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REFLECTIONS ON POSTMODERNITY AND FAITH

Randolf S. David

As a sociologist, I may be able to say a lot about modernity and postmodernity as social trends or as forms of society, but faith is something I am still trying to grapple with and clarify for myself. What can I tell you about faith, other than my generation's struggle to reconfigure a version of belief in a world that has lost all sense of certitude?

The question "What is the impact of postmodernity on faith?" cannot be answered without clarifying what is meant by postmodernity or, as Jean-François Lyotard preferred to call it, the "postmodern condition." Postmodernity, wrote Lyotard memorably, signals "the death of all metanarratives."[1] By that he meant not only the all-encompassing theological metanarrative of a divinely-created world, but also the grand metanarrative of human progress drawn by modern science and technology, not to mention the other metanarratives of human emancipation, justice, and prosperity advanced by industrial capitalism, on one hand, and by Marxist socialism, on the other.

[1]Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 1984), xxiv.

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As if that were not complex enough, postmodern for some means not just the death of metanarratives, but indeed the end of all foundational thinking, and the questioning of all meaning. No concept, no belief, no perspective is left standing under the piercing lens of postmodernity. Every truth is seen as no more than a construct to be deconstructed. Every belief is stripped of its foundation. Every assertion of fact provokes automatic challenge. Nietzsche—the prototypical postmodernist—once said, "There are no facts, only interpretations, and even this is just an interpretation."

And, finally, from this perspectivism of the postmodern, all our notions of good and evil become no more than moral intuitions given to us by our culture and our time. As such, they can lay no claim to universality.

It is this philosophical adventurism which Benedict decries as dangerously "relativist" in his writings.[2] Still, he is sensitive enough to recognize the immense space which postmodernity opens up for the return of faith, of belief, and of transcendental values. But, this is getting ahead of the discussion. Let us backtrack a bit.

The term "postmodern" at once suggests that it is what comes after the "modern," presumably when the "modern" has exhausted its possibilities. The word "modern" itself—taken from the Latin "modus"—initially meant "just now." But, from the end of the 16th century onwards, "modern" came to mean "of the present age," referring to the civilization that came into being with the rapid rise of science and industrial technology, the emergence of a market economy on a global scale, the rise of liberalism, the emergence of independent nation-states from the decomposition of empires, and the rise of cities and urbanization (the unprecedented large-scale movement of populations from the countryside to the metropolis).

It is important to bear in mind that the spread of modernity across the globe has been *uneven*, and so, even as we may be seeing the

[2]Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Homily for the Mass *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*, April 18, 2005.

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emergence of the postmodern in Western Europe and North America, a number of societies continue to be mired in feudal, backward, and relatively isolated circumstances. Many of them, like Philippine society, are still busy negotiating the difficult and wrenching transition to modernity. While, for most of our people, modernity remains an ideal to aspire for, in the West, ironically, people are turning their back on modernity, rejecting the naïve hopes that had accompanied the birthing of the modern world. The kind of reflectiveness induced by this reversal of expectations is what is referred to today as postmodern.

Postmodernists precisely suggest that modernity has reached its end point. Indeed, some talk about the "end of history." What follows after, they say, is something we cannot fully grasp yet. Used in this context, the term postmodern thus refers more to a type of discourse, an attitude, a perspective, or a way of talking, rather than to a new form of society.

Modern society is typically contrasted with what came before it, and that is *traditional society*. So, we have three terms here: the traditional, the modern, and the postmodern. There is a lot of debate on whether these terms refer to three distinct stages or periods in history, or whether they refer simply to types of societies, sensibilities, or worldviews.

For this discussion, I will use these terms to refer either to a type of society or to a distinct sensibility or world view, or to both. My aim is to locate the place of religious faith in these three types of societies, particularly in what we call the postmodern society. We start with the traditional society.

Religion in Traditional Society

Religion enjoyed unquestioned ascendancy over other institutions in traditional society. Faith was the dominant discourse, permeating all spheres of society with its distinctive moral code. Indeed, politics played second fiddle to religion, and perhaps nothing shows this better than the fact that the propagation of the faith was one of the basic functions of the traditional State. The economy was no exception. So

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tight was the intertwining between faith and economic life in the early years of European modernity that Max Weber was prompted to analyze this phenomenon in his famous work, *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, if only to show how religious belief very much inspired and underpinned economic activity. In traditional society, education, too, was virtually inseparable from religious instruction. This was not at all surprising given that the two most important institutions of traditional society were the family and the Church, both of which are fundamental teaching institutions.

