

# POSTMODERNISM AND THEOLOGY

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## *Introduction*

POSTMODERNISM IS MORE A DIFFUSE MOOD than a unified movement, more a climate of thought than a philosophical system. The expressions of the postmodern spirit are so various and different – in philosophy (especially the theory of knowledge and ethics), in literature and aesthetics, in political or legal theory and history, in feminist thinking – that it is very difficult to define just what that spirit is. Moreover, any attempt to define and systematize (or ‘totalize’, as the postmodernists say) the philosophical tendency called ‘postmodernism’ runs up against a paradox. ‘Postmodernism’ is centrally concerned with the radical critique of philosophical systematization, of grand theories and ‘meta-narratives’. A position that sees all such theories as ‘ideology’ can hardly at the same time claim itself to be a grand theory or system.

A further difficulty is that the sources of postmodernism as a philosophical tendency are extremely heterogeneous: Nietzsche, Heidegger, semiology and the structuralism of de Saussure and Lévi-Strauss, the theory of the interpretation of texts (hermeneutics), forms of sociology influenced by Kant (the ‘social construction of knowledge’), versions of neo-Marxism and neo-Freudianism, and contemporary feminist thinking have all contributed over the last thirty years to what we call ‘postmodernism’.

Despite the present vogue, postmodernism does not represent ‘the philosophy of our age’ or ‘the spirit of the times’, as some of its advocates have maintained. Similar claims were made for intellectual fashions in previous decades: existentialism in the 1950s and 1960s; the neo-Marxism popular after the Second World War (according to Sartre, Marxism was ‘the unsurpassable philosophy of our time’); structuralism in the 1970s. All these were supposed to express something fundamental about the spirit of the western world after the Second World War, and to represent a radical break with what had gone before. Calls were made that we should attune ourselves to the new *Zeitgeist*, whether it be existentialism or neo-Marxism or structuralism, if we were to speak meaningfully to our times. No one, however, now

thinks that these movements, important as they were, were really significant indices of deep and radical changes in human consciousness. One now looks back with some embarrassment on many of the attempts made by intellectuals (including Christian intellectuals) of the time to accommodate themselves to the new 'paradigm shift'. In my view, the same is true of what is now loosely called 'postmodernism'. Admittedly, there are all kinds of valuable lessons Christian theology can learn from postmodern thinkers – Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida, Rorty, Kristeva, Lyotard and others; moreover, English-speaking philosophers are sometimes guilty of an old and hoary chauvinism towards continental European thought.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, we should not think that such thinkers represent the spirit of our age in some especially significant way. Nor should we think that Christianity must be postmodernized if it is to be meaningful in some new postmodern world – whatever such a claim might mean.

What follows is an attempt to outline, in very general terms, some aspects of postmodern thought.<sup>2</sup> It is also an extremely selective treatment, concentrating on a handful of thinkers and themes. Nothing is said about developments in feminist postmodernism, or postmodern approaches within literature, art and politics.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Anti-modernism and postmodernism*

There are two main forms of postmodernism. The first is of a more general kind, with 'modernity' being defined in terms of the values of the European Enlightenment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially as these were influenced by the triumph of the natural sciences and the development of technology. As the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas puts it: 'The project of modernity formulated in the 18th century consisted of . . . efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law and autonomous art according to their inner logic'.<sup>4</sup> The normative models for thinking and reasoning came from science and technology; emphasis was placed on 'objectivity' and on utilitarian or instrumental reason. In this context, the concept of God became problematic.

