

How do we understand postmodernity in relation to the existence or non-existence of God?



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Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1 – The emergence of Postmodernity.....	3
Chapter 2 – Several Key Thinkers.....	7
Chapter 3 – Reaching towards an overall “Understanding”	17
Conclusion.....	21

Introduction

What is the relation of postmodernism to the changes that have accompanied understanding of spirituality, God and the “epistemic subject”? To answer this question is also to understand what we think we mean when we explain the terms. However Postmodernism is difficult to pin down, to define and explain because of often the term itself often seems dependent upon certain grounds for uncertainty. To acknowledge postmodernity is also to accept certain grounds, which are subject to scrutiny, change and subversion dependent upon the observer, the thinker who can also be thought of as the epistemic subject. It could be argued that there is no solid foundation from which postmodernity can be understood. Seemingly, it is the idea of postmodernity that seems to exist, instead of the term itself pointing towards a set of ideas that appear coherent and concrete, to be analysed through the typical student glasses of scrutiny.

Postmodernity has much of its known roots in Foucault, a thinker that for better or worse has influenced modern discourse in thought regarding power relations and dynamics and also in sexuality, a huge course of study for Foucault, amongst others. To illustrate the extent to which postmodernity cannot have a set of ground ideas locating some objective truths, we can look at Foucault’s understanding of power. As a pluralist, he denies the existence of a centre. As Foucault writes,

Power comes from below....there is no binary and all – encompassing opposition between rules and ruled at the root of power relations....power is not something that is acquired, seized or shared....power is exercised from innumerable points”¹

Despite criticising institutions such as hospitals which he regarded as exploiting the mentally unwell and helping to stigmatize mental illness instead of treating it”, he would not determine exactly the centralisation of power and where it lay. Similarly, postmodernists generally say the same of truth – there is a Kierkegaardian influence here despite Kierkegaard’s vastly differing ideas on God. Pinning such labels however is problematic in the sense that such labels “postmodern” and “post structuralism” refer to an academic

course of study that we associate with a certain thinker. In Foucault's case in particular, his work was so unique as to escape such labelling. To tie in his work with terminology and structural theories can be seen to undermine the individual thought and motives that drove his work and to make such an observation is consistent with postmodernity. This is the paradox at the heart of my work and indeed, various works commenting on postmodernity in that attempting to describe a theory, we refer to it with associations and political movements and theories of which many postmodernists would be keen to escape.

How we define postmodernism and outline the general movement and context in which it has emerged is dependent upon current understandings of what modernity itself entails. To understand postmodernity and how it relates to religion is to understand how we as humans are susceptible to the need for a subjective truth – a truth by which we can construct ourselves, dependent upon other truths, half-truths that we almost “cherry pick” to form world view that satisfies our own individual needs. This may seem like a very cynical description of postmodernity and could be seen as disingenuous. One vital aspect however is the consensus that “truths” are no longer objective or at the very least, we cannot view any such truths as existing as intrinsic, self-contained or apparent in the sense that they refer to a state of affairs observable by a priori or a posteriori means. There is a socio-cultural context to the ways in which truths are constructed that cannot be separated or dislocated from our collective understanding of so-called truths which influence them and burden them with presuppositions and assumptions. Wittgenstein has remarked upon this and how the concept of God is inherent in the biblical narratives themselves as taught to a child and that the idea of God himself does not exist prior to the child coming to any real sense of understanding².

Claims of superiority as in traditional religion do impose a “master voice” or “meta narrative”. Lyotard in fact summarises postmodernity as “incredulity towards all meta narratives” when really there is no “inside truth” imbuing religion with an “associated institutional monopoly on interpretation and salvation”³. There is also an appreciation of the ways in which humans have forgotten how languages, as noted by Wittgenstein,

² Wittgenstein

³ Stanford

continues to make promises it cannot keep. Even when taken by itself, language is inadequate to itself and to meaning.

This dissertation will outline the history of postmodernity which is generally regarded to begin with Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger in the sense that they paved the way and I will move on to describe the work Jacques Derrida and John D Caputo, two thought leaders within the movement of postmodern theology. But why did postmodernity begin? Obviously, it is necessary to dissect modernity itself, the movement of reason and logic associated with a new secular world, to describe it briefly and generally. How people felt about modernity itself can be understood as how people felt about a new age in which there was a palpable sense of a lack of trust in authoritative doctrines and ways of thinking in which many were comfortable and used to. People still held on to religious faith and cast doubts upon the limitations of reason. Modernity was seen to be spiritually weakening at best and downright destructive at worst. The twentieth century brought the horrors of the World Wars, of the death camps at Auschwitz and various places in Eastern Europe and despite our assumptions that these hadn't anything related to any kind of surge in the general popular thinking dominated by philosophers and scientists, there was a palpable sense of an association regardless. The fact was that, as it was observed, art alongside other intellectual branches and the development of the natural sciences, many various schools of thought seemed to look as though they were flourishing in close, spatial temporal proximity to massacre and the death camps. This raised for many doubts about not only the extent of Modernity's overconfidence in a sense but about all Western culture. For the sake of this paper, I will not be referring to Christianity broadly speaking without diverging into the nuances between the varying denominations. The traditional view of Christianity is the traditional view of an omnipotent, all-powerful God who brought his son Jesus to die on the cross to forgive us our sins, the message of salvation and reconciliation of God

