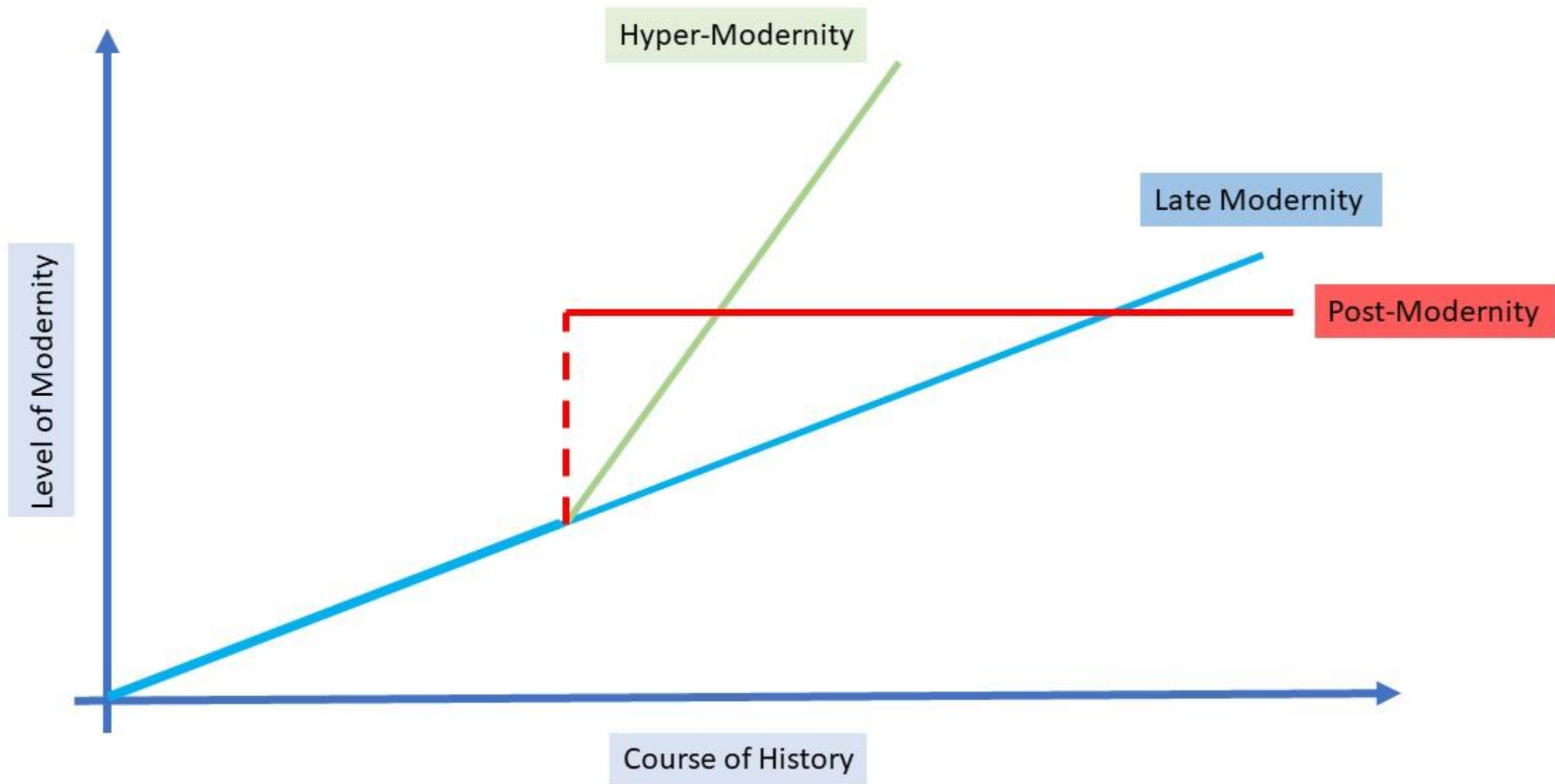
Post-modernity is often seen as modernity taken to the extreme.

The processes and characteristics of modernity, when driven to the limit, result in a breakdown of the meta-narrative of modernity.

Modernity is a victim of its own meta-narrative success over pre-modernity.

Scholars therefore disagree over what the best term for this “after-modernity” phase might be – either post-, late-, or hyper- modernity.





