

The *Mediator*



A Journal of Holiness Theology for Asia-Pacific Contexts

**ASIA-PACIFIC NAZARENE
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY**

Bridging Cultures for Christ
1 Timothy 2:5

Ortigas Avenue Extension, Kaytikling
Taytay, Rizal 1920
Republic of the Philippines

Telephone: (63-2) 658-5872
Fax: (63-2) 658-4510
Website: www.apnts.edu.ph
E-mail: mediator@apnts.edu.ph

Volume XII, Number 1
April 2017

The Mediator provides a forum for dialogue about theological issues related to ministry in Asian and Pacific contexts. The views expressed in the Journal reflect those of the authors and not necessarily the views of the seminary, its administration, or the editorial committee.

The Mediator is the official, peer-reviewed journal of Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary and has been in publication since 1996. Please send all correspondence, comments, or questions to the editor at the address below.

The Mediator
Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary
Ortigas Ave. Ext., Kaytikling
Taytay, 1920 Rizal
PHILIPPINES

Email: mediator@apnts.edu.ph

Website: <http://www.apnts.edu.ph/resources/mediator/>

Editor: Darin Land, Ph.D., Associate Professor of New Testament, APNTS

Consulting Editor: Mitchel Modine, Ph.D., Professor of Old Testament, APNTS

© Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary, 2017. The authors retain copyright to their individual articles.

ISSN 1655-4175

Permission to quote from the Holy Bible, New International Version® (NIV). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations taken from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org)

Permission to quote from the Contemporary English Version® (CEV). Copyright © 1995, by American Bible Society. All rights reserved.

Table of Contents

List of Contributors	iv
Preface.....	v
The Postmodern Condition and the Christian Open Narrative.....	1
<i>Phillip E. Davis</i>	
The Gospel of <i>Caritas</i> : The Church as an Open Society—Toward a More Inclusive Witness.....	45
<i>Jason V. Hallig</i>	
A Wesleyan Historian’s Response to Postmodernism	53
<i>Floyd T. Cunningham</i>	
Postmodernity: An Invitation to Quiet Confidence in Biblical Studies	81
<i>Darin H. Land</i>	
Call for Papers	87
Information	88

List of Contributors

Floyd T. Cunningham, Ph.D.

Academic Dean and Professor of the History of Christianity, APNTS

Phillip E. Davis, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Theology, APNTS

Jason V. Hallig, Ph.D.

Director and Professor, Philippine International College Graduate School

Darin H. Land, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of New Testament, APNTS

Preface

The articles in this issue of *The Mediator* are the outcome of a conference on postmodernity held at Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary on March 5, 2016. The first of these articles formed the cornerstone for the conference, as Dr. Phillip E. Davis presented some of the fruit of his doctoral investigations into the work of Jean-François Lyotard and Lieven Boeve. To his great credit, Davis was able to present the complexities of postmodern philosophy and theology, repackaged in a way that was both accessible to a general audience while simultaneously faithful to the original work. Thus, Davis challenges us to learn from postmodern thinkers in order to recontextualize the Gospel for a postmodern context.

The remaining articles in the present issue were initially offered as responses in plenary session to Davis's paper. Dr. Jason V. Hallig offers theological reflection, especially focusing on the role of the Church as an open community. Dr. Floyd T. Cunningham approaches the topic from the perspective of a historian. He traces the development of postmodernity within the guild of history, drawing conclusions regarding implications for Wesleyan historians. Finally, I offer a response from the perspective of Biblical Studies. I affirm the importance of hearing the postmodern critique, while also proposing a quiet confidence among Biblical scholars as they approach the interpretive task.

Darin H. Land, Ph.D.

Editor, *The Mediator*

Associate Professor of New Testament, APNTS

The Postmodern Condition and the Christian Open Narrative

Phillip E. Davis, Ph.D.

Abstract

In this paper, I consider the changes in knowledge brought about within countries developing into post-industrial societies. Shifts in the legitimization of knowledge bring about a situation described as “the postmodern condition.” For insight into the current critical consciousness, I consider Jean-François Lyotard’s analysis of knowledge in contemporary society. I also look at his “phrase pragmatics,” in which he demonstrates the dispersal of knowledge experienced in developed countries. A second condition accompanies the splintering of knowledge in the West. Specifically, the modern grand narratives have lost credibility. This affects the legitimization of knowledge in all fields, including theology and education. For a theological response, I turn to Lieven Boeve’s analysis of Lyotard’s work. Boeve receives the latter’s critique: namely, that the Christian narrative can degenerate into a hegemonic meta-narrative. However, Boeve argues that the Christian narrative is naturally an “open narrative,” which resists hegemonic narratives, while testifying to the event of God’s grace. Still, Boeve notes that any witness bearing must necessarily betray the event, even as it tries to give expression to it through language. I conclude then with a brief presentation of Boeve’s model of the “open narrative,” along with a few implications this model has for a theology working in the current postmodern context.

Nations in post-industrial societies experience changes in knowledge that have a tremendous effect on culture. These changes also affect theology and the witness it gives to the Christian faith. Previous expressions of the faith may no longer communicate effectively for people within those societies. During times of great transition, theology is called to explain the faith in culturally relevant terms. Roughly four decades ago, Western countries began to experience the postmodern condition. This resulted naturally from the rapid expansion of knowledge in post-industrialized nations. Since this shift was first reported, the rapid expansion of knowledge has spread around the globe. No other people, at any other time in human history, have seen difference so clearly as people living today. Increasingly, therefore, theologians share their reflections on faith in a postmodern culture. In order to gain insight into these changes, we turn to the philosophical analysis offered by Jean-François Lyotard.

1. Jean-François Lyotard

In 1979, Jean-François Lyotard gained international recognition for a small work submitted to the Canadian government.¹ His report, entitled *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* analyzed Occidental culture as coming increasingly under the influence of technological and informational narratives—stories that legitimize knowledge in the West.² Lyotard summarized his findings in these terms:

Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements—narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. However, we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable.³

One phrase stood out from the report: his overly simplified definition of the postmodern as “incredulity toward metanarratives.” In this same pamphlet, Lyotard announced a coming work that would further explain his thought. This later work has been largely ignored by theologians.⁴ Rather,

¹ See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans., Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Theory and History of Literature, vol. 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxv. Lyotard calls this writing an “occasional one”—“a report on knowledge in the most highly developed societies”—which was presented to the government of Quebec.

² Jean François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport Sur Le Savoir* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979).

³ Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

⁴ See Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Différend* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1983). This extremely difficult book preforms Lyotard’s understanding of his phrase pragmatics. For

Liotard functions as an *auctoritas* within other peoples' (theological) arguments. Numerous journal articles cite the Lyotardian phrase—"incredulity toward metanarratives"—as a definition of the postmodern before launching out in a direction that was predetermined by its author. This does an injustice to the philosopher, since it reduces his complex thought to a three-word slogan.