Chapter 1 – The emergence of Postmodernity

Postmodernity in some way can be traced back to the times of Kierkegaard, Marx and Nietzsche in a time of response to the age known as modernity. What we experience in the

everyday is viewed, with no distinction between what is artificial and what is natural and this is due to how modernity has forced society and the individuals of society to reshape their own perceptions. Science and technology had become so massive in scale and complicated in nature, the networks of mass communication and transportation so vast and this had caused people to view the empirical world through 'a different lens' which proponents of postmodernity coined a term for -that named de-realisation⁴. Kierkegaard considered the "network of relations" as levelling individuals into a phantom known as "the public". This leads to the feeling of losing one's identity and seeing themselves as part of a monolith. Of course, this had implications for theologians such as Kierkegaard who believed in the passionate inwardness of religious faith, the value of a risk that elevates it and this would certainly make sense in the context of living in a de-realised world. The most important kind of religious faith, the value of an inward spirituality was threatened by an overwhelming emergence and growing expanse of technology, science and general understanding of the world in terms of its operation. The era of modernity had grown prideful and self-conscious of its achievements and there is perhaps a case to be made that because it was so, the need for a subjective freedom began to gradually arise and yet it was underneath the sign of subjective freedom that the modern age stood. It is likely that through recognition of the state, of the way in which civil law protects the pursuit of individual freedom, the ideas of ethical autonomy self-realisation became compatible with subjective freedom. The individual became increasingly unable to synchronise all the various spheres of their own lives in terms of the day-to-day and conceive it into an overall totality; they let each aspect or "sphere" of their life operate by themselves. By allowing it do so, the supposed seal that was meant to synchronise all spheres of life became broken. This seal of course was religion and hence the social forces of religious integration grew weaker.⁵

Hegel had somewhat attempted to address this brokenness of seal through his conception of *Geist* (spirit) which was framed as a somewhat dialectic on enlightenment which equivocated reason with the power of religion. At the very least, this was supposed to make the two compatible via a self-knowledge of absolute spirit embedded with a status of reconciliation. This did contain a "metaphysics of presence" as an inevitable starting point –

⁴ Stanford

⁵ The Philosophical Course of Modernity

it was dependent upon a certainty of the epistemic subject. However, this starting point was certainly laboured upon by Hegel's contemporaries and followers to the extent that Hegel's philosophy began to dissipate – it could no longer hold itself accountable to the original purpose of *Geist* which was meant to reconcile reason with spirit. For at the same time as society's need for rationality was brought to the forefront, so was the need for compensation and so undermining the original intent on bringing traditional forces back to life via *Geist*.⁶

Nietzsche was very aware of this new turn of thinking of the Young Hegelians and was critical of the way in which history was given a larger significance than merited, dependent upon a false ideal of objectivity. This had the consequence of neutralising the ideals of what constituted a meaningful life, whilst also perpetuating further false ideals regarding the way in which humans looked back upon the past from the present standpoint. These ideals were of a decidedly relativistic kind, because as long as people emphasised the varying differences in historical context across time, what one does in terms of leading a moral life should not have mattered⁷.

Nietzsche also recognised that although apparently religion and the realm of reason were working against one another in the narrative of the Enlightenment under modernity, the religious metaphysical views of the world were actually too rational to exist as opposing forces. From this conclusion, it was more as if modernity was having a crisis with itself. It was more accurate for Nietzsche, that the manner in which myth had lost its unique status whilst an archaic life began to cease was more responsible for initiating a last epoch of historical rationalism. By historic rationalism, I refer to the singular status of Modernity as Nietzsche viewed all history as gradually reaching towards rationalisation⁸.

His original take on what he coined the Theory of Power, which he believed lurked behind the complete assimilation of reason to power, were rigorously expressed in his *Genealogy of Morals*. This theory of power consisted of self-preservation and domination, characteristics which inevitably tainted the realist realm including the ideals of objectivity by the Positivists

⁶ The Philosophical Course of Modernity

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and the ideals of asceticism of universal morality. His will to power was the means by which he constructed his own concept of modernity as a critique of reason. It has been suggested also that his work was also inevitably influenced by some of the aesthetic experiences of modernity which raises questions about the extent to which Nietzsche was truly able to escape modernity's influence and also questions the validity of his will to power. For him assessing reason and value were entirely different and yet, as Habermas argues, modern art still required the same critical faculties used for assessing value.⁹

