
Michael Gerrard
University of Aberdeen, Scotland

DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.04.13

Follow this and additional works at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License.

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.04.13
Available at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol4/iss1/13

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Theory at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.


The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World
Gilles Kepel
Polity Press, 1994

Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion
Phillipa Berry and Andrew Wernick (Eds)
Routledge, 1992

Radicals and the Future of the Church
Don Cupitt
SCM Press, 1989

Reviewed by Michael Gerrard
University of Aberdeen, Scotland

The 'post modernization' of contemporary Western societies provides a problematical environment for the survival of the mainstream Christian tradition. Bryan Turner, in his Religion and Social Theory remarks that Christianity as a Grand Narrative is subject "on the level of intellectual exchange to a direct analytical challenge to biblical authority through the postmodern technique of deconstruction and the critique of textuality" (xx). In the wider socio-cultural climate "consumerist hedonism and postmodern relativism challenge Christianity at both the intellectual and experiential levels by providing alternative sources of value, lifestyle and perspective" (ibid.). In conclusion, Turner writes that the public realm can "function in late capitalism without an over-arching system of common legitimation grounded in religion despite the chaos of personal lifestyles which is enhanced by the consumer market" (241).

However, as the three books featured in this review essay indicate in their own ways, the trends running within contemporary culture are ambiguous and contradictory for the future possibilities of religious development and theological thought. While orthodox religious beliefs have continued to decline—particularly in Europe, there has been no corresponding growth in 'rational-coherent', non-religious belief systems. Indeed the main secular alternatives are themselves in crises—precipitating talk of any number of 'post' concepts or scenarios—post-Marxist, post-ideological, even 'post-rationalist'. Chomsky has spoken of the possibility of a regression to 'pre-enlightenment times' with an eclectic mixture of superstition and irrationalist views, New Age and Fundamentalist religiosity co-
existing amid a developed technological society. Secularization has been shorn of any lingering association with concepts of a progressive march of rationalism—far less atheism. Two main themes then link these books. Firstly, they reflect the diverse, uneven and often surprising developments arising from the contact between postmodern culture and religion. Finally, they highlight attempts from both fundamentalist and ‘radical' religious perspectives to resist, explore or challenge the perceived ‘void’ at the heart of secular Western culture.

In the *Revenge of God*, a remarkable study of the global resurgence of Fundamentalist Islam, Christianity and Judaism, Gilles Kepel sets out his purpose as to ‘lay down some markers as a guide for thinking round the phenomenon as a whole’ (7). It is this approach that gives the book an especial relevance to those interested in the cultural history of the past 20 years and the ‘crises of Modernism'. Kepel's working hypothesis is that the near simultaneous appearance of the new Fundamentalist movements within all three religious traditions is not due to chance but a global phenomenon, which from the 1970s in each of their own cultural/political contexts drew sustenance from a "world wide discrediting of Modernism that was the hallmark of the decade" (3).

Kepel speaks of the post-World War Two optimism ("... nothing seemed unattainable") in which "the improved standard of living resulting from the considerable advances in technology fostered an uncrilical belief in progress, so much so that ‘progressiveness’ itself became a criterion of value” (9). The developing socio-economic crises from the mid-1970's shook the confidence in what Kepel calls the 'Earthy-Utopias’—the State Socialism of Eastern Europe and consumer capitalism of the West. Traditional categories of secular thought and solutions could no longer deal with the 'deep malaise' exposed in society. For the new recruits to the Fundamentalist movements the Enlightenment tradition of separating religion from questions of political and social order was the main reason for cultural delay—societies had to be rebuilt on a religious foundation. Kepel notes the common thread which motivates these movements and their followers as they wish to move on from a 'modernism that failed'; in every case:

... they complain about the fragmentation of society, its 'anomie', the absence of an overarching ideal worthy of their allegiance. They do not fight against a secular ethic which according to them does not exist but consider that in the final analysis the modernism produced by reason without God has not succeeded in creating values (4).