During the 1980's, Lyotard found an eager audience in many Western university liberal arts departments. His oeuvre covers many diverse subjects such as philosophy, history, the arts, etc. Theologians have interacted with other postmodern writers (e.g., Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Richard Rorty, among others), while largely ignoring Lyotard. This impoverishes theology; for his analysis of language and the current state of knowledge can benefit a theology seeking understanding. The condition Lyotard describes as a "crisis of metaphysical philosophy" increasingly affects theology, as well as the universities promulgating such thought. For only certain forms of knowledge receive universal legitimation: namely, the pragmatic, useful, and technological forms. One sees the effect of this crisis in the Church's (often) defensive response to new forms of knowledge. It is detected as well in the small number of young people seeking ecclesiastical careers—in contrast to those entering the technical, engineering, and scientific fields. In this paper, we will argue that a theology that seeks understanding, *fides quaerens intellectum*, can benefit from engaging with Lyotard's postmodern critical philosophy. But theologians should do so to gain a critical understanding of knowledge in current thought—not to build a cool, new, postmodern theology.

2. The Postmodern condition

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard deals with "the question of knowledge in advanced industrial societies."⁵ Shifts in knowledge occur in soci-

the English translation, see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Theory and History of Literature, vol. 46 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

⁵ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 13. It is important to note here that Lyotard is dealing with a particular "contemporary society and culture": namely, "postindustrial society, [and] postmodern culture" in the West. See *ibid.*, 37.

eties as they move from an industrial to a post-industrial phase, according to Lyotard. In such societies, knowledge is legitimized pragmatically: i.e., through its performativity or “use-value.” Forms of knowledge that can be put to use are (demonstratively) true; whereas, metaphysical or narrational truth claims are held as suspect. Simply said, they have lost legitimacy. The former forms of knowledge fall within the realm of experts; whereas, philosophers and artists deal in the latter forms. Knowledge continues to advance in such societies, as more sophisticated machines are developed, and knowledge continues to increase, in a process similar to what happened in the development of transportation and communication. Knowledge is converted into information and is, therefore, separated from the “knower” (i.e., from one with a trained mind). Instead, it becomes exchangeable. As knowledge is converted into information, only the bits of information are remembered. Other forms of knowledge, which cannot be translated into computerized language, are immediately forgotten.⁶

2.1 Narrational knowledge

However, traditional narrative knowledge makes its own claim. Such forms of knowledge confront the modern practice of legitimizing knowledge through technological or scientific means with their own claims. These narratives “jar the golden rule of our knowledge” when they exhort their addressees to “never forget.”⁷ Traditional knowledge is incommensurable with Western scientific or technological narratives, which claim an independent, “objective observer” as the one who legitimizes their claims. These latter (scientific) games are played by experts. However, narrational knowledge uses a different set of rules, making it incommensurate with the Occidental language game. One sees a difference in the temporal sense employed in the traditional narrative: a narratee, who recounts the narrative, is also located as one within a group—the group of people thus narrated. One is included within the narrative as both sender, hearer, and object (or more technically, as addressor, addressee, and referent). In narrative knowledge, one never forgets; for the founding events are recounted

⁶ See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

from one generation to the next. According to Lyotard, “Narration is the quintessential form of customary knowledge.”⁸ Such stories form the social bond. Lyotard refers to traditional narrative knowledge in *The Postmodern Condition* to show the diversity of language games. There he argues that various discourse genres use different rules to “win” in a game in which they all compete.⁹

2.2 The dispersal of knowledge

Scientific knowledge plays by its own set of rules, as well. But the rules science uses—namely, verification and falsification—are incommensurate with those used by narratives. The scientist concludes therefore that the narrative’s referents are not true (i.e., they are not established, since proof cannot be given for their existence). However, narratives play by their own set of rules. As a result, a story may, or may not, incorporate insights gained through the scientific method. If it does, the narrative will re-narrate this insight as one of the story’s many recounted events. Different forms of knowledge use various, particular rules. Thus, it is as impossible to legitimize narrational knowledge by scientific procedures as it is to judge the latter by the former. Lyotard is left “in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species.” However, he argues that in postmodernity “lamenting the ‘loss of meaning’... boils down to mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative.”¹⁰ Knowledge is dispersed in the postmodern condition. Indeed, the existence of modern universities—whose role is to further extend knowledge—attests to the diversity of various forms of knowledge.¹¹

⁸ Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 19.

⁹ This analysis is more completely elaborated in *The Differend*.

¹⁰ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 26. He notes, however, that when scientists explain their (non-narrational) findings to the public they often employ epic language (i.e., they construct stories). Lyotard writes, “It is not inconceivable that the recourse to narrative is inevitable, at least to the extent that the language game of science desires its statements to be true but does not have the resources to legitimate their truth on its own. If this is the case, it is necessary to admit an irreducible need for history understood... as a need to forget” (ibid., 27–28).

¹¹ Lyotard identifies a narrative grounding modern scientific practice, as seen in the founding of the university system in Berlin, Germany, in the speculative discourse of Ger-

This diversification of knowledge results naturally from progress itself. The growth of knowledge, resulting from rapidly increasing technological transformations, brings necessary changes to the nature of knowledge. Since the number of languages continues to grow, no one can speak them all.¹² Knowledge appears to be “splintering.” As a result, the realization dawns that no universal metalanguage exists that is capable of legitimizing all forms of knowledge. Rather, each discourse of knowledge must legitimize itself.

2.3 Language games

Artists and philosophers in Vienna began to grapple with this realization at the turn of the twentieth century. In contrast to the positivists, Wittgenstein’s investigations into language games leads to

a kind of legitimation not based on performativity. That is what the postmodern world is all about. Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction.¹³

For example, science uses a number of language discourses to legitimize its empirical practices. Logic is employed, as a metalanguage, to establish well-formed expressions, which other scientists adhere to in their own re-

man Idealism, which, in bringing together all of the disparate forms of knowledge, constructs its own metanarrative. This, of course, is a different legitimation than that of usefulness. Today, however, knowledge finds its legitimacy in “humanity,” i.e., in our ability to govern ourselves. Knowledge informs us about the reality in which our prescriptions—i.e., what we want and thus legislate—are to be carried out. Within such a narrative, “knowledge has no final legitimacy outside of serving the goals envisioned by the practical subject, the autonomous collectivity,” i.e., the state. See Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 31–36.

¹² Languages continue to increase in all fields of knowledge. Along with symbolism used in chemistry and notation employed in calculus, Lyotard mentions “machine languages, the matrices of game theory, new systems of musical notation, systems of notation for nondenotative forms of logic (temporal logics, modal logics), the language of the genetic code, graphs of phonological structures, and so on” (ibid., 40–41).

¹³ Ibid., 41.

search.¹⁴ Clarity is required, since science is a dialectic that calls for consensus among its addressees.¹⁵ Therefore, scientific statements must adhere to logical conventions for the creation of “well-formed” statements, in order to render judgment.¹⁶ Other language discourses also appear within scientific research: the prescriptive, which sets the conditions for scientific statements; the denotative, which expresses the (hypothesized) state of the referent before it is “proven”; and the ostensive, which “proves” the referent through observation by sight, hearing, or some other sense. Thus, as stated above, science is a form of knowledge that engages in its own form of “communicational interaction.”