What led the age of modernity into post modernity was in large part driven by the way in which the metaphysics of philosophy understood by a subject, an "I" or consciousness was being critically deconstructed by both Nietzsche and Heidegger. In his views of the theory to power, he found that this default position to assume this presence as a certainty was really was really produced by morality and "the communicative needs of the herd" and was leading metaphysics to a place of exhaustion whereby it had fully run its course and was inevitably doomed to end. Heidegger radically displaced the original subject with *Dasein* – the "human being event of ecstatic temporality" where the human does not exist within the modes of past, present and future do not exist, subjected to an infinity contained within consciousness's limits. The world as explained by Heidegger was in the state of de-realisation "Precisely nowhere does man today any longer encounter himself" and he contributed to this sense that grew across Western philosophy. The past misplacement of metaphysical presence was attributed to era of Modernity, as it embodied the assumption of the conscious subject prior to deconstruction because when being was taken as meaning the very presence of human beings, humans became synonymous with the question of how useful they could become. This of course had the effect of dehumanising humans, all due to the metaphysics of presence influencing ideals about what purpose meant for humans. Heidegger calls this the enframing of individuals in which a calculative order of the individual's use against others was emphasised over and above the human itself who is reduced to reserves of manpower. This way of thinking even had implications for how mountains were perceived – not a mountain but as coal supply. It is for the individual to

recognise and achieve a kind of self-awareness of place in the world, the way they are commodified so they can begin on a process of transcendence.¹⁰

Despite their critiques addressing the state of modernity and influencing the discourse of postmodern thought, they have both been largely ignored from the topic of postmodernity as a whole. The transition from a period to the postmodern has been attributed for Lacan and Wittgenstein – Lacan utilised Wittgenstein ideas on language games as a critique of Freudian theory – the psychoanalytic process whereby he argued that the subject (the patient) was analogous to a set of signifiers. These signifiers generally related to the discourse of power between therapist and patient. All of language use constituted such signifiers and ultimately represented something else – human power, need, desire¹¹.

He was hugely fond of the aesthetic and art was to be trusted in above all else for it contained the will to deception as well as the sanctified lie and was

Chapter 2 – Several Key Thinkers

The work of Derrida would be a pivotal starting point for many postmodern theologians as their contemporaries such as Caputo. They were mainly concerned with the role that language has to play in shaping perceptions of religion or more specifically, the exact mystical being that theologians of all backgrounds have attempted to analyse.

Deconstruction is one of the most commonly attributed words to the discourse of postmodernity and describes the ways in which an author's text are so dependent on whatever conceptual distinctions are made within the text so that when such distinctions fail, the text fails by its criteria. The reason these conceptual distinctions fail is because the author does not actually manage to consistently draw them across the work as a whole resulting in a text that when taken as a whole is inherently paradoxical.

Derrida was also sceptical of a so-called metaphysics of presence – the assumption that all theories must begin with a definitive, certainty that is immediately accessible and evident. By denying such a presence, Derrida had already lost the grounding of which philosophical writers work from. This results in work from Derrida that can often read very inscrutable

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and abstract – it lacks the “now”, the location of which makes any given text relatively easy not just to process but also to relate to at least upon a first read. In rejecting the metaphysics of presence, Derrida was also rejecting the epistemic place of the human subject – the accessible and evident starting point from which all philosophers construct their theories.

There is only the text when it comes to Derrida, language which is only metaphorical and are in fact not different from works of literature. There is at least no significant division. Just as in fiction, meaning shifts around via the process of metaphor. When we wish to communicate something, there is an assumption that what we are saying corresponds to a reality and therefore is used to directly reflect it. Really, this is not what is happening. Language, rather than reflecting, constitutes our reality. How we see our reality is being consistently constructed and shifted and consequently, the meaning we use to construct our reality is changing.

Though Wittgenstein is not normally associated with the postmodern movement – he came much earlier than those that really began to change the discourse and dialect surrounding the phenomena – his ideas concerning language and theology do seem particularly relevant especially the use of the inward role he credited from theology to religion. He did not believe that believing really refer to a mental state and we should undermine the realist talk of a relation between belief and it's object that speaks of it as though this relation should be taken for granted. But to speak of theological non realism was also just as empty. This seems pretty damning for the post realist theologian for even postmodernism assumes mental state somewhere down the line, even if there is no explicit reference to such. By acknowledging the faulty nature of human faculties, even the post-modernist cannot be sure that there is not something of a relation between the inner searching and the way this influences the mind, or vice versa. D Z Phillips, also hugely influenced by his work gives the example of a child whose idea of God is completely unseparated from their teaching of the biblical narratives that they are taught from a very young age. They do not form a conception, a idea of God from these stories, rather they are conceived of simultaneously. God's formation in the mind of the individual occurs in the actual story-telling and religious services.

Concerning John Caputo's book *Hermeneutics and meaning in a world without facts*, John D Caputo 's influences specifically concern the works of Derrida amongst others, however he much favoured Derrida's method of deconstruction as a general approach to his work.

Caputo was adamant that modernism has only complicated the discourse of theology – atheism, theism and agnosticism all under the same bracket as far as he was concerned. They share similar features that were inevitable of modernity, all sharing the same presuppositions regarding the Classical God, the God of Theology. They only differ in so far as their stances upon this same framework, treating Him in a respectively pro, con and neutral sense but all within the sphere of a belief that is decidedly propositional. We cannot, with the postmodern shifting of theology that Caputo was keen to advance, end in a neutral position regarding God. Any neutrality is disinterested and lacks the passion of the undecided yet radical faith. What we were not to do was end up sitting on the fence. What Caputo labelled a disinterested neutrality was really only an illusion of such a stance. For any neutral stance would only adhere itself to a modernist framework of understanding.