LATE, POST, HYPER...

Late modernity sees our current society as a continuation of the same processes and characteristics that form modernity – Zygmunt Bauman, Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck etc.

Hyper modernity sees our current society as the result of an acceleration of the trends and processes integral to modernity – Paul Virilio, Terry Eagleton, Marc Augue

Post modernity sees our current social condition as distinctly different from the characteristics and processes of modernity – Lyotard, Derrida, Baudrillard



POST-MODERNITY

Post-modernity is generally therefore seen as modernity taken to the extreme.

The processes and characteristics of modernity, when driven to the limit or extreme, result in a breakdown of the meta-narrative of modernity – the story is no longer able to convince us of its legitimacy.

Urbanisation

Anomie
(Durkheim)
and isolation

Individualism

Increasing
rejection of
universalism

Distrust of
scientism

Increasing
subjectivism

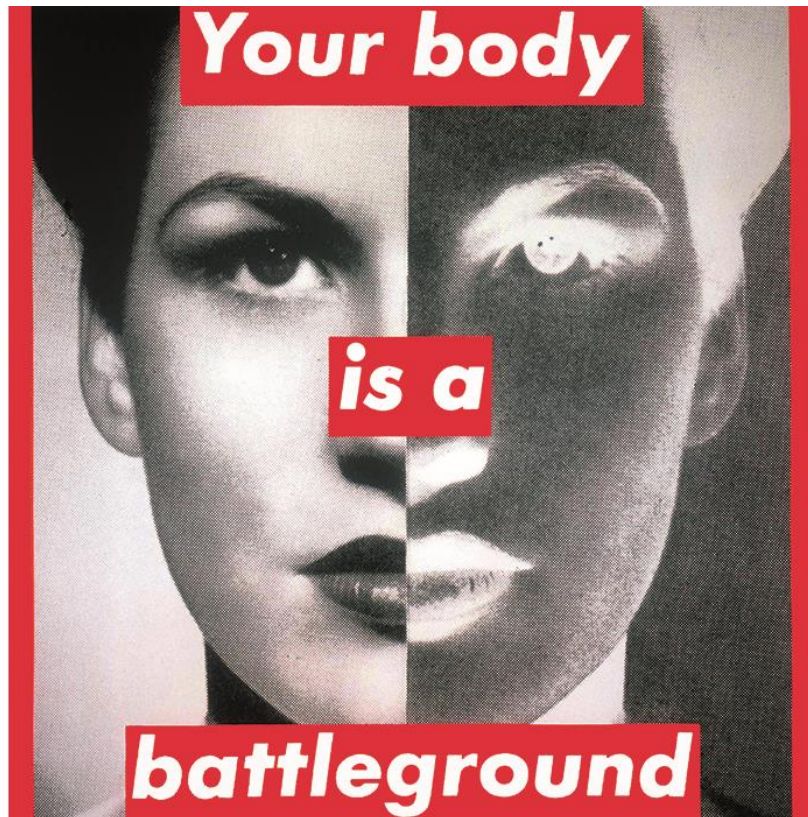
POST-MODERNITY

Indeed, the post-modern rejects the concept of a sustainable meta-narrative in its entirety, highlighting the ways in which even the meta-narrative of modernity failed in its goal – it failed to account for differences of experience within modernity, eg. by those excluded from its narrative.

Instead, society is seen as always being made up of a kaleidoscope of competing narratives, informed by individuals different experience, which reflect only subjective aspects of reality



POST-MODERNITY



For Post-Modernism, there is no objective standpoint from which we can judge the universal truthfulness or reality of anything, only subjective realities produced by the individual that we choose to believe or not.