2.4 Performativity

Historically, the scientific enterprise was conducted under idealistic and humanist narratives of legitimation (i.e., Spirit or truth). However, today “the production of proof... falls under the control of another language game, in which the goal is no longer truth, but performativity—that is, the best possible input/output equation.”¹⁷ Today, the point of research is power. As Lyotard writes, “Scientists, technicians, and instruments are

¹⁴ Languages are used pragmatically in scientific research. Each language “must formulate its own rules and petition the addressee to accept them. To satisfy this condition, an axiomatic is defined that includes a definition of symbols to be used in the proposed language, a description of the form expressions in the language must take in order to gain acceptance (well-formed expressions), and an enumeration of the operations that may be performed on the accepted expressions (axioms in the narrow sense)” (Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 42).

¹⁵ That is, new findings are put to other scientists, within the scientific community, who, after reviewing the evidence presented, give consent that the evidence validates (or invalidates) claims made by the addressor(s).

¹⁶ But logic itself may be questioned. By what means does logical discourse legitimize its own ways of determining whether or not statements are “well-formed”? The logician’s problem is that “all formal systems have internal limitations,” and language, which is used to express axioms, is inconsistent. For “it allows the formation of paradoxes.” This creates a question, regarding the legitimation of knowledge: the sciences “owe their status to the existence of a language whose rules of functioning cannot themselves be demonstrated but are the object of a consensus among experts.” See *ibid.* 43.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

purchased not to find truth, but to augment power.”¹⁸ However, technical ability increases one’s ability to obtain proof, so it also necessarily influences “the truth criterion.” Simply said: something is true because it works. Improved performance, therefore, produces a pseudo form of *de facto* legitimation.

This procedure operates within the following framework: since “reality” is what provides the evidence used as proof in scientific argumentation, and also provides prescriptions and promises of a juridical, ethical, and political nature with results, one can master all of these games by mastering “reality.” That is precisely what technology can do. By reinforcing technology, one “reinforces” reality, and one’s chances of being just and right increase accordingly. Reciprocally, technology is reinforced all the more effectively if one has access to scientific knowledge and decision-making authority.¹⁹

Lyotard argues that power functions in a cycle of self-legitimation: where the law and science, as well as their particular discourses, are legitimized through efficiency; while that very efficiency is legitimized through science and law. This creates a self-legitimizing cycle that has tremendous implications for other areas of society, including, notably, higher education.

2.5 Education

The criterion of performativity has a deep effect on education, for it begins to be governed by the idea of knowledge through power. Immediately the idea of education as the transmission of an established body of (traditional) knowledge is delegitimized. Education no longer has the role of training the “liberal elite,” who guide society along a path towards social progress or emancipation. Rather, education is expected to produce experts and managers, who have the necessary skills required for improving the efficiency of social systems.²⁰ Higher education, therefore, becomes

¹⁸ Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 46.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 48–49.

functional, and the place of professors—as those who transmit a body of knowledge—is replaced by computers transmitting knowledge to students.²¹ This functionalization of knowledge fundamentally changes the role of education. For “when it comes to speaking the truth or prescribing justice, numbers are meaningless.”²² However, numbers do matter when one is putting research teams together, for “teamwork does in fact improve performance.”²³

2.6 Breakthroughs

While research and education are legitimized through performativity, this is not the source of scientific breakthroughs. Teams of researchers advance knowledge and push research forward; however, they do so through parody—not through consensus. That is, they look to break established ways of thinking in order to find a newer and better idea. Lyotard writes,

Science does not expand by means of the positivism of efficiency.

The opposite is true: working on a proof means searching for and “inventing” counterexamples, in other words, the unintelligible; supporting an argument means looking for a “paradox” and legitimating it with new rules in the games of reasoning. In neither case is efficiency sought for its own sake; it comes, sometimes tardily, as an extra, when the grant givers finally decide to take an interest in the case. But what never fails to come and come again, with every new theory, new hypothesis, new statement, or new observation, is the question of legitimacy. For it is not philosophy that asks this question of science, but science that asks it of

²¹ Lyotard writes, “But one thing that seems certain is that in both cases the process of delegitimation and the predominance of the performance criterion are sounding the knell of the age of the Professor: a professor is no more competent than memory bank networks in transmitting established knowledge, no more competent than interdisciplinary teams in imagining new moves or new games” (Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition.*, 53). In line with Lyotard’s thought, one wonders today about the professor’s role once his or her lectures are recorded as video and made available for on-line instruction. Computers never tire, get sick, demand raises, or protest. And networks transmit information efficiently.

²² *Ibid.*, 52.

²³ *Ibid.*

itself.²⁴

Thus, the problem of legitimizing knowledge appears over and over again. The increasing particularity and sophistication of knowledge—thus its “splintering”—is seen in the difference between the physical sciences and the human sciences. While the hard sciences legitimize their findings through a dialectic carried out among fellow scientists, which establishes a referent (i.e., nature) through denotative statements, the human sciences deal with a referent (i.e., a human) that argues back, develops strategies, and counters scientific moves with its own move. Nature is an indifferent referent, but a human is involved—agonistic.²⁵

2.7 Paralogy and dissensus

Lyotard closes his argument in *The Postmodern Condition* by contrasting paralogy and systems based on a body knowledge. Such systems strive for balance, stability, and uniformity. They function through a pragmatics of consensus. While knowledge does in fact continue to develop within such systems—governed by a paradigm and functioning through consensus—it is the idea that upends the current paradigm that promulgates “new norms of understanding.”²⁶ As we previously said, occasionally someone comes along with such a new idea. As Lyotard notes, discoveries “are unpredictable.”²⁷ They arise with the request that practitioners follow a different language game.

Throughout *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard points to the different language games used to legitimize the heterogeneous forms of knowledge in postindustrial societies. For example, he writes,

From the beginning of this study, I have emphasized the differences (not only formal, but also pragmatic) between the various language games, especially between denotative, or knowledge, games and prescriptive, or action, games. The pragmatics of science is centered on denotative utterances, which are the foundation upon which it builds institutions of learning (institutes, cen-

²⁴ Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 54.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

ters, universities, etc.). But its postmodern development brings a decisive “fact” to the fore: even discussions of denotative statements need to have rules. Rules are not denotative but prescriptive utterances, which we are better off calling metaprescriptive utterances to avoid confusion (they prescribe what the moves of language games must be in order to be admissible). The function of the differential or imaginative or paralogical activity of the current pragmatics of science is to point out these metaprescriptives (science’s “presuppositions”) and to petition the players to accept different ones. The only legitimation that can make this kind of request admissible is that it will generate ideas, in other words, new statements.²⁸

However, unlike science which uses a “simple” pragmatics, social pragmatics employs many disparate, competing language games, within networks of linguistic phrases. Recognition of this situation signals the postmodern condition.²⁹ The idea that one metalanguage can regulate all of the sentences used in social pragmatics is abandoned. According to Lyotard, this describes the current inability to believe in traditional or “modern” narratives of legitimation.³⁰ In fact, the use of the word “system” is an attempt to deal with the loss of such a regulating story.