"Secularism" by the standards of Caputo is deeply mislead, in the same way as traditional theology by assuming such divided lines between faith and reason, private and public, fact and value etc. It is a modernist fiction, mythological in the same sense that angels and demons are mythological.

Caputo was aware that religious faith, running and operating in the same circles as it currently does was damaging itself by holding itself up to even more scrutiny by atheism, naively unaware of the way its own internal or intrinsic logic was and as a result is being ruthlessly torn to shreds. What religious faith requires is something, however elusive or abstract it may seem, that defiantly resists this. What he notices in terms of the pragmatism of holding so steadfastly to such religious beliefs under the sphere of modernity is that people with this mindset, the evangelicals of America for example, that were in major part responsible for electing President Trump, when confronted with the kind of perceived sneering, elitist intellectualism of left wing atheists, the evangelical community tend to double down upon their beliefs. This doubling down manifested itself as an increasingly distorted, exaggerated defence, the kind that occurs under a sensing threat. Such people are desperately trying to cling something individualistic no matter how defiantly they attempt to stand for a wider institution or framework of shared moral beliefs amongst

communities – evangelicals tend to value the tight-knit family unit with church members as their closest friends. But this individualistic, personal value embedded in their spirituality should be protected however, even the attempt to wrangle itself out of pre-supposed theological groundings.

The hermeneutical ground for theology has shifted to the pointy of creating a space of distrust and unease about the correct ways of addressing and preaching to new generations of people. There is a lapse in hermetical judgement due to the increasing variations of interpretation.

Caputo shifts his analysis of postmodern hermeneutics to the work of Paul Tillich, a scholar from whom Caputo clearly derived much inspiration. The existence of God, as it exists as a concept is actually half-blasphemous and mythological because when speaking about him and acting upon him, he inevitably enters the subject-object correlation. Tillich made sure to stress that God is not object for us as subjects and demonstrates the ways in which this subject-object correlation occurs. Firstly, the personification of God is implied through various analytical approaches to describing the “character” of God. This is the mythologisation, treating Him as somebody with personal characteristics that can relate to us in more or less the same ways we can relate to or treat a friend or family member. As long as one does not hold their own language up to a level of scrutiny or analyses it too carefully, this makes things easier for the person whom is investing in such a “relationship”.

By simply reducing God to such a being, this also crosses into dangerous territory for many Christians also because then the act of blasphemy occurs. This kind of blasphemy though instead of disclosing itself through phrases such as “Oh my God” discloses itself much less implicitly and more inherently through such mythologisation, for it treats God as a finite being that can be reduced and assigned to various attributes, easily understood. There is no escaping this if one describes God with all the divine superlative attributions – you can add as many as you like but all would only emphasise his de-finity, all if all of this points towards a superbeing. Tillich refers to this as *maxima cum laude*. God should be thought of as the ground of being – the ground from which humans come and go is stable and unchanging, rather than God Himself. God, the ground of being is “that from which things come and go”.

There are hints of Wittgenstein in some of Caputo's work. Though Wittgenstein is not normally associated with the postmodern movement – he came much earlier than those that really began to change the discourse and dialect surrounding the phenomena – his ideas concerning language and theology do seem particularly relevant especially the use of the inward role he credited from theology to religion. D Z Phillips, also hugely influenced by his work gives the example of a child whose idea of God is completely unseparated from their teaching of the biblical narratives that they are taught from a very young age. They do not form a conception, an idea of God from these stories, rather they are conceived of simultaneously. God's formation in the mind of the individual occurs in the actual story-telling and religious services.

AT Nuyen argued that there are false distinctions made between the concepts of deconstruction and construction, willing to do away with binary oppositions because of the belief that they produce categories that are over simplistic. The opposition itself between these two concepts themselves need deconstruction and we should not be so quick to judge deconstruction as not constructive, especially if one truly wants to attempt to understand the heart of the postmodern theological message. We need to be wary, in his view, of what he calls the quasi-logical space in between categories, which we can think of in simplistic terms such as like a "crack" when describing this space or hiatus between categories. There is a whole other branch of postmodern philosophy attributed with the label of "revisionary" to be associated with "constructive" and decidedly opposed to the postmodern theology of Taylor whom A T Nuyen in his paper was content on defending. Taylor considered his work to be both constructive and deconstructive whereas others, notably Griffin criticised his work with the label of "eliminative"

The metaphysical premises for which underwrite the work of Taylor and his position has led to confusion, particularly when it comes to the idea of the deconstruction of the self or of the idea of a subjective unity. Taylor has been hit with the accusation of atomisation, which misunderstands him and also paints him with actually setting forth a concept of modernism unintentionally. Murphy and McClendon write that Taylor has reduced the individual in terms of atomisation into constituent properties and relations. This misunderstanding has occurred seemingly due to Taylor's prioritisation of the individual over the collective,

contrary to their view that really postmodernism prioritises the collective. Murphy and McClendon see modernism as using reductionism as a method to understand the collective which necessarily involves the individual as a starting point for understanding the collective which is what Taylor does, even though the basis of his a/theology is postmodern. Nutyen disagrees that there is any tension here, in using a modernist method for understanding postmodernity, finding this consistent with the epistemic and metaphysical premises of it.