Friedrich Schiller, who spoke of the disenchantment of nature a century before Weber, used the term *Entgötterung*, which literally means the dedivination of nature. Deity, for the founders of the modern worldview, such as Descartes, Boyle and Newton, was in no way immanent in the world; it was a being wholly external to the world who imposed motion and laws upon it from without . . . God was at first stripped of all causal power beyond that of the creation of the world; later thinkers turned this deism into complete atheism.<sup>5</sup>

No one denies the importance of the modern movement, which began with the Enlightenment, in bringing new values to the fore. Unless one is a scientific and technical Luddite, one can hardly reject the knowledge that scientific objectivity and instrumental rationality have made possible. The same is true in the moral and political field: the values of personal autonomy and liberty, and the development of the idea of a liberal society, are precious acquisitions made possible by 'modernity'. Religion, too, has been enriched by 'modernity': no longer can we subscribe literally to traditional myths about God, or to a notion of the divine as a supra-scientific 'explanation' or 'ground'.

However, the gains of modernity have demanded a considerable price. Postmodernism in this first, broader sense begins from a recognition of modernity's costs: the scientific and technological (reductive and 'value-free') 'disenchantment of the world'; the manipulation and exploitation of nature; the emergence of individualism and the consequent collapse of the sense of community; the divorce between technology and moral values; the denial of the validity of 'local knowledge' or tradition with its pluralism and variety in favour of universal, abstract systems and 'meta-narratives'. An English literature scholar, Terry Eagleton, expresses this sense of a crisis in modernity and of the need to go beyond it, in the following way:

Postmodernism signals the death of . . . meta-narratives whose secretly terroristic function was to ground and legitimate the illusion of a 'universal' human history. We are now in a process of waking from a nightmare of modernity, and its manipulative 'reason' and fetish of totality, into the laid-back pluralism of the postmodern, that heterogenous range of lifestyles and language games which has renounced the nostalgic urge to totalise and legitimate itself . . . Science and philosophy must jettison their grandiose metaphysical claims and view themselves more modestly as just another set of narratives.<sup>6</sup>

Postmodernism, then, is a movement which, although in a sense provoked by modernity, subjects Enlightenment rationality to radical criticism, and redirects us to the beliefs and values which modernity denies. It refuses to see science as some kind of supreme model or meta-narrative; it recognizes the variety and pluralism of local knowledge and tradition emerging from people's lived experience; it has developed a thoroughgoing critique of technology. Postmodernism promotes environmental or 'green' values, 'feminine' or 'non-patriarchal' ways of thinking and acting, the restoration of community

and civic concern, and the emergence of new forms of spirituality. We must obviously resist the temptation to call 'postmodern' any opposition (whatever its origin or motivation or however 'New Age' it may be) to modernity and its values; moreover, as we have already noted, postmodernism's own central convictions forbid us to 'totalize' the movement. Nevertheless, all these developments can be seen as part of the 'postmodern backlash' against the values of Enlightenment modernity.<sup>7</sup>

### *Philosophical postmodernism*

There is, however, a stricter sense of postmodernism, which is more philosophically focused, and which has developed from a critique of what has been called the Cartesian project. The great seventeenth-century French thinker, René Descartes (1596–1650), is usually seen as the founder of 'modernism' and the first modern philosopher. It is worth looking at the main ideas of the Cartesian system, since it is largely against these ideas that postmodernism has defined itself as a philosophical movement or tendency.

Descartes was centrally concerned with the 'foundations' of knowledge, and with providing clear and certain criteria against which our knowledge can be tested for truth. Unless there were such foundations the whole edifice of knowledge would collapse. This quest for certainty led Descartes to a new view of the conscious or knowing subject: it is only in the subject that we can find a clear and certain basis for knowledge. So long as we rely upon the evidence of our sensory knowledge of the external world we cannot have absolutely certain or indubitable knowledge, since it is always possible that our senses may have deceived us. The foundation of knowledge must be something that is absolutely certain and that cannot be doubted. This Descartes finds in his famous *cogito*, the indubitable experience that one is actually thinking. This experience pre-exists any knowledge we have of the external world or of other conscious subjects (indeed, I can know that there are other conscious subjects only by inference from their external behaviour). In this sense it is quite autonomous. The conscious self may be located in the body (which operates according to mechanical principles) at particular points in space and time, but it also provides a transcendent vantage-point (above and beyond space and time) from which the conscious self can judge the world and achieve universal knowledge. For Descartes, the relationship between mind (capable of universal, non-localized knowledge) and body (the localizing principle subject to mechanical explanation) is deeply ambivalent.