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard announces the coming of another philosophical work—a book that will further work out his thought. There he pleads that we pay attention to the dispute that breaks out in “language.” For justice must be done to those who are victimized by terror, and this can only be expressed when we take dissensus seriously.³¹

²⁸ Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 65.

²⁹ Lyotard mentions these: “denotative, prescriptive, performative, technical, evaluative, etc.” (ibid.).

³⁰ Again, among the “modern” narratives of legitimation, Lyotard mentions “the emancipation of humanity” and “the realization of the Idea” (ibid.).

³¹ Here I begin to anticipate Lyotard’s position in *The Differend*. However, at the end of *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard writes, “Consensus has become an outmoded and suspect value. But justice as a value is neither outmoded nor suspect. We must thus arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus” (Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 66).

3. The differend

The work Lyotard announced appeared in 1983, in French, as *Le différend*. In this long book, Lyotard performs a reading of philosophy, history, and politics, without trying to impose criteria upon these disciplines. He searches, thereby, for the rule that will do justice to the event as expressed in these particular disciplines. *The Differend* is a book that demands much of its reader: for Lyotard attempts to write with a “zero degree style,” in the form of “Observations, Remarks, Thoughts, and Notes.”³² Arranged like a philosopher’s notebook, the thought is given into the reader’s hand. Lyotard provides a clue for the reader in the “reading dossier” that precedes the work: “the whole is to be read in sequence.”³³ However, as the A. (i.e., author, addressor, or addressee?)³⁴ notes, the book is “too voluminous, too long, and too difficult.”³⁵ However, this dossier permits the reader “to ‘talk about the book’ without having read it.”³⁶ For philosophical reflection takes time—something people will not suffer, since success requires “gaining time.”

3.1 Language pragmatics

In *The Differend*, Lyotard performs his concept of language pragmatics. Here the reader encounters the radical heterogeneity found in “language.” The radical differences between particular genres of discourse—alluded to in *The Postmodern Condition*—are sketched out in (sometimes) excruciating detail. *The Differend* is organized into 264 numbered reflections, which are interrupted by a number of Notices or “reading notes for philosophical texts.”³⁷ Once the reader leaves the reading dossier, s/he plunges

³² Lyotard, *The Differend*, xiv.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Lyotard argues that phrases “happen,” so he effaces the role of the author, as a way of undoing the “subject”—hero of the Enlightenment project. He says that “in writing this book, the A. had the feeling that his sole addressee was the *Is it happening?* It is to it that the phrases which happen call forth.” Here Lyotard can be understood to be the author (of the phrases in the book), addressor (of the event or the reader), or addressee (of the phrases that happen). See *ibid.*, xvi.

³⁵ Ibid., xv.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., xiv.

deep into Lyotard's discussion with a number of philosophers—a conversation that encompasses the whole history of philosophy.³⁸

3.2 Silence and the differend

Lyotard's philosophy of the phrase centers on the idea of the *differend* (*différend*). A differend is the dispute that erupts at the presentation of a phrase, or in the occurrence of an event. He writes, "The differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be. This state includes silence, which is a negative phrase, but it also calls upon phrases which are in principle possible."³⁹ Lyotard's philosophy of the phrase seeks to express (somehow) the inexpressible phrase. A sentence must be phrased, but cannot be phrased under the rules governing the (then current) discourse. The condition of a differend—or dispute—is signaled by a feeling. One must look for the right words, and struggles to do so.⁴⁰ This feeling signifies that a search must be made for a new rule (or rules) capable of bearing witness to the event, i.e., to the thing to which the feeling alludes. A phrase must be phrased. A search must be made for a way to express the (as yet) inexpressible. Otherwise, the event is immediately forgotten and smothered in a litigation.⁴¹ During this unstable moment in language, something "asks" to be expressed and suffers from its inability to be put into words. Lyotard calls this a wrong (*tort*)—the suffering of a damage (*dommage*), along with an accompanying inability to communicate this loss to other people.⁴²

³⁸ For example, early on Lyotard discusses the dispute between Plato and Gorgias (the father of rhetoric). See the "Gorgias Notice," in Lyotard, *The Differend*, 14–16.

³⁹ Throughout this article, Lyotard's number for particular reflections in *The Differend* will also be cited, to make them easier to locate. See *ibid.*, 13 [D22].

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ That is, the event is translated into a phrase regimen that cannot signify its witness, or an end is imposed on it by the prevailing discourse genre. As a result, the event is reduced to a litigation, since its wrong cannot be signified. Its witness is thus silenced and forgotten. See 3.3 below.

⁴² Lyotard notes that this happens under two conditions: 1) the complainant loses the ability to prove his or her loss, and 2) one cannot bring the damage to peoples' understanding. The victim who attempts to circumvent the impossibility of expressing the

The Differend begins with a dispute between Robert Faurisson—former professor at the University of Lyon (France) and holocaust denier—and the survivors of Auschwitz. Faurisson claims that he has made an exhaustive search of experts, documents, and deportees; however, he has not found a single survivor who can prove that s/he saw a gas chamber at Auschwitz with his/her own eyes.⁴³ Faurisson demands eye-witness testimony from someone who saw an operating gas chamber in the death camp as proof of its existence, i.e., he requires proof needed to establish the existence of a referent. However, the survivors cannot bear witness to their experience in the language of scientific discourse. For to have seen a gas chamber operating at Auschwitz is to be one of the dead. Exacerbating the situation is the fact that the Nazis destroyed the evidence, and the guards won't talk. Indeed, Faurisson claims that *he* is a victim—fooled by those who lie, claiming that gas chambers were used in the Final Solution. As a result, the survivors are put in a position where they cannot prove their claim, or signify their damage. They suffer the wrong of being unable to signify their loss in the discourse genre the professor requires (i.e., cognition). In Lyotard's parlance, Faurisson makes the survivors victims, because they are deprived of the ability to prove the wrong they have suffered. Lyotard writes, "A plaintiff is someone who has incurred damages and who disposes of the means to prove it. One becomes a victim if one loses these means."⁴⁴

wrong suffered in an understandable way runs into a dilemma. Such a victim is told "either the damages you complain about never took place, and your testimony is false; or else they took place, and since you are able to testify to them, it is not a wrong that has been done to you, but merely a damage, and your testimony is still false" (Lyotard, *The Differend*, 5 [D7]).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3 [D2].

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 8 [D9]. Lyotard describes how the plaintiff is made into a victim. "You neutralize the addressor, the addressee, and the sense of the testimony; then everything is as if there were no referent (no damages). If there is nobody to adduce the proof, nobody to admit it, and/or if the argument which upholds it is judged to be absurd, then the plaintiff is dismissed, the wrong he or she complains of cannot be attested. He or she becomes a victim. If he or she persists in invoking this wrong as if it existed, the others (addressor, addressee, expert commentator on the testimony) will easily be able to make him or her pass for mad" (*ibid.*, [D9] 8).