This all seems rather superfluous when considering the implications for theology but the question of the individuals' role for shaping the discourse of truth as discovered for themselves gather complexity when regarding the role to which the very existence of ourselves has implications for understanding the means for connecting with the God of Christianity. Is there an inherent, unavoidable selfishness within the framework of postmodernity? Kierkegaard regarded the individual as being more important than community and yet this not the path that many postmodernists haven to undertake. If community is simply the totality of individuals then what should be discussed should be the extent to which we view community as simply this totality instead of a unified whole representing one definitive thing. This was exactly Buber's criticism of Kierkegaard – he was oblivious the consistent involvement and reciprocal relationship between individuals. The tension between the individual and that of "the other" representing that which is transcendental and leads towards an ultimate truth will be elaborated upon when discussing Levinas.

Taylor has been commonly hit with accusations of nihilism in the sense that his particular view, which Nuyen in his article does not even believe to be truly postmodernist, entails a conclusion of relative subjectivism alongside an "anything goes" mentality. I wish to leave aside the debate as to whether he really is a postmodernist and focus on the various ways in which Taylor defends him. For Taylor does not believe that all defences to shield him from criticism were all equally fair – some were defensive. Taylor quotes J Hillis Miller who objected to the view that postmodernism simply entails that all interpretations are equally valid for "there are obviously strong and weak critical misreadings, more or less vital ones". Taylor also quotes Roland Barthes, a French radical deconstructionist who prioritised "rules of communication" as setting standards for various human constructions of meaning and values. Such "rules of communication" would also allow for rules of thinking and reasoning,

of mutual respect and understanding and for allowing the human race to survive. Generally, a pragmatic use of one's meanings and values need to be displayed through public shared communication – one's meanings and values seem useless when kept within the private sphere in which they lose their value and thus undermines the generalisation that any such meaning and value will do. Nuyen's point about the defensiveness of the above point seems to allude to the way in which there is an imposition of values to justify other values as long as they are practiced, for examples the value of "mutual respect and understanding" to quotes Barnes, which he sees as a constraint for the framework of constructive values.

Instead, for Nuyen, a much more convincing defence of Taylor and general criticism of the relativist charge levelled at postmodernity should instead relate to epistemic scepticism as opposed to scepticism in the way that they are generally conceived or described. For if there is an objective realm of morals outside the limitations of human experience, reason and rationality, this is true relativism because then various interpretations and perspectives become inevitable. This is not the stance that postmodernists like Taylor are proposing. As Nuyen describes, the metaphysical thesis imbedded in their postmodernism as opposed to epistemic scepticism denies true meanings and objective values enabled by such a transcendent reality. From this view, it can be seen that postmodernism is not simply about undermining the concepts of meaning and truth as thought about them, or even emphasising their instability, but instead about going to "the heart of the matter" regarding meaning and truth. This is somewhat reminiscent of Caputo when he describes the value of the search for truth, the search for finding something real outside of one's self and wrestling with it, giving life meaning in the process. Yet Caputo does fault Taylor for not demonstrating that he really does understand the true spirit of postmodernism, seemingly conceding with Nuyen that he is not truly a postmodernist even though Nuyen does object to Caputo's criticism. Because Caputo was influenced by Derrida, his grounding for criticising Taylor is related to this, for he, in his view, would also have objected. Misunderstanding was created around the term difference, lifted straight from Derrida, whom Taylor viewed as locus of meaning for the idea of the divine and thus endowing difference with an ultimate presence. But is this really what he was doing? According to Caputo, it was. Yet Nuyen charges Caputo with as assuming God with definitive qualities that equates Him with concept and meaning itself which is not the God that Taylor believes in. Interestingly

however, it would not seem at a surface level to be same God that Caputo responds to. However, a definite and identifiable God is what Caputo would have to assume in order for his critique of Taylor to hold any substantial weight. Once this concept of God is deconstructed as Taylor has deconstructed Him, then equating God as *difference* or thinking of God as *difference* does not have to turn difference itself into “concept and meaning, something definitive and identifiable. He is therefore not endowing difference with any kind of ultimate spirit, for any ultimate spirit would have to inherit qualities of definitiveness and identity which his deconstructed God does not resemble by any stretch. His difference yet does contain “the divine” for which is not something that occurs from within like it does for Caputo but is independent and is present from the start, constituting causality and therefore bears vast implications for everything which we do in both a mental and pragmatic sense. Because this divine difference exists from the beginning, everyone has the same means in the first place by which to construct our morals. How this differs from Caputo is the location is the origination of this difference. For Caputo there is nothing that supervenes upon our free will in terms of “practical and cognitive pursuits” for we construct them from within and there are seemingly no constraints which for Taylor exist within the divine difference from the very start.

Emmanuel Levinas believed that Hegel, as elaborated on in his paper *Totality and Infinity*, was far too assuming in his philosophy of the Geist (Spirit) in the way that Hegel utilises it to cover and explain the total state of affairs in the world. To be so far reaching as he sees it renders Hegel guilty of conceptual imperialism, which results in inherent limitations for explaining difference, consequently undermining it and depriving it of genuine otherness.