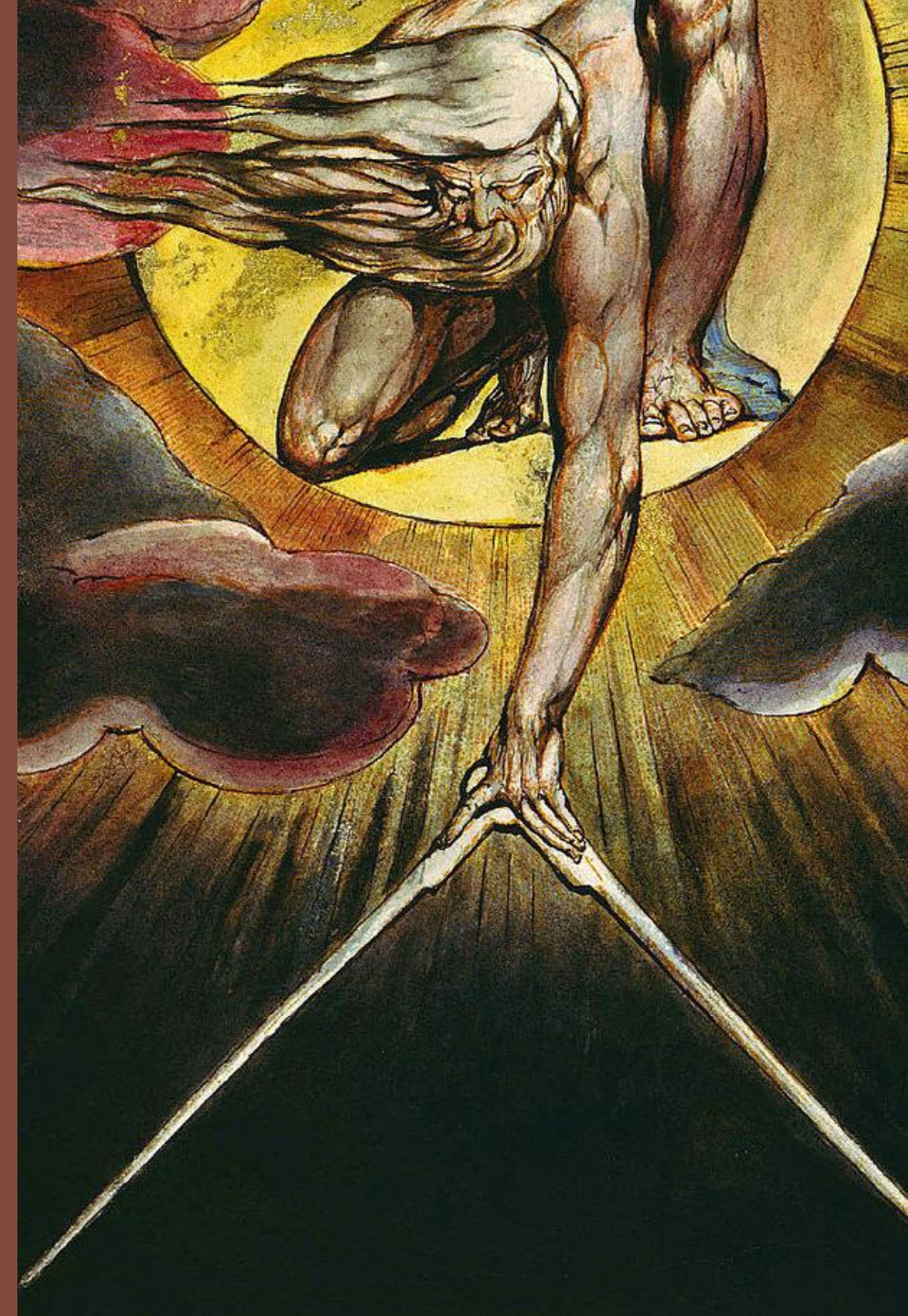
Post-modernism celebrates this as a liberation from the oppression of the modern meta-narrative, which, while working for some, marginalised and excluded others.