The question arises, “Why don’t the survivors speak? Why are they silent?”⁴⁵ For Lyotard, their silence is a sign. It indicates the suffering borne by those who cannot express what they have to say. Silence indicates, therefore, the limits of language. It signals the denial of one of the phrase instances (i.e., addressor, addressee, referent, or sense). Once again, something “asks” to be expressed but suffers from its inability to be immediately phrased. For the event must be expressed in an utterly new way, since no prior idioms can convey what asks to be communicated.⁴⁶ Lyotard’s philosophy attempts to do justice to victims, to those who have been silenced.

To give the differend its due is to institute new addressees, new addressors, new significations, and new referents in order for the wrong to find an expression and for the plaintiff to cease being a victim. This requires new rules for the formation and linking of phrases. No one doubts that language is capable of admitting these new phrase families or new genres of discourse. Every wrong ought to be able to be put into phrases. A new competence (or “prudence”) must be found.⁴⁷

Lyotard’s philosophy attempts to do justice to victims, to those who have been silenced. His thought bears witness to the limits of language, as well as to the radical heterogeneity present in “language.”

3.3 Phrase instances and phrase regimens

Lyotard notes that when a phrase happens it immediately presents a universe. As was implied above, in every phrase universe four instances are situated: addressor, addressee, referent, and sense.⁴⁸ A phrase is not a

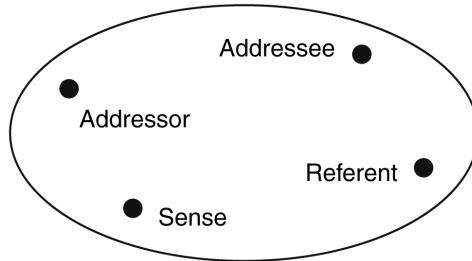
⁴⁵ For years after the Second World War, the Jews remained silent. This raises a philosophical question that Lyotard answers. See Lyotard, *The Differend*, 13–14 [D24–27]. However, as the decades passed and the number of survivors declined, the deportees began to tell their stories. They felt compelled to tell people what happened. The phrase “Never again!” expresses their compulsion.

⁴⁶ Lyotard writes, “What remains to be phrased exceeds what they can presently phrase, and they must be allowed to institute idioms which do not yet exist” (ibid., 13 [23]).

⁴⁷ See ibid., 13 [D21].

⁴⁸ Not every instance is situated in every phrase. Lyotard gives the example of the

message communicated from an addressor to an addressee, as those who are independent of the phrase; rather, both are situated within the phrase universe, when it happens, according to the rules the phrase follows, i.e., according to its phrase regimen. For there is a radical heterogeneity between phrases and phrase regimens. As Lyotard shows, there are phrases for “reasoning, knowing, describing, recounting, questioning, showing, ordering, etc.”⁴⁹ Each of these regimens are radically heterogeneous, situating their instances according to different rules.⁵⁰ Therefore, translation of a phrase into another phrase regimen necessarily damages that prior phrase. For the phrase regimen determines how a phrase is formed, linked, and validated.⁵¹



Phrases do not need to be verbal, for phrases are events, i.e., occurrences in the world. Lyotard says that a phrase is a “what” that happens. As a result, words may, or may not, be used. Lyotard gives some examples of gestures as phrases: a wink, foot tapping, a dog’s wagging tail, a cat’s perked ears, the “French *Al’é*, Italian *Eh*, [and] American *Whoops*,” or shrugging shoulder.⁵² The one thing which is certain is the phrase. Des-

phrase *I saw it*, where the addressor, sense, and referent are situated. Note, however, that the addressee is not situated in that phrase universe. To situate the addressee, another phrase is needed: *I tell you that it’s there that I saw it*. In this second phrase the other three instances (i.e. addressor, sense, and referent) are situated along with the addressee. See Lyotard, *The Differend*, 71 [D115].

⁴⁹ Ibid., xii.

⁵⁰ Lyotard writes, “The addressor of an exclamative is not situated with regard to the sense in the same way as the addressor of a descriptive. The addressee of a command is not situated with regard to the addressor and to the referent in the same way as the addressee of an invitation or of a bit of information” (ibid., 49 [D79]).

⁵¹ Ibid., 49 [D78].

⁵² Ibid., 70 [D110].

cartes may doubt everything including his existence; but the thing that survives that doubt is a phrase: *I think...* A phrase's existence cannot be doubted. The phrase, as a singular, calls forth the plural: for another phrase must link to the presented phrase, even if this is a silence—for silence is a phrase.⁵³

A phrase is presented. What is clear is that another phrase must follow, and a link must be made to the prior phrase. However, when a phrase links to the presented phrase, it does damage to the latter, for the phrase instances are modified by the linking phrase. Secondly, a phrase from one regimen cannot be translated into another regimen without doing damage to the phrase, for phrase instances are situated according to specific rules governing each particular regimen. For example, in logical phrases the instances are situated in order to provide a range of possibilities: e.g., *It may or may not rain*, or *x is p or not-p*. And such a phrase is situated in a radically different manner than an ostensive phrase: e.g., *Here it is! Rome*—the phrase a traveler uses as he points at a city.⁵⁴ Both the logical and ostensive phrases are also radically heterogeneous to the prescriptive phrase—*Open the door*. In the same way, the ostensive phrase situates the addressor and addressee instances differently than in the descriptive phrase—*The door is open*.⁵⁵ While the various phrase regimens situate their phrase universes in radically different ways, they cannot avoid coming into contact with each other. Thus, differends are inevitable.

3.4 Genres of discourse

Once again, when a phrase is presented it calls forth phrases that will link according to relations between the phrase instances, which are predeter-

⁵³ Silence is a phrase in abeyance, signifying that something cannot (as yet) be phrased—often as a feeling.

⁵⁴ Of course, Lyotard notes, the city could be “in Italy, or in the State of Georgia, or New York, or Oregon, or Tennessee, but not in California.” In which case, we need another phrase to indicate the specific place referred to, within the network of names. See Lyotard, *The Differend*, 44 [D67].

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 42 [D65]. The phrase universes presented by each phrase regimen are heterogeneous to the phrase universes presented by other phrase regimens; therefore, the situation of instances varies depending on the rules governing each phrase regimen (e.g., cognitive, descriptive, ostensive, performative, obligatory, etc.). See *ibid.*, 128 [D179].

mined according to its own phrase regimen. Each phrase regimen has its particular rules for the linking of phrases. But, as was just stated, contact between phrases of heterogeneous phrase regimens is inevitable. Therefore, the links that occur between phrases are either pertinent or inconsistent, according to whether or not the link is made in a suitable or unsuitable manner with regard to the prior phrase.⁵⁶ The differend occurs when the mode of linking is unsuitable for the prior phrase.