Descartes placed great emphasis on the idea of universal knowledge, which could be achieved by the application of mathematical and mechanical principles to all spheres of human knowledge, and which would lead to a unified system of knowledge. For a Cartesian, philosophy starts from a privileged vantage-point, and provides a comprehensive or total view of reality and of human experience.

Though there is evidence that Descartes was a devout Christian believer, his view of God, like his view of the mind-body relationship, is deeply ambivalent. God is introduced by Descartes merely as a kind of *deus ex machina*, guaranteeing the veracity of the self's knowledge of the external world; at the same time the physical world operates according to its own mechanical laws, so that, so to speak, God has nothing to do. As Pascal was to say contemptuously in the *Pensées*, Descartes' God gives the world a flick of the fingers to set it in motion and then leaves it to its own devices.<sup>8</sup> The idea that God can be discovered within the conscious self is not taken up or exploited by Descartes. In a certain sense, indeed, the Cartesian subject displaces and replaces God. As the American postmodernist thinker, Mark C. Taylor, puts it:

In the wake of Descartes' meditations, modern philosophy becomes a philosophy of the subject. As the locus of certainty and truth, subjectivity is the first principle from which everything arises and to which all may be returned. With the movement from Descartes through the Enlightenment to idealism and romanticism, attributes traditionally predicated of the divine subject are gradually displaced onto the human subject. Through a dialectical reversal, the creator dies and is resurrected in the creative subject. As God created the world through the logos, so man created 'a world' through conscious and unconscious projection. In different terms, the modern subject defines itself by its constructive activity. Like God, the sovereign subject relates only to what it constructs and therefore is unaffected by anything else than itself.<sup>9</sup>

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Descartes' ideas were seen as the quintessence of 'modern' thought, and they had immense influence in Europe through their development by Kant and other thinkers. Charles Taylor has, for example, shown how the Cartesian idea of the conscious subject has permeated our views about society and social policy. Most people would now reject any dualistic view of the conscious self and the body, but the view that I am able to look at my body as an object, Taylor argues, 'continues beyond the demise of

dualism in the contemporary demand for a neutral, objectifying science of human life and action'. Again, Descartes' view of consciousness and the body 'continues today in the tremendous force that instrumental reason and engineering models have in our own social policy, medicine, psychiatry, politics and so on'. Finally, Descartes' view of the conscious subject is the basis of 'many of the assumptions of contemporary liberalism and mainstream social science'.<sup>10</sup> Although Descartes himself says very little about ethical and political values, the development, by Kant and others, of the concept of personal autonomy clearly derives from the Cartesian idea of the conscious subject pre-existing the external world and other conscious subjects, and independent of them. (For Descartes, my knowledge of the existence of other selves is a problem; I can only *know* that they are conscious by inference from their bodily behaviour.)

#### *The attack on foundationalism*

Almost all the central ideas behind the Cartesian project have been rejected by postmodernist thinkers, and over the last thirty years there has developed 'a new orthodoxy' according to which the whole epistemological enterprise begun by Descartes and continued by Locke, Kant and various successors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was 'a mistake'.<sup>11</sup> Postmodernists generally reject 'foundationalism', i.e. an approach to philosophy which sees the primary task as the quest for the absolutely clear and certain foundations of human knowledge. Indeed, postmodernism can be seen as a movement which teases out the radical consequences of this anti-foundationalism. The US literary theorist and legal scholar, Stanley Fish, describes anti-foundationalism as follows:

Anti-foundationalism teaches that questions of fact, truth, correctness, validity and clarity can neither be posed nor answered in reference to some extra-contextual, ahistorical, non-situational reality, or rule, or law or value; rather, anti-foundationalism asserts, all of these matters are intelligible and debatable only within the precincts of the contexts or situations or paradigms or communities that give them their local and changeable shape . . . The resistance . . . of foundationalism usually takes the form of a counterattack in which the supposedly disastrous consequences of anti-foundationalism are paraded as a reason for rejecting it. These consequences are usually said to extend to the loss of everything necessary to rational enquiry and successful communication.<sup>12</sup>

In ethics, too, there is a reaction against foundationalist theories of the kind associated with Kant; instead, ethical existence is seen as

something expressed in 'local pathways', in a 'form of life' making particular sense to the people living in it.<sup>13</sup> The only 'foundations' we have for knowledge or ethics are contingent ones, forms of life and language games that make sense in the 'local experience' of our 'community of interpretation', just as any language is based upon certain entirely contingent conventions about voice sounds and the ways in which words are put together.

Anti-foundationalism leads to 'relativism' in the obvious sense that the meaning and truth of our judgements are relative to certain conventions, or local experience, or what is acceptable in communities of interpretation. But it is one thing to say that judgements are relative to a community, quite another to deny that there are any stable criteria whatever for the validity of our judgements and behaviour. As has just been said, a language like English is 'relative' in that it is based upon contingent conventions and rules; but that does not mean that anything goes in English. It is important to distinguish between benign and pernicious relativism. Of itself, the term 'relativism' means very little.

#### *The conscious subject as social construct*

Another point at which the Cartesian project has been subject to criticism is its vision of the conscious subject or self as an autonomous entity independent of the external world and of other selves. For Descartes, even if I were the only being in existence I could still constitute myself as a knowing subject. Michel Foucault and other postmodern thinkers reject this idea and argue that the self is a 'construct'. The idea that our views about the world and human beings are powerfully influenced by social and cultural factors, including the structure of the language in which we think, is of course a common one. But Foucault and other thinkers have given a radical philosophical twist to this sociological commonplace. They argue that the knowing subject is not merely influenced by external factors, but rather that it is 'constructed' by them. Descartes' conception of the conscious self (including its ambivalences about the body and other selves) is seen, not as a privileged philosophical vantage-point, but rather as a historical and cultural fabrication. The Cartesian *cogito* was constructed in response to certain historical forces in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; it is now losing whatever validity it appeared to have, and new concepts of the self are emerging. We can even contemplate the end of Cartesian subjectivity.

For Foucault, it is not that the self exists autonomously and independently before it enters into relationship with other conscious subjects

and with the world; rather that it makes or constitutes itself through those relationships. Following Nietzsche, Foucault sees the making of the self as a 'work of art'. As he put it:

The goal of my work during the last twenty years . . . has not been to analyze the phenomena of power, nor to elaborate the foundations of such an analysis. My objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects.<sup>14</sup>

In an essay on his own work written shortly before his death, Foucault emphasized that a major interest for him was to show how the subject becomes an object of knowledge. Thus in *The order of things*<sup>15</sup> he analyses the advent of the 'human sciences' (psychology, sociology, anthropology etc.) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; again in his important philosophico-historical studies on the phenomenon of 'enclosure' (*renfermement*), *Madness and civilisation*,<sup>16</sup> *The birth of the clinic*<sup>17</sup> and *Discipline and punish*,<sup>18</sup> Foucault analysed the constitution of the subject as revealed through conceptions of insanity, illness or delinquency. This analysis he noted, 'involved practices such as psychiatry, clinical medicine, and the penal system'.<sup>19</sup>