The very scope of Kepel's work might lead to suspicions that he is trying to fit complex phenomena into too neat a symmetry. However, Kepel's four specific areas of study (Catholic movements in Europe, Islam in the Mediterranean basin and communities in Europe, the Gush Emunin in Israel and the forces for re-Christianization in the US) chronicles in fine detail the 'local' balance of socio-political events which acted as catalysts for growth in these movements. Equally, these differing contexts act to shape and limit their influence. Liberal democracy and secularism—concepts vitally related to the modernism held in such contempt—act as a 'democratic restraint' on the aspirations of Western groups, who prefer to influence State policy in a 'Christian direction', rather than the revolutionary strategy 'from below', frequently adopted by Islamic groups.

In conclusion, Kepel's superb book highlights that however aberrant and fanatical these movements can appear "...like the workers' movement of yesterday, today's religious movements have a singular capacity to reveal the ills of society for which they have their own diagnosis" (Ibid.). Their existence—and continued attraction to the young and well educated—is testament to the failures of the 'earthly kingdoms' to develop new solutions to the economic and social dislocations of the mid-1970's onwards. Kepel points out that, in the ideological assault on modernism, Enlightenment thinking becomes the source of all evils, the scapegoat. Cardinal Lustiger, the Archbishop of Paris, wrote that the "arrogance of Reason" which ignores God, led to anti-Semitism and Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism (56). Terry Eagleton has pointed out the difficulty at least some versions of postmodernism also have in approaching 'old fashioned' Enlighten­ment concepts like justice, freedom or emancipation, which it finds "embarrass­ingly naive". As Western societies have failed to develop a new cohesion or consensus round its values, Kepel's book is a reminder that other groups have prepared to fill this void not with a new pluralistic ethics or respect for difference, but
Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion, edited by Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick, explores with contributions from amongst others Mark C. Taylor, Gillian Rose, John Millbank and Don Cupitt, another aspect of postmodernist culture and its relationship with religion. Based on the Cambridge conference held in 1990, "Shadow of Spirit, Contemporary Western Thought and its Religious Subtexts," the book highlights the surprising and as Benny writes "unexpected emergence of religious motifs and themes in both deconstruction and postmodernism"(3). Divided into three parts, the 19 essays featured here are diverse, exploratory and complex, and defy easy summarization. Starting with the section 'Maps and Positions', which offers a series of introductory essays with maps of the 'terrain of this new discourse', the articles are then subdivided into discussions of ethics, morality and politics and on the other hand on questions of gender, subjectivity and textuality.

Berry herself sets the context in which this theoretical exploration of postmodern thought takes place,

"It now seems plausible that the deconstructive style of thinking which has initiated a century ago in Nietzsche's thought has subtly and unobtrusively dissolved the clean-cut distinction between secular and religious thinking, which Kant and the Kantian tradition had carefully secured (4)."  

Berry remarks that the original conference which inspired the book implicitly asked the question ... could an apparently nihilistic tradition of thought—a thought ostensibly shaped by that darkness of angst of meaninglessness and abjection which surrounds the 'end' of the modern era—paradoxically have acquired a non-religious or spiritual dimension?

(4)

Taken as a whole, the book does not provide a conclusive answer (or aim to), but succeeds in provoking further questions on this 'reading' of postmodern thought.

It is, of course, an arbitrary exercise to highlight some of the most provocative themes arising from a book with such a varied collection of essays. However, for those acquainted with the main postmodern writings from a cultural history/sociological perspective, certain themes are particularly rewarding and provocative. Wernick's article, "Theological Themes in Baudrillard's America", is perhaps the most surprising from this perspective. While stressing "my point is not that Baudrillard’s lapsed Catholicism is waiting to grab him from the wings", Wernick finds in Baudrillard's writings "in thoroughly magie yet thoroughly disencharged form ... a recovery of the prophetic voice" (69) and the hope that "we can secure a redemptive escape" (65). Several essays refer to the "obscure relationship of Derridean deconstruction to various religious or mystical treatments of negation and absence" (3). In essence, the book is a tentative investigation into the limits and 'gaps' in postmodern thinking, the recurring themes of the 'sublime', 'sacred', 'divine' and 'infinite' and whether they lead themselves to a quasi-religious or mystical discourse. The sub-text here is whether such concepts (the problem of terminology) are sufficient even when 'stretched' to describe the new modes of thinking and existence.