But, more than this, in traditional society, the moral code of the family tended to be replicated in the other institutional systems of society. The values promoted by the moral code of the family are worth noting. First of all, members of the family are valued for who they are, rather than what they can do. Secondly, the duties that people owe one another are diffused rather than specific. People treat one another holistically, rather than in terms of the partial roles they play.

In the traditional society, people deal with one another according to the pre-ordained statuses of their respective families in a hierarchically ordered society. Statuses are thus basically assigned at birth, rather than earned by merit in the course of one's life. Everyone is expected to know where he/she stands in the social hierarchy according to his/her birth or social status.

Traditional society is a well-ordered and stable society because it is based on moral consensus. The interests of the collectivity—i.e., the family, the community, and the larger society—take primacy over individual rights.

In many traditional societies, including our own, the guardian and main interpreter of this moral order was indeed the Church. Everything that took place within the family, within the political system, within the economy, or within the educational institutions had to be justified in terms of its relation to faith. People worked six days in various arenas of life, and on the Sabbath, they were expected to pause and reflect on what they accomplished, and they offered this to God, in the hope that he would complete their work by his grace.

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Modernity changed all this. The religious system was dislodged from its pre-eminent position as the center of human society. Its place was taken over first by the State, and later by the Market.

Modernity and Faith

Various forces came together to bring about modern society, beginning in the second half of the 18th century in Europe. As mentioned earlier, the rise of cities, the rapid development of science and technology, the expansion of commerce and industry, the spread of markets, the rise of the nation-state, and with it, of liberalism—all these precipitated the collapse of traditional society. What exactly happened to society under modernity?

Let us count the ways, at the risk of simplifying what is in truth a very complex and slow process. In modernity, the extended clan and the tribal community vanished overnight; the small nuclear family consisting of husband and wife and children became the norm. The State broke loose from its religious ties, thereby instituting the much-misunderstood concept of separation of Church and State. In lieu of moral education, which explicitly aimed at building character, the objective of public education came to be education for productive citizenship or nation-building or personal advancement. Economic enterprise definitely lost its meaning as a moral vocation. Economic success began to be measured solely in terms of profitability or monetary gain.

Perhaps—more importantly for our discussion—in the modern Western world, religious faith found itself increasingly consigned to the private sphere. In the words of William James, religion came to be equated with what a person does in his solitude.[3] So-called public religions—meaning religions that had previously made themselves heard on all the pressing issues of the day—were expected to die a natural

[3]William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London and Bombay: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902), 31.

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death in the course of modernity. Under the impulse of secularization, religion was expected to withdraw from the public sphere.

That, of course, has not happened everywhere. Indeed, in the developing world, religion remained very much a distinct voice in the public sphere. Notably in Latin America, but also in parts of Asia like the Philippines, religion took a distinctly political turn, sometimes even supplying the moral justification for violent revolutions.

The question remains: what is it about modern society that promoted these dire expectations about the marginalization of religion in the modern world?

One of my favourite definitions of modernity comes from the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. Modernity, he says, is nothing but the internal differentiation of society primarily along functional lines. This form of differentiation replaces the old differentiation that revolves around the categories of gender, ethnicity, religion, race, or social class. The only divisions that will matter in modern society are functional. Institutional spheres will gradually split off from one another, operating autonomously according to their distinct codes and rules.

Thus, law evolves as a distinct sphere separate from politics and from religion. One by one, the political system, the religious system, the family, the economy, the mass media, art, science, education, etc., will spin off into distinct spheres, and operate on the basis of their respective mediums of communication and functional codes. Each institutional system will be impelled to jealously guard its own turf and defend its autonomy, even as they may often try to influence the other institutional systems. Autonomy certainly does not mean that institutions will stop watching one another. Indeed, while they become normatively closed, they remain cognitively open.