The problem of linking phrases from incommensurate phrase regimens is regulated by genres of discourse, which link phrases together according to a particular end. Lyotard gives examples of different genres of discourse, including, among others, cognition, obligation, speculation, rhetoric, and narrative. Genres of discourse “seduce” phrases to link together, setting the rules for linking, determining the stakes, and establishing a single finality for phrases from different regimens. Following these rules insures that the differend is avoided, since an end is given to all phrases. Heterogeneous phrases link according to what is at stake in the genre of discourse, and differends between the various phrase regimens are allowed to continue. But the differends are shifted “from the level of regimens to that of ends.”⁵⁷

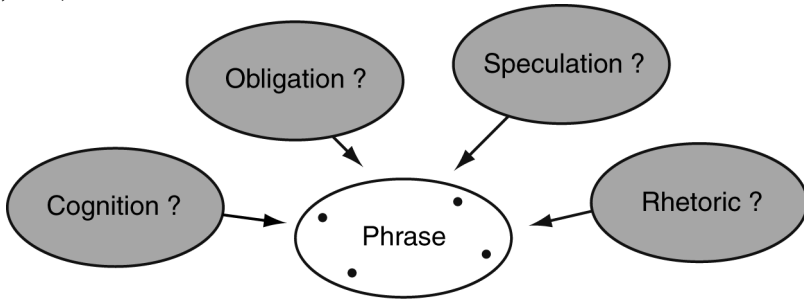
However, a differend breaks out at the linking of every phrase; this time on the level of discourse genres. For the various genres of discourse “compete” with each other over the presented phrase. One genre of discourse will defeat all other discourse genres and determine the linkage to the prior phrase. Thus, a wrong is done to all other possible phrases, both on the level of phrase regimens and discourse genres.⁵⁸ The differend is forgotten and the gap between heterogeneous phrase regimens is filled in according to the rules of the genre of discourse governing the linkage of the two phrases. On the level of discourse genres, the fight is over which

⁵⁶ The only pertinent link to the officer’s prescriptive phrase *Avant!* is to obey, i.e., to charge forward. Soldiers who cry out *Bravo!*—but don’t move—link to the prior phrase in an impertinent manner, thus, damaging it. See Lyotard, *The Differend*, 30 [D43].

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 29 [D40].

⁵⁸ For only one discourse genre will succeed in regulating the link to the presented phrase. All other possible discourse genres are defeated. Their possible ends are silenced, thus victimized.

end will determine the linking of phrases (e.g., knowledge, result, obedience, etc.).



3.5 Narratives

Genres of discourse tend to forget the differend, or dispute between phrases. But one discourse genre, in particular, most easily forgets the differend. The narrative genre of discourse places its end upon all phrases: namely, “to come to an end.” A narrative links phrases together according to diegetic time, i.e., the time frame given in the story. Each individual phrase functions as a “turn” in the story. The narrative presumes that the last phrase will be a “good one,” as turns are knitted together. When the last phrase links, all previous sentences are organized and signified according to this phrase—from the end to the beginning. In this final move, an end is stamped on all prior phrases.⁵⁹

A narrative strips away the interruptive power of the event through its diachronic operator (the before/after). The story pushes the event—as a disturbing presence—to its (narrative) border. Thus, the event—as a challenge to current knowledge—never happens. Rather, the narrative links it to other events, as simply one more occurrence in a chain of narrated events. In this way, the event is translated and tamed. Peace reigns within the narrative, and the event (as event) is forgotten.⁶⁰ Because of

⁵⁹ A murder mystery gives a good example of this. Throughout the story, the author presents one character after another as the possible perpetrator, while misleading the reader. Clues are embedded in the narrative, which the reader (hopefully) misses. At the conclusion, the last sentences impress a (correct) meaning on all prior phrases, and the truth is revealed. This gives the reader tremendous pleasure, when it is done well.

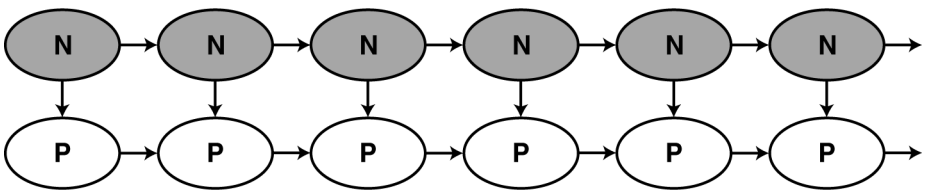
⁶⁰ For an example of how a narrative forgets all that lies outside its borders, see Lyo-

this, the narrative as discourse easily forgets the dispute that breaks out between heterogeneous phrase regimens and genres of discourse. This is especially the case with narratives from the Enlightenment. Such stories claim universality, i.e., to be able to represent reality “as it is.” Lyotard resists such hegemonic narratives. Rather, he focuses his attention on the phrase as a way of resisting claims made by the grand narratives.

3.6 Grand narratives

A grand narrative (*grand récit*) claims that it can transcend all other stories. It pretends, thereby, to disclose the true meaning of all other “little narratives” (*petit histories*). Therefore, a grand narrative presumes a cognitive apparatus.⁶¹ It links phrases together in parallel, according to an idea that functions as its governing rule. This is in contrast to small stories which link phrases together in serial order. At the moment of every linking, the idea governing the grand narrative situates the phrase instances and determines the rules for the linking of phrases. It thereby claims to inform us about “humanity” and presents either a totalized history or a project for humanity. History marches towards a specific goal, which is determined by the idea governing the narrative, e.g., a workers’ paradise (communism) or a world market (capitalism).

Grand Narrative



Sequence of Phrases

tard’s discussion of the Cashinahua tribe and their stories. Lyotard, *The Differend*, 152–155 [Cashinahua Notice].

⁶¹ Among such stories, the narrative is understood as “a conceptual instrument of representation” able to produce and transmit the meaning of all narratives. See Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics*, ed. Christopher Norris, *Critics of the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1991), 63.

As products of the Enlightenment, grand narratives function as (meta-) narratives disclosing universal truths. For example, the “story of history” claims to reveal the truth of human existence through time. This story purports to be told by a universal (objective) addressor, to all humanity (its addressors), about “humanity,” giving us the meaning of being “human.” However, its referent (“humanity”) cannot be shown, since it is a name for an idea. Particular names, places, times, and events—narrated by “little narratives”—are incorporated within its universal cognitive narrative. From such “data” the grand narrative extracts the true meaning of being “human.” Of course, the particular names, places, events, etc. are forgotten in the “story of history.” It is but one of many such grand narratives. Some identify people as “the proletariat,” “consumers,” or “objects of cognition,” and so forth, depending on the universalized idea governing the particular (grand) narrative.

Lyotard discusses the Nazi grand narrative in *The Differend*. This story was based on the idea of pure blood and made its appeal through the aesthetic of a funerary oration. One had to be born with pure Aryan blood to be included in the story. Those with such blood are told to “hear, tell, and do” what their ancestors have already done. The Nazi grand narrative obliges true Germans to fulfill its end. They must work, kill, and die for the Third Reich—a Reich that would (reportedly) last a thousand years. Lyotard summarizes the funerary oration as follows: “We (e.g., past, present, and future Aryans) tell ourselves that we have died well.”⁶² Thus, true Germans are to participate in the Aryan “beautiful death.” In this narrative, the phrase instances slide around freely. For the hearer becomes the addressor, who is, lives, and dies for those who have pure Aryan blood. As Lyotard notes, the Nazis made communal politics into a “politics of humanity.”⁶³ But terror lies both inside and outside of this master

⁶² The oration sounds as follows: “I, an Aryan, tell you, an Aryan, the narrative of our Aryan ancestors’ acts.... We tell ourselves that we have died well.” Lyotard notes that “the single name *Aryan* occupies the three instances in the universes of the narrative phrase.” The sense of the phrase is always “the beautiful death.” See Lyotard, *The Differend*, 105 [D160].