Levinas was careful to make a distinction between metaphysics and ontology and does so because he wants to argue that it is through metaphysics that we can experience something transcendental and is not constrained by concepts in the way that ontology is. Such constraint particularly includes Hegel’s ontology in his generalising overview of history and the world which cannot avoid such deflective usage of concepts, not accounting for the variance and richness by which such conceptual analysis undermines. Instead, Levinas wants to look to metaphysics, which he describes as a “desire for the infinite”. This desire, it is important to emphasise, is not experienced by the subject in the sense that the subject’s consciousness is aware of finitude, which leads to this desire, but is about the Infinite

existing from itself. The infinite comes from itself but is experienced through empirical communication via “the other”, other human beings, embedded in the face of the other. This brings us closer to revelation, experienced as a gift through the other. It is significant for Levinas that such revelation, compatible with Christian theology is something that the intellectual realm cannot account for. The striving towards understanding will never lead us towards true self-realisation in the sense that we can fully grasp a greater meaning. So truth is not something that is ascertained through concepts which are inherently limited in the first place anyway. Levinas may have been guilty of conceiving metaphysics on the grounds he naively believed it to bear a certain status which it does not. Duncan Richter alluded to how metaphysics “has delusions for being something else”, in comparison to magic. Considering how general the terms metaphysics is commonly used however and how Levinas specifically uses it to describe the relation to the Infinite, is he not conceptualising upon pre-conceived notions of metaphysics anyway? It could be argued that there is a difference between the abstract general idea of what metaphysics entails on an intuitive level and understanding the limitations of ontology

Levinas insights are reminiscent of Buber and his teaching that we have access to an eternal “Thou” simply by every particular “thou” that we encounter. They could also be analogous to the scripture of Jesus’s transformation on the mountain top whereby his body becomes seen with a brand new perspective that deepens its significance whereby the invisible is seen through the visible. This analogy, which John Macquarrie alludes to in..... holds significant weight if the quest to become Christ-like through atonement and acceptance of one’s own sinful nature is truly reflected through the face of such a person. For someone who is of the fallen world and has not accepted Christ as Lord and Saviour, he/she has not become unto Christ and maybe could not be seen through “the other” as Levinas describes. The tension is whether simply the acceptance of sin is enough to transform a good and yet nevertheless sinful Christian into someone who reflects Christ. Of course, what Levinas really alludes to in the face of “the other” is the Infinite, not a direct access to Christ but he does stress the importance of the Infinite for gripping such a connection to revelation and therefore Christ himself. So this analogy may be considerably misleading and of course, similarly to.... does not account for the inherent broken sinful nature of humanity as a whole. Of course, one needs to have gained a true understanding and acceptance of the

theologians account of The Fall of Man to really believe in the inadequacy of such an analogy. If we are to become more optimistic about the potential showing of something transcendent and encompasses something beyond understanding through a direct encounter with “other”, we also need to believe in a message that does not look upon individuals as inherently and existentially separated from God.

However if one were to be sympathetic to Levinas, it very well may be said there is an appealing, even poetic meaning in his association between another person and the Infinite. Of course it seems more than necessary to have to concede his theory does not seem to hold up to scrutiny on a surface level, let alone a logical one although to make a criticism may seem well beyond the point. There is nevertheless an idea here that when we encounter another person, he/she represents to us as a “genuine other” to which is synonymous with saying “Hello, I am me, what can I do for you”. Being confronted by a genuine other obligates us to think of a world outside ourselves since the other represents the very idea of existence beyond ourselves.

But, it has to be acknowledged that even though the God of theism shares the suffering of humanity, humanity according to classical theology is also tainted, corrupted by sin. So to attempt to synomynise God with his own creation would seem to paint a theologically false picture, so the question of compatibility here does render itself even more problematic or at the very least more complex. Also, Levinas differs from the likes of postmodern theologians today like Caputo for not residing in the subject the kind of inward searching that leads to revelation but instead implies that one only reaches this by sensing the Infinite as he calls it in the face of the other. Levinas does ultimately relate this to a kind of subjectivism associated with a spiritual inwardness but he has to begin with the empirical to describe the nature of a connection to a transcendence. However since many postmodernists like Caputo are not keen on the idea of salvation as a narrative as understood traditionally, to acknowledge that humanity is broken by sin does not seem to have much resonance. If theologians emphasised the reconciliation aspect of theology and the mysterious nature of God imbedded in human desire to connect with “the infinite” or the transcendent. Levinas does make Caputo’s theology appear relatively individualistic by comparison but it should not be denied also that Caputo did believe in loving the other in

the way that “God” or the inner voice that calls us, obliges us to love. If to love is to be in connection with “The Infinite” in this sense, then Levinas and Caputo do not contradict one another as much as it may first appear.

Chapter 3 – Reaching towards an overall “Understanding”

A strong defence of postmodern thinking in the church specifically came from Jean-Luc Marion whom Merold Westphal championed in his paper Postmodernism and Religious Reflection as one of the more interesting and worthy of attention. Westphal identified three main features of his work. I will outline only two since for the sake of relevancy and what I consider to be the most significant.