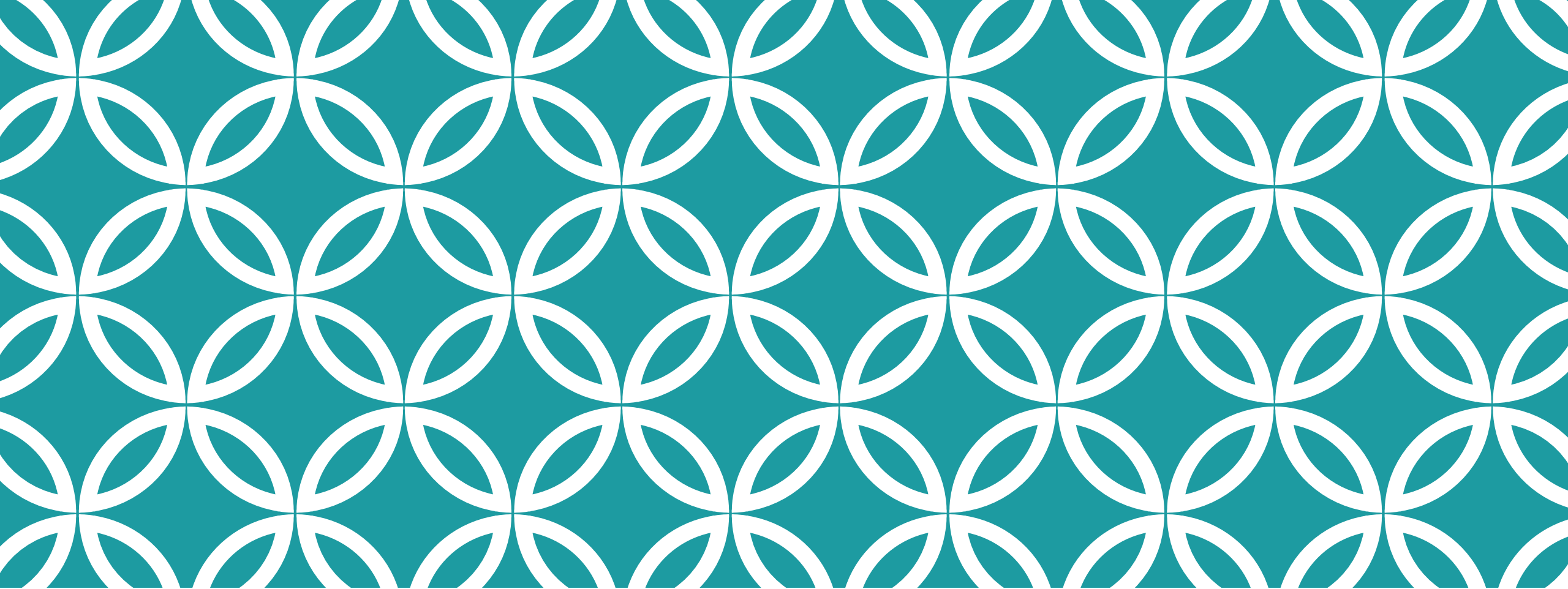
The modern meta-narrative, for post-modernists, sought to control the subjective through the false promise of the objective.

CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

As this discussion of the academic approaches to modernity and post-modernity have hopefully illuminated, our societies are complex and changing things that require nuanced and delicate study in order to understand.

These changing trends and processes we have examined don't just operate on a broader social level — they also have significant effects on the way in which we approach aspects of our society — like religion, faith, and belief.





**WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR
RELIGION?**



CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY AND RELIGION

The impact of broader social processes on the formation and practice of religions is a complex and changing picture – it is very rare for a single process to be uniformly encouraging or discouraging for religious belief.

Rather, different broad social trends may augment or detract from specific forms or practices of religious belief.

It is helpful therefore to be specific about types of religious belief or practice discussed when attempting to answer questions about the interaction of (post-) modernity and religion!



RELIGION IN MODERNITY

The characteristics of modernity we identified in the last section function as both a challenge to traditional forms of religious belief and as a help to other aspects of religious practice and belief.

For example, the modern trend towards individualism, urbanisation, and dislocation from social structures can pose a challenge to traditionally embedded forms of religious belief and practice that rely on strong forms of tradition and hierarchy to continue, for example Roman Catholicism.