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 152 [D220].

narrative. For how does one prove that s/he is a true Aryan? (By meticulously carrying out the Nazi plan.) Indeed, how pure is pure blood? Only Aryans are “human,” after all. Those born without German blood are “animals.” They are in the way; they will be eliminated.

Modernity promised progress and a direction to history. If there is a direction, there must be “guiding threads,” which are experienced as a feeling. Here Lyotard points to the sublime. During the French Revolution, people throughout Europe hoped for freedom, equality, and fraternity. Their feelings of hope were countered by fear, among the European monarchs, that something was happening, which threatened their rule. According to Lyotard, if history marches towards a goal, this is signaled by the sublime. “Philosophies of history,” therefore, try to fill in the abyss separating heterogeneous genres and events. However, Lyotard sensed a different feeling at the end of the last century—an incredulity towards modern finalities. This feeling emerges from the failure of the grand narratives to achieve their goals, to deliver on their promises. Too many counter-examples have emerged.⁶⁴

3.7 The Christian grand narrative

For Lyotard, the Christian narrative is the grand narrative *par excellence*, which conquered all the (pagan) narratives of ancient Rome. It achieved this by incorporating what is at stake in the narrative genre itself into its own narrative, i.e., “to link onto the occurrence.” The Christian narrative can link onto whatever happens through its rule of love. By loving the event, the Christian narrative re-narrates events, narratives, and other discourse genres as signs indicating (or announcing) “that ‘we’ creatures are loved.”⁶⁵ Thus, whatever happens is signified as “the promise of good news.” The event is appropriated as a gift of (divine) love.⁶⁶ In this way,

⁶⁴ The ideas governing these universal narratives have proven to be sterile. Their counter-examples include the following: historical materialism is contradicted by “Berlin 1953, Budapest 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968, Poland 1980”; parliamentary liberalism is called into question by “May 1968”; economic liberalism is countered by the “crises of 1911 and 1929.” See Lyotard, *The Differend*, 179 [D257].

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 160 [D233].

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 159 [D232].

the narrative universalizes the narrative instances and problematizes the event, under the Idea of love. Everything is incorporated within the Christian narrative. Past events are fixed within its tradition; while any possible future events will be (already) received by *caritas*.

However, the narrative opposes those who resist its claim. Lyotard gives two examples: Joan of Arc and those involved in the Reformation. The “maid of Orleans” confesses that she feels under obligation to her heavenly voices. This puts her in conflict with “the authorized interpreters of the Scriptures.” For Joan feels obligated to “the voice of conscience” and to “respect for the moral law.”⁶⁷ Lyotard says that the appeal to the discourse genre of obligation shakes “narrative politics.” It challenges narration’s way of “receiving and neutralizing events.” It also defies the latter’s way of circulating the idea of love among the phrase instances (i.e., addressor, addressees and referents).⁶⁸ Grand narratives, of course, are totalitarian, and so is the Christian grand narrative. Whatever resists the narrative must be destroyed. Lyotard does not explicitly mention the end of *La Pucelle de Dieu*. But every child of France knows what happened. On May 30, 1431, Joan of Arc was burned at the stake as a heretic.⁶⁹

According to Lyotard, the beginning of modernity—and thus of such universal narratives—can be traced to the apostle Paul and to Augustine. For in their writings a new idea of historicity emerges, which cannot be found in “ancient imaginary.”⁷⁰ Both write on the idea of a Christian eschatology in which history becomes self-healing.⁷¹ A subject, which is

⁶⁷ Lyotard, *The Differend*, 160 [D234].

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ She was posthumously canonized by Pope Benedict XV on May 16, 1920 in St. Peter’s Basilica, Rome.

⁷⁰ Lyotard, of course, notes the ancient invention of history—in contrast with “myth and epic”—in the writings of Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy, and Tacitus. However, Lyotard’s comments deal with the insertion of the idea of eschatology into European thought. See Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, trans., Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 96–98.

⁷¹ By re-narrating the event, the narrative appropriates its interruptive power, neutralizing its jarring witness. The narrative heals itself because the event never happened. It is drowned in a pacific ocean of forgetfulness. For an example of this in regards to racism in America, see Jean-François Lyotard, *Pacific Wall* (Venice, CA: Lapis Press, 1990).

overcome by a lack, is promised the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and the return to the Father's house" at the "end of time."⁷² This movement of history towards redemption and love funds a narrative that dominated Western civilization for almost two millennia. It authorized a "universal history as progress toward the redemption of creatures."⁷³ Once the narrative has been stripped of the idea of revelation (i.e., a story authorized from a primordial past), love is translated into "republican brotherhood" or "communist solidarity" and can authorize a story of humanity emancipating itself under the Idea of freedom.⁷⁴ Such stories lie at the heart of the modern project.⁷⁵

Liotard hates such universal narratives. For grand narratives make victims, and the past century was awash in blood shed for such stories. Countless millions of people suffered under mythical, emancipatory, and economic grand narratives. The ideas governing these narratives could not establish their promised utopias. Indeed, Lyotard sees these grand narratives as evil.⁷⁶ For people who resisted their programs were silenced, starved, gassed, and shot.

⁷² Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, 96.

⁷³ Lyotard, *The Differend*, 160 [D235].

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 160–161 [D235].

⁷⁵ Lyotard writes, "Although secularized, the Enlightenment narrative, Romanticist or speculative dialectics, and the Marxist narrative deploy the same historicity as Christianity, because they conserve the eschatological principles. The completion of history, be it always pushed back, will reestablish a full and whole relation with the law of the Other (capital *O*) as this relation was in the beginning: the law of God in the Christian paradise, the law of Nature in the natural right fantasized by Rousseau, the classless society, before family, property, and state, imagined by Engels. An immemorial past is always what turns out to be promised by way of an ultimate end. It is essential for the modern imaginary to project its legitimacy forward while founding it in a lost origin. Eschatology calls for an archaeology. This circle, which is the hermeneutical circle, characterizes *historicity* as the modern imaginary of time" (Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, 97–98).

⁷⁶ Lyotard understands evil as "the incessant interdiction of possible phrases, a defiance of the occurrence, the contempt for Being" (Lyotard, *The Differend*, 140 [D197]). One could give many examples here; however, one will do. In Stalinist Russia, anyone thought to disagree with Comrade Stalin would suddenly disappear at a train station, be shot at night, or get a "tenner" in the Gulag Archipelago. For numerous other examples, see Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation I - II*, trans., Thomas P. Whitney (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).