Postmodernism, for Marion is able to accommodate a characteristic of conceptual humility, which distinguishes between God the idol and God the icon. Whereas the idol conceptualises God as the classical omnipotent, all powerful being who brings the gaze to rest on oneself, the icon points to something beyond himself. This pointing beyond works well with much of what Caputo has also written about relating to how it is misleading and falsely illusory to understand God conceptually – to do so would reduce him to a finite being. It also retains classical mystic qualities of God – that God is a mystery unto himself and to reduce the mystery is to reduce the intrigue, one may even say poetic intrigue. The distinction between the idol and the icon only implicates that of what can be said about God and how we understand him but not in the content of who He is. It could be argued on this specific point however that the content of who is does radically change under this distinction because if we cannot speak of God, how can we speak of his character? Perhaps it goes without saying for Marion that we cannot. However the point of the distinction is not to radically alter or change who He is with just another theory but to provoke the idea that God is not a being that is something to be understood concretely for if He was, we would not imagine him as signalling towards anything that doesn’t ultimately only describe His character. It makes perfect sense then that he named book “God without Being”, criticising Being as understood by both Aristotle and Heidegger. When God is rendered within the context of being inevitably places Him within a game of its own rules, the rules being specifically human rules. Marion contemplates in his work the radical shift towards replacing Being with “love as gift”

The second notable feature of Marion's work concerns time and language and the need for theology to be eschatological. There are Heideggerian themes imbedded with his insights here regarding how we perceive reality as it unfolds around us during time. Reality does not synchronise itself at the same temporality as time does and so is unattainable for us in the here and now. We must not construct our reality assuming presence as a starting point with any "metaphysics of presence" as such because in this way it only renders past and future with the quality of absence. This places an unnecessary, unbearable burden upon the present but alternatively by the experience of the Eucharist, God appears to us present in "two absolutely originary temporalisations" a continuously giving gift outside space and time. Seeing God face to face in any earthly moment does not really count, according to Marion, as truly seeing God, for he is outside these constraints.

Generalisations are again an easy way out – theologians see it as inherently contradictory in the undermining of God as Being who loves, responds and persists as an active force in the world. There are two types of postmodernism as perceived by Wespahl. These two types are general and refer more specifically towards different tendencies in postmodernism, but they are helpful in so far as they separate the conceptual distinctions that inevitably get conflated and confused within the entire discourse. The first is the easy kind – the kind as generally imagined and mocked by theologians and academics alike. It is the kind of immature, childish relativism associated with an "anything goes" mentality whereby all beliefs are equally acceptable and lacks much of the nuances of the second kind. "Socratic Irony" coined by Kierkegaard is of the other kind – it shields the soul from the kind of relativism of the first kind even as it manifests itself in the form of nothing when it bears the absolute. This means it cannot claim to know everything and what it can claim must claim itself alongside the acknowledgement that nothing is certain. There is still room for questioning one's own beliefs, practices and even motivations even at the same time that this Socratic Irony must defend itself from the ideology of absolutism as well as the accusations of only relativism ideals being real. It is useful to elaborate that especially under postmodernism, since binary oppositions are not necessary for any discourse on morality, the tension between relativism and absolutism is not so strong as might be thought. They should not even bear the status of oppositions. To think of any tensions there may be between the two are fraught instead with the kind of exciting peril that are necessary for a

radical, mysterious faith of the kind Caputo would advocate. Westphal even suggested the hard and most vocal critics accusing postmodernity of relativism as really acting from a state of fear and anger – they had built in a defence mechanism which incentivises them to be too absorbed into their assurances of absolutism. These self-assurances manifest themselves to the point where the idea of looking deep inside themselves, to question any presuppositions they may carry with them and self-examine would be too painstaking.

Postmodernist terminology and their conceptual analytics are so closely tied into together that when observed from a distance, or rather to stand back and generalise about the movement of thought as whole may cause one to wonder if this is really all there is. When there is so much talk and reference of metaphysics, of onto-theology and logo-centrism that these concepts inevitably bind themselves in together, often times interchangeably, there is much chance people are left wondering if that is really all there is. This is in despite of the fact that such terms can and are given precise meanings. Westphal makes an interesting point that Western Philosophy was responsible for the “the overvalue of conceptual currency”. This was the tendency to overvalue the use of terminology – literally how words should be used - over and above individual meaning that somehow ends up left behind. There is more effort to gather, place and utilise the terms correctly. This does seem reminiscent of modernity in the sense that things as well as people were regarded for their use as well as the way in which conceptualisation and binary opposites were just modes of using language under the illusion of infallibility.

Postmodern interpretations of the world do speak to the way in which how we understand the world and our place within it is increasingly muddled and complicated by a blurring of what had been conceived in modernity as the clear lines between rational and irrational thought. Science had assumed it had overwrought religion but nevertheless faith has remained relatively persistent and is really growing on the increase in less developed countries whereas even in the West it remains rampant enough to continue a growing base of support. The plurality of interpretation offered by a postmodern reading allows the spiritual growth of individuals if we understand this spiritual growth as entailing the desire to connect with something beyond themselves. To connect with something personal through inward examination and reflection may sound self-indulgent but to allow it to manifest itself in the outward character of action of an individual allows the human to

become their own narrative, their own work of art, to derive a term from Nietzsche. The human is still able to make moral distinctions that work in so far as they are based on some kind of moral predicate that are not of the metaphysical kind but dependent on an inner intuition. These intuitions can be influenced by experience as well as simple conviction but the modernist also takes their own perspectives with a grain of salt, with the knowledge that they could be wrong. Relativism should not be exaggerated – really the accusations of relativism are based within the limited meta-ethical framework of understanding such distinctions as conceptually perceived.