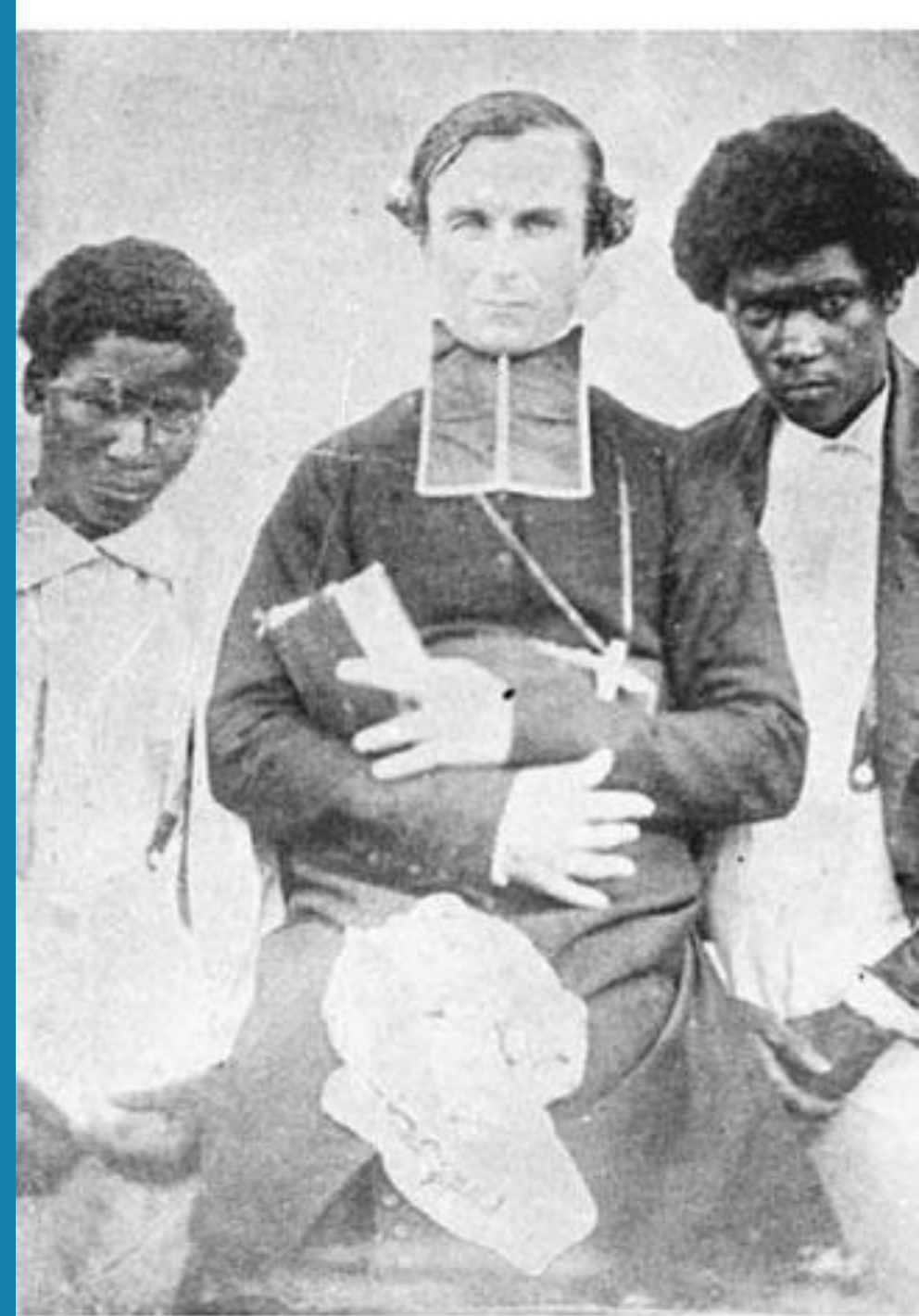
However, that trend towards individualism can also be seen to be interacting with religious belief in a positive way – allowing for greater individual exploration of alternative religious beliefs and practices, for example the Evangelical Revival.



RELIGION IN MODERNITY

We see this double-edged nature apparent in many other of the characteristic trends associated with modernity, which proved to be a turbulent time for religious belief.

For example, the identification of religion with the nation state provided political and social opportunity for certain of religious organisation, as did the concomitant projects of colonialism and globalism.



RELIGION AND MODERNITY

Of course, modernity, with its meta-narrative of rationality and totalisation, also sought to understand religion, religious beliefs, and religious practices – both within our own societies and through engaging with societies all across the globe.

It is in modernity that we see the beginning of the sociology of religion / anthropology of religion – an attempt to explain religion through rationality by thinkers like Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx etc.



POST-MODERNITY AND RELIGION

Post-modernity, as the distrust of meta-narratives, would seem to pose a significant challenge for the form of religious traditions in our current society.

This is because religions are meta-narratives *par excellence* — they seek to explain and make coherent everything about our existence — and therefore, remain vulnerable to a decline in trust in meta-narrative structures as a whole.

Of course, this depends on how we understand religious traditions and whether we see their decline as connected to a decline in religious belief overall.