Obviously, functional differentiation is not completed overnight. Indeed, Luhmann thinks of it as an evolutionary achievement of society, indicating the general direction in which all societies are headed. Still, people have tended to use modernity as a normative model or as a guide for correct institutional conduct. Let me offer

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two instructive instances where modern functional differentiation is implicitly invoked as a norm. The first comes from Pope Benedict XVI, and the second is taken from a recent landmark decision of incumbent US Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts.

No other pope in recent times comes close to Benedict XVI in grasping the role of the Church in the modern age. Benedict is truly the first modern Pope. In his opening address to the 5th General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean on May 13, 2007, he made a point that has been articulated in various other Vatican pronouncements. I quote from it at length because it shows a Pope who, instead of opposing modernity, shows the way for the Church to work within it.

> The political task is not the immediate competence of the Church. Respect for healthy secularity, including the pluralism of political opinions, is essential in the authentic Christian tradition. If the Church were to start transforming herself into a directly political subject, she would do less, not more, for the poor and for justice because she would lose her independence and her moral authority, identifying herself with a single political path and with debatable partisan positions. The Church is an advocate of justice and of the poor, precisely because she does not identify with politicians or with partisan interests. Only by remaining independent can she teach the great criteria and inalienable values, guide consciences and offer a life choice that goes beyond the political sphere. To form consciences, to be the advocate of justice and truth, to educate in individual and political virtues: that is the fundamental vocation of the Church in this area.[4]

If this is not a modernist view, then I do not know what modern is.

Speaking from the perspective of the legal system, US Chief Justice John Roberts stressed the same need for functional differentiation when the US Supreme Court recently upheld the constitutionality

[4]Benedict XVI, Address at the Inaugural Session of the 5th General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (Conference Hall, Shrine of Aparecida: Sunday, May 13, 2007), no. 4, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/ 2007/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070513_conference-aparecida_en.html (accessed September 12, 2012).

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of President Obama's controversial health care program, rejecting countless petitions to strike it down as unconstitutional. This is what Justice Roberts wrote in upholding the constitutionality of the healthcare law:

> Members of this Court are vested with the authority to interpret the law; we possess neither the expertise nor the prerogative to make policy judgments. Those decisions are entrusted to our nation's elected leaders, who can be thrown out of office if the people disagree with them. It is not our job to protect the people from the consequences of their political choices.[5]

What Chief Justice Roberts is saying here is simply that judges should stick to their work of interpreting the law; it is not their job to make policy. Policy-making is the work of political leaders chosen by the people. Pope Benedict was saying essentially the same thing. The work of the Church is to form and educate consciences, so that individuals may make the right decisions in their lives. It is not the Church's function to make these decisions for the laity, and certainly neither is it the pastor's role to substitute his conscience for that of his flock, or, worse, to take on the work of the politician.

It is, of course, not at all easy for influential institutions like the Church or the Supreme Court to maintain the kind of institutional restraint that Pope Benedict and Justice Roberts advocate. This is especially so when the Church and the courts find themselves called upon to intervene or solve problems in a deeply flawed, confused, and dysfunctional society. But, as Benedict warns, no institution can make a habit of invading the spheres of other institutions without exposing itself to the risk of undermining its authority within its own sphere.

[5]Opinion of U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John C. Roberts on the National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius, Secretary of Health and Human Services, Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit, no. 11-393, argued March 26–28, 2012, decided June 28, 2013, page 6, http://msnbcmedia.msn.com/i/msnbc/Sections/NEWS/scotus_opinion_on_ACA_from_msnbc.com.pdf (accessed September 12, 2012).

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Social scientists think of functional differentiation as modernity's solution to the complexity posed by the emergence of plural and morally diverse societies. Which is not to say that modernity does not breed new problems—indeed, it does. Not the least of these problems is the resulting fragmentation of the human condition, the manifestations of which often defy comprehension—as when decisions handed down by courts of law contradict our moral intuitions, or when politicians we know to be lawbreakers are routinely voted into office and given the task of making laws. These contradictions often leave us with the strong sense that we may have lost control over our societies and over our individual lives. This condition is what is called "alienation."