Foucault's final work in his 'history of subjectivity' ('the formation of the procedures by which the subject is led to observe itself, to analyse itself, to decipher itself, to recognize itself as a domain of possible knowledge') is a 'history of sexuality'.<sup>20</sup> It is, he says,

in relation to sexuality that, throughout the Christian era and perhaps even earlier, all individuals have been called to recognise themselves as subjects of pleasure, desire, lust, temptation. And it is in relation to sexuality that they have been summoned by various practices (self-examination, spiritual exercises, avowal, confession) to apply the game of truth and falsehood to themselves, to the most private and personal elements of their subjectivity.<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly, Foucault saw analogies between his idea that the self is made or constructed and the ideas of 'spiritual exercises', 'care of the soul' and the 'cultivation of the self' found in classical antiquity and the early Christian fathers. Foucault drew upon the brilliant work of his colleague at the Collège de France, Pierre Hadot, who had analysed the ancient Stoics and Epicureans, and in particular their view of philosophy as a *style of human life* rather than a *discourse about it*.<sup>22</sup> Hadot, however, had reservations about this comparison. For him, the Stoics



and Epicureans cultivated the self precisely so as to go *beyond* the self and one's individuality. Foucault, by contrast, was presenting 'spiritual exercises' and the care of the self as a way of making a work of art out of one's life. As Hadot puts it:

By focusing his interpretation too exclusively on the culture of the self – more generally, by defining his model as an aesthetics of existence – M. Foucault is propounding a culture of the self which is *too* aesthetic. In other words, this may be a new form of Dandyism, late twentieth-century style.<sup>23</sup>

This raises the question as to how Foucault might respond to Hadot, and indeed the more general issue of how Foucault can evaluate or judge styles of life. After showing by an 'archaeological' process how a particular style or way of life, and the notion of the self it embodies, is a 'construction' formed by a complex web of beliefs and practices and institutional structures, how do we compare it in value with other ways of life involving very different views of the conscious subject? A similar question was posed to Foucault after the student protest in Paris in 1968. How does an understanding of the human subject as a constructed reality help us to form value judgements that could be a basis for political action? Foucault argued that by uncovering the hidden structures, or 'implicit systems', which govern our social behaviour, we can understand them and so escape from them. What has been constructed can be deconstructed; the human subject is contingent, and susceptible to change. Thus in an interview in 1971 Foucault had this to say:

What the students are trying to do . . . and what I myself am trying to accomplish . . . is basically the same thing. What I am trying to do is to grasp the implicit systems which determine our most familiar behaviour without our knowing it. I am trying to find their origin, to show their formation, the constraints they impose upon us. I am therefore trying to place myself at a distance from them and to show how one could escape.<sup>24</sup>

Such a claim, however, seems inadmissible within Foucault's overall position. On Foucault's analysis, it makes no sense to claim that we can escape by political action from the constraints of the implicit systems determining the way we think and act and see ourselves. The most we can do is to escape from one set of constraints into another. We cannot escape from the fact that we are constructed beings. In the passage just

quoted, however, Foucault seems to be suggesting that we can after all take up some kind of privileged position outside the realism of discourse (and power relationships) in which we are immersed. From this vantage point we can make value judgements about the realm of discourse and power, and envisage an alternative which would no longer impose undesirable constraints upon us. But in making such a claim, he seems to be going against the logic of his own project. At times Foucault sees the construction of the self as a quasi-deterministic process, so that the task of the philosopher is seen as an 'archaeological' one, uncovering the layers of socio-cultural forces and circumstances and other 'conditions of possibility' that have helped generate such ideas as the Cartesian account of the knowing subject. At other times, especially in his later work, he speaks in Nietzschean style, and seems to claim that we can make and unmake and remake the self almost at will. The tension is worth noting.