Caputo agreed with Nietzsche in a lot of ways – only when “God is dead” Nietzsche believed could human growth and imagination could flourish, out of the bounds God the overseer. Caputo agreed with this, commenting that for Nietzsche the term “God was more of a conversation stopper which he resented. Caputo asks the question of whether this is really necessarily the case. Caputo believed the mystery and ineffability of God demanded that God remains an open question. He is something to be pondered and struggled with, not analysed and just as God within traditional theology has a personal relationship to all of his sons and daughters, how one perceives and experiences God can be variant across the world.

More liberal takes of postmodernism are popular for they undermine much of the traditional scripture that many find offensive and outdated regarding the rules and expectations of human morality derived from the concept of “sin”. Many postmodernists prefer not to acknowledge sin at all – the term existed insofar as it had meaning for individuals searching for clear moral distinctions in their lives and hoping to reconcile them with Christ for the gift of eternal heaven. The gift of heaven itself, also it can be viewed on this interpretation, is motivated by the human need for something to exist beyond one’s self and comprehension, which interestingly is the very thing the postmodern God claims to be. What if God more closely adhered to the idea that heaven rests upon – that which precedes understanding but without the bliss. Postmodernism does not negate the human struggle – it is tied in with God Himself and part of the risky passionate nature of faith. This is not exactly to equate God with the human struggle but to speak of the nature of such a relationship that is authentic as it can possibly hope to get.

Conclusion

Postmodernity, as it has gone through so many phases with emphasis being focused towards various aspects and facets within the overall idea - from the decentring of the subjective to the inadequacy of knowledge, has survived a long and heady discourse within both respectively philosophy and theology. The metaphysics of presence are taken so much for granted within philosophy and postmodern theology derived from so for Derrida to asks us to surrender any preconceived notions we have of temporality as “us” as subject is as astronomically difficult task. To perceive God without predicated in this presence demands that we interpret biblical text in an entirely different form for it can no longer speak to us as subjects whereby there is a direct correspondence between the words on the text, that which is addressing and us an interpreters to the text. It seems increasingly apparent that true postmodernism demands we may as well abandon all of it. The only thing of relevance is to know God, which is as paradoxical as it may seem, to not know him and to struggle endlessly with the hope of understanding more of his character, as much as we can. What postmodernism also requires is to love God whilst also taking absolute peace in the struggle as long as the willingness to know him is genuine. How does this God differ from any God the after all? Why is He not the God of mysticism?

Even the likes of Caputo, Mario and Gadamer may be very happy with this conception of God. However, there is also nothing wrong with finding poetic, metaphorical and even quietly aesthetic meaning in the stories and the parables in the bible. As much as the “Holy Scripture” could be completely tossed aside, it also may very well function as a work of art. Of course this is not to say that many theologians do take certain sections and parables within it as being more metaphorical in nature – surely some sections do contain more metaphorical language and striking imagery - but for many it is careful balancing act of taking just the right literal approach with an allegorical interpretation.

Of course, this may all sound very naïve. One does not have to be a “Christian”, which is to label oneself as such in order to find emotional meaning in scripture or even to be moved by a passionate sermon in which hope is encouraged and love is maximised. In addition, just because one is not a Christian or any religious person for that matter does not mean one cannot enjoy a form of spirituality. But what the nature of a spirituality is without the idea

of God is more ambiguous? I say idea, because to conceptualise Him would be contradictory. What distinguishes someone who says God and means it is the very direct reference to something beyond understanding whereas the spiritualist may advocate for love at all costs and treasure inner peace but not attend to this particular outlook as profoundly.

What then is the nature of theology if it is to be compatible with postmodernity? If theology simply entails the quest for God then it may seem obvious that compatibilism is attainable. However, the quest of God as understood by “theology” seems to also entail the quest for the decidedly conceptual God, or rather the God that cannot escape from conceptualisation.

Postmodernism does not lend itself towards an understanding of The Holy Trinity for this would square God into a conceptual realm that is half-blasphemous and mythological, as Tillach described. Even the most non-literalist understanding of theology, orthodox, protestant or otherwise would be too assuming for the post-modernist. Also and importantly, the postmodern “Christian” wishes to separate themselves from any discourse of theology that supposes a modernist tendency of “sitting on the fence”. It is assumed that postmodernists wish to accommodate to the cultural diversity of thought and liberation offered by secularism by accepting objective stances regarding everything else but their own idea of “God” and the epistemological framework of subjectivity as an outlook on life. Otherwise, they are entirely objective, according to the critic and unnuanced in their theological thinking or even understanding. The postmodernist wishes despite all odds to push forwards with the difficult challenge they face and this conviction itself is difficult to negate. Indeed, it may be that so much of postmodern theology is motivated by conviction. Convictions of course may be suspect, or even susceptible. A psychiatrist may be able to analyse the root of such self-conviction but then for the postmodernist does this even matter?