Some philosophers, like those from the Frankfurt School, trace this condition to the "dialectic of reason"—the negation by reason of all our highest hopes and expectations about the modern era. Instead of reason serving as our reliable guide in the creation of a better world, we become its hapless slave. All around us, we see intelligent people devoting their lives to looking for the most efficient means to attain goals, yet even as they do, they appear to have lost all ability to look at the rationality of these same goals. We find ourselves increasingly ruled by technocrats who have no vision, by politicians without morals, by businessmen without conscience. Our schools produce graduates armed with sophisticated knowledge and skills, but no wisdom and no love in their hearts for others. We bring out the finest and most productive technologies that give us instant gratification, but which produce catastrophic consequences for society and nature in the long term. Reason, indeed, can be blind.

Postmodernity and Faith

The crisis of modernity that we are talking about here is what has spawned the sustained reflection that we today call "postmodernism." This is not so much, then, a new type of society as it is a new way of thinking about the world—a sensibility that emerges from the failed promises and disappointments of modern reason. The postmodern sensibility takes a hard look at the modern era, and asks what went

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right and what went wrong, what can be preserved and what needs to be rejected. Above all, it asks the most important question of all—how shall we live in such a world? Benedict seizes this moment, and reminds us: faith without reason is no more than blind prejudice; but reason without faith leads to self-absorption and a destructive detachment from reality.

There is no standard postmodern attitude. To postmodernists, there is no single proven model for living meaningfully in the modern world. Indeed, for many, there is not even a yearning to create a better world. I think it is from this profound postmodernist pessimism that Benedict seeks to rescue the present intellectual age. In their self-absorption, unable to look to something beyond them, and operating without a steady compass, many people, especially the young, sink into despair and self-destruction. One icon of the postmodern generation was the young creative American genius, the writer David Foster Wallace, who took his life precisely when he was at the height of his achievements. The modern world has prompted so many to abandon their faith, yet today they find themselves trying to work their way back to the old metaphysics that had inspired their elders, but which they themselves could no longer accept.

Some, like the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo, a Nietzschean and Heideggerian scholar, explicitly willed themselves to believe. Vattimo avoided the perils of nihilism by committing himself to Christianity as a religion of love. His friend, the late American philosopher Richard Rorty, could not bring himself to embrace any form of religion even at his death bed. He sought comfort instead in a secular philosophy of social solidarity that, like faith, he knew he could not ground on philosophical certainty. Like Vattimo's ungrounded faith in love, Rorty remained steadfastly committed to an ungrounded hope in a world that makes no room for cruelty.

What, then, is postmodernity's impact on faith? I would argue that postmodernity probably creates far more room for the religious sensibility than was originally permitted by the conventional modernity that sought its exile to the private sphere. But perhaps the more interesting question to ask is "What kind of faith is taking shape

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within the context of postmodernity?" My quick answer is "Maybe, something closer to a 'faith of the faithless'"—to borrow Simon Critchley's memorable phrase. What is meant by this?

Let me devote the remainder of these reflections by lifting some interesting passages from two books that, in their separate ways, painfully grapple with the challenge of faith in the modern world.

I start with Simon Critchley's *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology*. Critchley's book takes off from a quotation from Oscar Wilde's last essay, "De Profundis," written entirely from prison. Wilde was a socialist and an agnostic. This is what Wilde wrote:

> When I think of religion at all, I feel as if I would like to found an order for those who cannot believe: the Confraternity of the Faithless, one might call it, where on an altar, on which no taper burned, a priest, in whose heart peace had no dwelling, might celebrate with unblessed bread and a chalice empty of wine. Everything to be true must become a religion. And agnosticism should have its ritual no less than faith.[6]

It was the sentence "Everything to be true must become a religion" that struck Critchley. It seems to stand out from the rest of the paragraph. What does it mean "to be true," Critchley asks. He offers an answer: truth is an "experience of fidelity." Unbelievers do not give up on the idea of truth, Critchley says; rather, they transfigure its meaning. Critchley's quest is basically for a kind of faith—a "fidelity to the infinite demand"—that is not trapped in any kind of religious metaphysics, a faith that can cure the cynicism and apathy of the modern age. He elaborates this thesis in what he calls "the catechism of the citizen."