Foucault struggles to avoid epistemological, ethical and political relativism. Some disciples, by contrast, warmly embrace such relativism, notably Richard Rorty, the American neo-pragmatist philosopher sympathetic to the thought of Foucault and Derrida. Once we abandon foundationalist prejudice, the only criteria validating our knowledge and value judgements are pragmatic ones. According to one commentator, for Rorty 'there is no secure vantage-point, no "sky hook" . . . on which to hang one's arguments, judgments or criticism, apart from the various kinds of suasive appeal that happen to work in some given social context'.<sup>25</sup> All that we can do is to show how our beliefs cohere with other beliefs that are accepted by our socio-cultural group and that provide us with useful and fruitful ways of maintaining what Rorty calls the social 'conversation'. As another commentator remarks: 'Deconstructive critics offer their own texts not as new truths and authoritative works but only, presumably, as further moves in continuing conversations'.<sup>26</sup> Rorty appears to hold that there is 'nothing more to the justification of beliefs than local and parochial convention, our practices of objection, response, concession'.<sup>27</sup> This is of course a radical form of relativism. It also makes philosophy redundant – at least if philosophy is meant to subject our beliefs and values to some kind of external critical scrutiny.<sup>28</sup>

### *Jacques Derrida and deconstruction*

Another main figure in the postmodern movement is the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Derrida writes in an extremely dense and convoluted style abounding in neologisms, and the fact that he has been

a close student of Heidegger's work does not improve his readability.<sup>29</sup> Derrida's *Leitmotif* is that 'there is nothing outside the text'.<sup>30</sup> There is no outside reference point by which the meaning of any text can be determined. There is no 'correct' interpretation of a text, since any text allows a multiplicity of interpretations and no one of these discloses a 'core' or central meaning. Derrida dismisses the idea that the intention of the author of a text is somehow normative for how a text should be read and interpreted. Of its very nature a text is 'polysemous': it permits a variety of meanings.

Moreover, Derrida accepts the structuralist idea that human behaviour in general, and even socio-cultural complexes like the Enlightenment, may be seen as 'texts' and interpreted as such. Here too there is nothing outside the text. We can deconstruct 'texts' and show how tensions and conflicts within them exemplify and mirror analogous tensions and conflicts in society at large. In a recent interview Derrida has stressed that:

Deconstruction is not negative. It is not destructive, not having the purpose of dissolving, distracting or subtracting elements in order to reveal an internal essence . . . It's a matter of gaining access to the mode in which a system or structure, or ensemble, is constructed or constituted, historically speaking. Not to destroy it, or demolish it, nor to purify it, but in order to accede to its possibilities and its meaning, to its construction and its history.<sup>31</sup>

It is also through a form of the process of deconstruction that we are able to speak in some sense of transcending our world and 'moving beyond being'. There is a suggestion in Derrida that we can in this way make sense of the religious sphere or 'the divine'. There may be analogies between Derrida's project and 'negative theology' (from Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius), according to which we do not know what God is, but what he is not. Thus in the same interview Derrida says:

What there is in Plotinus of the movement beyond being . . . is something that interests me greatly. I think that deconstruction is also a means of carrying out this going beyond being, beyond being as presence, at least.<sup>32</sup>

Classical proofs of the existence of God depended on the assumption that we could take a totalizing view of the world, as though creation were a systematic whole, and that God could play the role of an

ultimate or transcendent 'foundation' or ground. But no postmodernist can ground the religious order through any process involving totalization and foundationalism. However, in his brilliant book on Derrida, *The trespass of the sign*, Kevin Hart shows conclusively that deconstruction is not necessarily anti-theological:

Deconstruction provides a critique not of theology as such but of the metaphysical element within theology and, for that matter, within any discourse. If we take 'God is dead' to be a statement about the impossibility of locating a transcendent point which can serve as a ground for discourse, then deconstruction is indeed a discourse on God's death. But if we take 'God is dead' to be a formula for belief or disbelief, then there is no reason at all to link it with deconstruction.<sup>33</sup>

Whereas Derrida would reject any theology depending on metaphysics and making God into a means of totalization, nevertheless Hart argues that we can develop from Derrida's work a 'non-metaphysical theology', in which God can be thought yet not known,<sup>34</sup> and which gives us 'the only possible way in which theology can resist the illusions of metaphysics'.<sup>35</sup>