Shadow of Spirit is not a programmatic book—authors disagree sharply on what a postmodern theology would look like. What its real significance may be is that, in Berry's words, it reflects an intellectual climate leading to an interrogation of the assumptions upon which secularism depended and the "contributions currently being made by many theologians to the changing orientation of postmodern thought appears to herald the end of theology's intellectual marginalization" (4). Foucault remarked "it is no longer possible to think in our day other than in the void left by Man's disappearance"(251). Shadow of Spirit explores the vacuum, the collapse of meaning at the heart of Western thought—and at least tentatively suggests that a new religious or theological discourse may emerge from this 'thinking in the gaps' in ethical, moral and political debate.

Don Cupitt, lecturer in the philosophy of religion at Cambridge and an Anglican priest, describes Radicals and the Future of the Church as his "fourth and last of a series of books about faith in the postmodern age" (5) and a book which "on a small scale addresses itself to the question of how far in the postmodern age a church is possible" (1). Cupitt has been described as the best known and the most controversial of the Church of England's academic theologians "and an 'atheist priest'". One of his earlier works, The Sea of Faith, also a successful and acclaimed television series in 1984, inspired later in the decade the 'Sea of Faith Network', now of over 500 members—including Methodists, Quakers, Catholics and Atheists. It rejects concepts of a supernatural God and is committed to exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation. The network is influential amongst many active members of the clergy. One of those, the Rev. Anthony Freeman, became the first Anglican minister removed from a parish for his views for half a century after the publication of his book God in Us—The Case for Christian Humanism. Freeman denied the existence of a supernatural God 'out of..."
there', instead seeing the concept of God as a projection of all human values, ideals and aspirations. Cupitt describes his own position as one of a 'state of exile' in the Church. "I am an emissary of the world to the Church rather than of the Church by smuggling into her the faith of the future" (121).

Cupitt's exploration of what a post-modern faith might be borrows eclectically from Derrida, Baudrillard, Nietzsche, Rorty and Buddhism. However, elsewhere he has been critical of the apathetic 'lie back and enjoy it' attitude to late capitalism he finds in Baudrillard as well as Deleuze and Guattari. He is scathing about fundamentalists, whose writings "reek of reaction, hysteria and despair. They have seen the writing on the wall from their God and it has driven them mad" (125). Equally, he sees liberal theology as too compromised with the modernism that is in crisis. Instead Cupitt writes "your God has to be, let's be blunt about it, your own personal and temporary improvisation. Our God is only able to be so close to us and to dwell in our hearts because we made Him" (14). Cupitt talks of a 'cultural holocaust' which has cleared away all the metaphysical supports for a supernatural 'realist' God and traditional religious beliefs. Equally the idea of the unrolling of the march of history for a single divine or socialist purpose has perished in the ruins of optimistic religious and Marxist Messianism. For Cupitt the vacuum which has appeared should be the beginning of a new awareness of a freedom to create our own new values. He writes "this endless undecidability that follows the loss of the old absolutes is not all bad news. It opens a new space and leads us to seek out a post-orthodox sort of Christian faith" (13).

Cupitt proposes a Church "structurally democratic, crudely minimalist and consistently libertarian", committed to social justice and reflecting a Western kind of liberation theology (173). Cupitt stresses that a Church and religious language is still needed as a community and vocabulary in which, like art, it symbolically illuminates life and embodies our communal myths and values through constantly creating and recreation. Cupitt's view of a postmodern faith is not one in which intellectual structures, or dogmatic faith, are built to fend off the 'void' in Western culture. Cupitt instead advocates actually running to it and embracing it for this void is not "an additional blank region beyond life but rather is the experienced character of our life itself... It is the poignant insubstantiality, fleetingness on contingency of everything" (142). For Cupitt, it is the beginning of freedom, an overcoming of alienation. *Radicals and the Future of the Church* represents another strand in the 'dialogue' between postmodernist thought and religion and represents the clearest and most challenging account of what a 'faith of the future' might look like.

Cupitt writes:

the astounding event that has come upon us in recent times is the end of all ends. As in our modern physical cosmology so also in our philosophy, everything now scatters into infinite dispersal and endlessness. We are adrift in an illimitable flux. Truth is a lot of arguments that go on forever without end (12-13).

These three books looked at here do not suggest any simple reversal of secularization. But they do indicate that in the 'arguments about truth,' religion, albeit in new forms, will have a less marginalized contribution to make than a more confident, secular age would have predicted even 20 years ago.

Endnotes


3. See for example Eagleton's 1994 review of Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*.