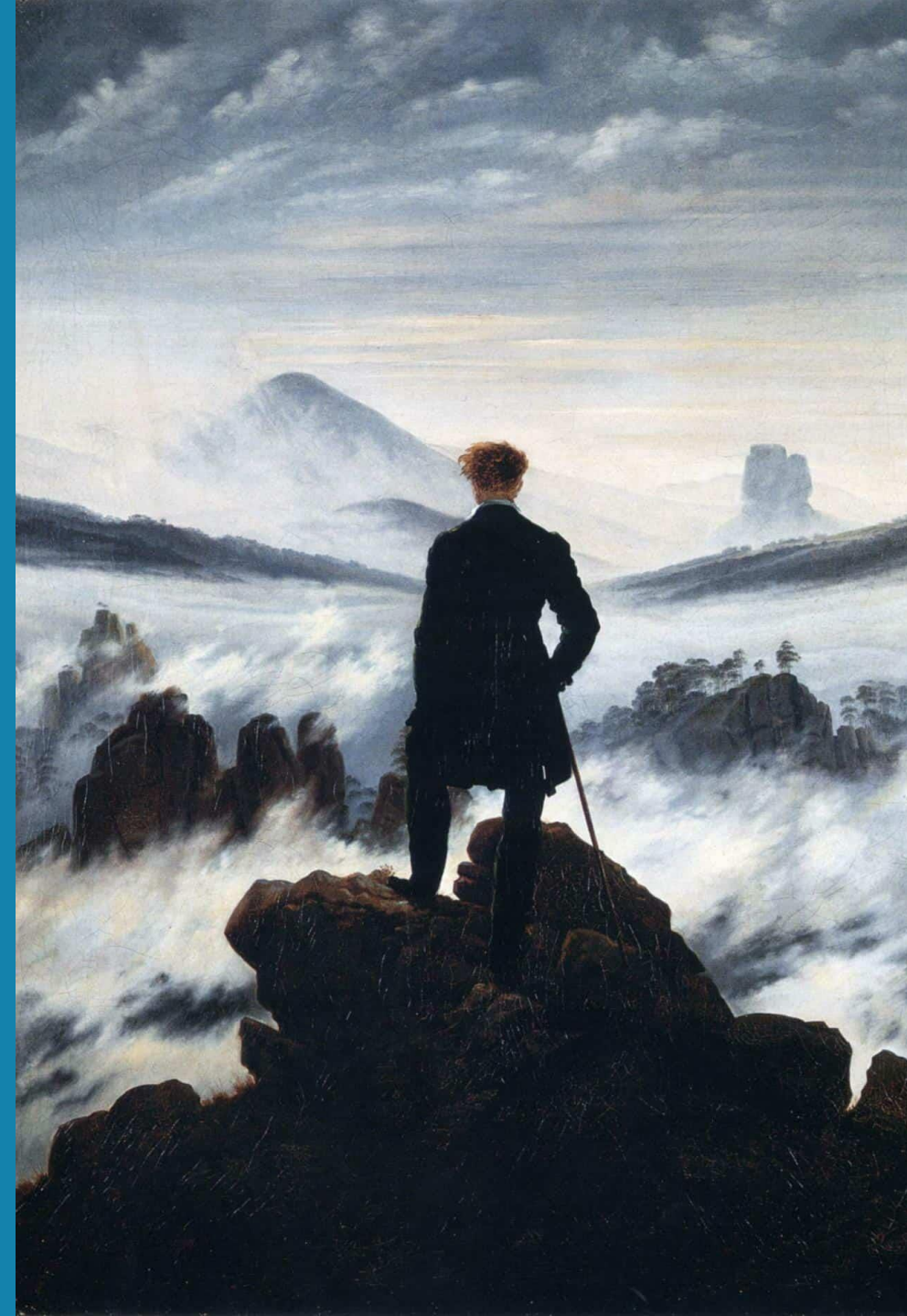


POST-MODERNITY AND RELIGION

Post-modernity emphasises the individual over the corporate, the subjective over the objective, the particular over the universal, suspicion over belief.

Contemporary processes of globalisation, individualisation, diversification, and pluralisation reduce the “hold” of institutional religion – a decline in the socialising power of religion (Durkheim 1912) – making more difficult the transmission of social religious practices.

We become like the wanderer on the right – detached and unmoored from established norms and practices, connected only to our own individualism.



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