One might mention in parenthesis that, although he was born in Algeria, Derrida has a Jewish background and in many of his writings he refers to themes and liturgical practices in Judaism, both Kabbalistic and Rabbinic.<sup>36</sup> Over the last few years, in fact, he has been teaching intermittently at a Jewish seminary in New York. He has also written a kind of meditation on the seventeenth-century Christian mystic, Angelus Silesius and his work *The cherubinic wanderer*,<sup>37</sup> and recently organized a colloquium on religion in Capri, Italy.<sup>38</sup>

### *Implications*

What implications does postmodernism have for Christian thought? I can only indicate very briefly two aspects of postmodernist thought that, in my view, have particular relevance for the Christian thinker. The first concerns the concept of God and the 'divine'. Postmodernist thought reinforces Aquinas' remarks about how we know almost nothing of God and the divine order in general, and how God is much more unlike than like anything else we know. Above all, we need to be aware of the dangers of introducing inadequate metaphysical ideas (for example, God as an ultimate or transcendent 'ground' or foundation) into our conception of God. Our conception has been powerfully 'constructed', and distorted, by historical influences from Greek philosophy, medieval Neoplatonism, the European Enlightenment and

'modernity'. It needs continual 'deconstruction' and, so to speak, de-idolization. This applies also to our conception of the Church. Here Derrida has something to teach Christian theology.

Second, postmodernism's critique of the 'totalizing' and universalizing tendencies of modern western thought, and its relativizing emphasis on 'local knowledge' and 'communities of interpretation', connect up with contemporary attempts in the Christian churches to develop a more adequate idea of 'tradition'. The Roman Catholic Church has always prized tradition; moreover, since Vatican II, there has been at least a theoretical acknowledgement of how the Christian Scriptures emerged from the lived experience and traditions of the early Christian 'communities of interpretation', and of how church structures such as the papal teaching authority or *magisterium* similarly grew out of local traditions. But, in practice, this richer notion of tradition in the Catholic Church has been systematically under-used. Instead we are subjected to a 'totalizing' and 'foundational' view of church leadership, presented by the present Catholic authorities as the only way of combating theological 'relativism'. In this area too Christian theologians can learn important lessons from postmodernist thought.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> One American critic has described Derrida's programme of 'deconstruction' as 'shallow tricks in obscurantism and study gimmicks for specious arguments': T. K. Seung, *Structuralism and hermeneutics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. xii. For another strongly critical view see Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, reason and religion* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> There is now a vast industry in postmodernist writing and in critical commentary on postmodernism. One of the best introductions is Jonathan Culler, *On deconstruction: theory and criticism after structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982). See too the remarkable book by Kevin Hart, *The trespass of the sign: deconstruction, theology and philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). There is also the interesting (if difficult) work by Mark C. Taylor, *Alterity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), which gives a good idea of the complex philosophical culture – Hegel, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, Bataille, Blanchot – from which postmodernism emerged. The essay by Christopher Norris, '“What is Enlightenment?”: Kant according to Foucault' in Gary Gutting (ed), *The Cambridge companion to Foucault* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 159–196, is also worth reading.

<sup>3</sup> See C. Pateman and E. Gross (eds), *Feminist challenges: social and political theory* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1986); M. Gatens, *Feminism and philosophy: perspectives on difference and equality* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1991); Philippa Rothfield, 'Bodies and subjects: medical ethics and feminism' in Paul A. Komisaroff (ed), *Troubled bodies: critical perspectives on postmodernism, medical ethics and the body* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 168–201.

<sup>4</sup> J. Habermas, 'Modernity: an incomplete project' in H. Foster (ed), *The anti-aesthetic: essays in post modern culture* (Washington: Bay Press, 1983), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> David Ray Griffin, *The reenchantment of science: postmodern proposals* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 2–3.