This may not seem much of a religion as we usually understand the term. But here we get an idea of what the postmodern consciousness is yearning for which it cannot seem to find in conventional religion. It yearns for commitment to an infinite demand, something that exceeds our ordinary human striving. Critchley thinks he has found it in the

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[6]Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons—The Nickerbocker Press, 1905), 18–19, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/921/921-h/921-h.htm (accessed September 12, 2012).

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rigor of Christian love—not the easy kind of love we reserve for those near to us, but the love that Christ demands of us, the love for our neighbors, including our enemies. That is what is difficult.

"Faith," Critchley concludes,

> is the enactment of the self in relation to a demand that exceeds my power … a subjective strength that only finds its power to act through an admission of weakness: the powerless power of conscience. Conscience is the inward ear that listens for the repetition of the infinite demand. Its call is not heard in passive resignation from the world, but in the urgency of active engagement. … [I]t is perhaps the faithless who can best sustain the rigor of faith without requiring security, guarantees, or rewards.

For such a person, says Critchley, it is enough to hear "Be it done for you as you believed." I have never come across a stronger endorsement of the power of conscience.

The second book that has given me so much to think about was written by someone who has the same background in leftwing politics as I. This is Terry Eagleton's *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*. As the subtitle indicates, Eagleton's work is a sustained polemic against the flashy atheism that has recently become the vogue among intellectuals like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. Eagleton is of Irish descent, was raised as a Catholic, but lived, studied, and taught in Cambridge University, where he became a Marxist. He is a leading postmodern literary critic, and his faith is idiosyncratic and not at all conventional.

Eagleton believes that under modernity, culture and civilization were fatally torn apart from one another. Marxism held up the hope of bringing civilization and culture back together, he said, but unfortunately it was rejected as a political project. In light of this, we cannot avoid asking, he says, where have the radical impulses that used to animate the political movements migrated. To theology, he exclaims.

> This is not entirely surprising, since theology, however implausible many of its truth claims, is one of the most ambitious theoretical arenas left in an increasingly specialized world—one whose subject is nothing less than the nature and destiny of humanity itself, in relation to what it takes to be its transcendent source of life…. Theology's

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> remoteness from pragmatic issues is an advantage in this respect…. In a world in which theology is increasingly part of the problem … it is also fostering the kind of critical reflection which might contribute to some of the answers.

In other words, it is precisely the holistic perspective of religion that makes it possible for it to bridge the fragmented arenas of the modern world. This is what Eagleton seems to be saying. I find it intriguing that some of the most refreshing spiritual reflections of our time are coming from agnostics who have the humility to recognize the limits of reason.

I think I can now begin to pull the various strands of my reflection in order to answer the question, "What is the impact of postmodernity on faith?" Let us bear in mind that postmodernity as a sensibility arose from the disenchantment with modernity—particularly the confusion resulting from the fragmentation of human society into autonomous and highly differentiated institutional spheres. If every institution had been able to do its work, this condition in itself might not have spawned the kind of pathological crises we have seen in recent years. But something happened to modern society that was entirely contingent. This was the rise of market society—meaning the spread of the code of the market and its medium (money) into spheres that could not resist its efficiency. The result of this is the ascendancy of monetary valuation over all other forms of valuation. The State was the first to succumb to the logic of the market by prioritizing capital accumulation and economic growth over social justice, ecological sustainability, the development of the family and community, or the cultivation of a just culture. Nowhere is this clearer than in the total co-optation of higher education today by business.

Now we know that our main problem is neither political nor economic. It is cultural—something that hearkens back to the centrality of beliefs and values. Unfortunately, the thirst for those values that can restore balance to our lives, and beliefs that can adequately orient us as we make our way into a complex world, can no longer be quenched by radical political ideologies or by conventional religion. Many churches and political movements are trapped in obsolete vocabularies that

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offer no credible ethics for living in today's world. As such, they do not speak to the anxieties and needs of the modern individual.

What makes reading Pope Benedict's writings interesting for a non-theologian like me is that they suggest a way out of modern nihilism through the rediscovery of the Biblical roots of the Western civilizational project that has given us modernity. I am just a beginner, an amateur, in this difficult quest to ground my faith in something enduring, but what little I have read fills me with the grace of understanding.

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