- <sup>6</sup> Terry Eagleton cited in Robert Berkhofer, *Beyond the great story: history as text and discourse* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), p 226.
- <sup>7</sup> The series edited by David Ray Griffin under the general rubric 'Constructive Postmodern Thought', published by the State University of New York Press, is largely concerned with this general and looser view of postmodernism.
- <sup>8</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* in James M. Houston (ed), *The mind on fire: an anthology of the writings of Blaise Pascal* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1989), p 229.
- <sup>9</sup> M. C. Taylor, *Alterity*, p xxii.
- <sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, 'Overcoming epistemology' in *Philosophical arguments* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp 7–8.
- <sup>11</sup> C. Taylor, *Philosophical arguments*, p 2.
- <sup>12</sup> Stanley Fish, *Doing what comes naturally: change, rhetoric and the practice of theory in literary and legal studies* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1989), p 354.
- <sup>13</sup> Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the limits of philosophy* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press), p 104.
- <sup>14</sup> M. Foucault, 'The subject and power' in H. Dreyfus and P. Rainbow (eds), *Michel Foucault: beyond structuralism and hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p 208.
- <sup>15</sup> M. Foucault, *The order of things* (New York: Random House, 1970).
- <sup>16</sup> M. Foucault, *Madness and civilisation* (New York: Pantheon, 1976).
- <sup>17</sup> M. Foucault, *The birth of the clinic* (New York: Vintage, 1973).
- <sup>18</sup> M. Foucault, *Discipline and punish* (New York: Pantheon, 1977).
- <sup>19</sup> M. Foucault, 'Foucault, Michel, 1926–' in Gutting (ed), *The Cambridge companion to Foucault*, p 316.
- <sup>20</sup> M. Foucault, *History of sexuality, Vol 1: An introduction* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); *Vol 2: The use of pleasure* (New York: Pantheon, 1985); *Vol 3: The care of the self* (New York: Pantheon, 1986).
- <sup>21</sup> Foucault, 'Foucault, Michel, 1926–', p 316.
- <sup>22</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).
- <sup>23</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy*, p 211.
- <sup>24</sup> Foucault in J. Simon, 'A conversation with Michel Foucault', *Partisan Review* vol 38 (1971), p 201.
- <sup>25</sup> Norris, 'What is Enlightenment?', p 163.
- <sup>26</sup> Berkhofer, *Beyond the great story*, p 10.
- <sup>27</sup> See the English analytical philosopher, Susan Haack, *Evidence and inquiry: towards reconstruction in epistemology* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1993), p 183, and, more generally, chapter 9 on R. Rorty's *Philosophy and the mirror of nature* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979).
- <sup>28</sup> See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), and *Objectivity, relativism and truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). See also the similar approach by Fish, *Doing what comes naturally*.
- <sup>29</sup> Jacques Derrida's main works are *Of grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); *Writing and difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); *Speech and phenomena* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), *Glas* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).
- <sup>30</sup> Derrida, *Of grammatology*, p 158.
- <sup>31</sup> Derrida in Raoul Mortley, *French philosophers in conversation* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp 96–97.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p 97.
- <sup>33</sup> Hart, *The trespass of the sign*, p 39. See also Robert R. Scharleman (ed), and Thomas J. J. Altizer, Mark C. Taylor, Charles E. Winquist, *Theology at the end of the century: a dialogue on the postmodern* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1990).
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p 96. Derrida's recent meditation on Angelus Silesius can be found in *Sauf le nom* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1993), pp 23–24. Speaking of the mystics' 'witnessing to' or 'confessing' or 'avowing' the love of God, Derrida says that the mystics' 'avowal does not 'essentially belong to the order of cognitive determination. It is quasi apophatic in this regard. It has nothing to do with

knowing, as such. As an act of charity, love and friendship in Christ, it is meant for God and his creatures.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p 269.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Derrida's moving account of a procession in an Algerian synagogue in honour of the Torah (*Glas*, pp 268–269).

<sup>37</sup> See Derrida, *Sauf le nom*.

<sup>38</sup> See Derrida (ed), *La religion* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1995).