3.8 Philosophy's task

According to Lyotard, philosophy is a discourse in search of its own rule. Unlike grand narratives, philosophy's task is to remain open to the different. It is called to bear witness to the event and to help victims find a way to bring the wrong they suffered to peoples' knowledge. In this sense then, philosophy functions as an open discourse genre, seeking for the rule that will enable it to phrase the event in an—as of yet—un-thought of manner. Thus, philosophy is a discourse that tries to phrase the inexpressible phrase. In this sense, philosophy strives to “bear witness to the different.” However, Lyotard remains aware of the fact that any attempt to express the event in language—i.e., in a phrase—must necessarily betray the occurrence. For another phrase, another genre of discourse, could have succeeded, in the dispute among phrase regimens and discourse genres, in determining the rule for—and linking to—the presented phrase. Philosophy's task is to find a way to make the link while remembering, somehow, the different and the betrayal of the event.

4. Assessment of Lyotard's thought

Lyotard says something important about the current condition of knowledge. He correctly identifies the current status of knowledge in the West as being legitimized by performativity. Something is true because “it works.” The Enlightenment narratives of freedom and equality have largely given way to the scientific and technological.⁷⁷ Evidence of this can be easily seen, for example, in the development of “religious studies” courses in faculties of theology (i.e., theology is “legitimate” if it is studied cognitively). Money, power, and influence accrue to those who write and manage code, as knowledge is increasingly translated into data. What Lyotard described in the early eighties is ubiquitous now around the globe.

Of course, Lyotard is a difference thinker, who stresses the radical heterogeneity of discourses and ways of speaking, writing, and thinking. Here, again, Lyotard was ahead of his time. People today are constantly confronted with difference in our globalized world. CNN's recent tagline,

⁷⁷ It seems, however, that another narrative increasingly governs phrases and gestures in the world, i.e., capitalism. This is a point Lyotard makes at the end of *The Differend*.

“go there,” describes an electronically mediated global journey that promises to take us wherever anything newsworthy is happening. Our awareness of difference continues to grow, as cell phones, Youtube, Facebook, and other digital tools show us radical differences in opinions, lifestyles, cultures, religious ideas, etc. Of course, this goes far beyond anything Lyotard could describe four decades ago; but it points to his prescience. For the radically particular stories we tell are being mediated through a digital (i.e., “computerized”) medium, and we cannot fail to notice radical, particular difference in these worlds.

However, more interesting for theology is Lyotard’s assessment of language—to the radical heterogeneity of phrase regimens and discourse genres. His insight regarding their inability to bear witness to the event is particularly helpful. While a link must be made to the presented phrase, any phrase that succeeds in linking necessarily wrongs the event in the very act of giving it expression. For another phrase could have succeeded in linking, but failed. No phrase can completely express the event. Something is always forgotten. Lyotard warns about the narrative’s propensity to forget the event. This is important for theology to understand, because theologians work with the Christian narrative (i.e., with Christian tradition). We also learn that narratives which (1) make universal claims and (2) construct programs for humanity are especially dangerous, for they inevitably make victims. In the last century, victims, by the millions, cried out for justice. Unfortunately, this continues into the twenty-first century, as well. While culture may be incredulous towards such stories, people still tell them, and blood continues to flow.⁷⁸

However, Lyotard should be critiqued for the *theological* statements he makes. Often in his work, he presumes God’s non-existence, naming God as the “great Zero” and the “Kastrator.”⁷⁹ Here Lyotard disregards theology’s witness: namely, to experiences in time and space with the God who reveals Godself in Jesus Christ. Lyotard attempts to construct a philosophical discourse that remains open to the event, but he rejects theolo-

⁷⁸ One thinks here of the atrocities being committed around the world, which are inspired by an apocalyptic narrative governing life and praxis within the Islamic State.

⁷⁹ See Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans., Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993).

gy's witness *a priori*. He is incredulous of such an event. Thus, Lyotard silences those who bear witness to precisely such events. Ironically, his thought victimizes those who witness to such divine encounters in their lives.

Where Lyotard's critique most forcefully impinges on theology, of course, is in his assessment of the Christian narrative as the grand narrative *par excellence*. In this way, Lyotard helps theology *ex negativo* by pointing out the tendency all narratives have towards totalization. This critique should be taken seriously. However, in general, theology has not received Lyotard's thought. An exception is the Flemish theologian, Lieven Boeve, who engages deeply with Lyotard's difference thought, making it fruitful for theology.

5. Lieven Boeve

Before looking at Boeve's reception of Lyotard's work, we will briefly consider his impetus for doing so. This will take us briefly in the direction of Boeve's cultural/theological work, before we return to the philosophical/theological. However, in this detour, we will gain a rationale for engaging postmodern thought. Then we will turn to Boeve's critique of the French philosopher's work.

Boeve's work is complex, operating on two different levels: specifically, on the contextual-theological and the philosophical-theological. He thinks we need a new theological expression of the faith, because of changes in the cultural context and in the current critical consciousness. Although we cannot linger long on the cultural/theological, it will help us to briefly consider his understanding of the relationship between theology and cultural context.

5.1 Recontextualization

According to Boeve, when culture and philosophy shift, a re-expression of the faith becomes necessary. For older ideas, metaphors, or practices no longer convey spiritual truths as they once did. When this happens, theologians must reflect again on the faith and re-express it in language suitable for the new context. Boeve calls this process "recontextualization." He maintains, therefore, that with the shift from the modern to the postmod-

ern, theology must recontextualize itself once again.

In fact, theologians have done this throughout Church history. For example, the Church Fathers found inspiration in (neo-) Platonic thought for their reflections on faith. Thomas Aquinas, among other medieval scholars in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, built theologies influenced by Aristotelian thought, when that philosopher's work became the dominant conceptual framework in Europe after its reintroduction from the Middle East.⁸⁰ Similarly, modern theologians responded to the explosion of knowledge in the sciences and philosophy with new reflections during the last couple of centuries. Each shift in knowledge and culture put pressure on theology to express the faith in (then) plausible terms.⁸¹

Theological expressions rise out of—and are embedded in—particular cultural, historical, and philosophical contexts.⁸² Thus, when cultural horizons shift, previously constructed theological reflections may begin to lose credibility for a majority of people living in the new context.⁸³ Theologians engage, therefore, with the current critical consciousness—i.e., with philosophers who attempt to express this understanding—to gain insights on how to re-express the faith in current, plausible thought pat-

⁸⁰ Boeve writes, “Such a recontextualization was necessary because Aristotelianism had come to dominate and determine the intellectual climate. The form in which theology had been cast up to that point was no longer capable of rendering the reflexive unfolding of Christian faith in a contextually intelligible manner. As a result, the theology, which emerged from this recontextualisation, differed fundamentally from its former incarnation, especially that which continued to pursue the Augustinian (i.e., Platonic) tradition” (Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context*, trans., Brian Doyle, Louvain Theological & Pastoral Monographs, vol. 30 [Leuven: Peeters, 2003], 30–31).

⁸¹ Theologians work as participants within the faith. “Caught up in a never-ending and open hermeneutical process, they have sought to understand what faith is about, but always from within a commitment to it. Since plausibility is always essentially contextual, they make use of thought patterns developed by their contemporaries, most often philosophers” (Lieven Boeve, “Critical Consciousness in the Postmodern Condition: A New Opportunity for Theology?,” *Philosophy & Theology* 10, [1997]: 449–450).

⁸² This also includes the thought patterns undergirding them. See Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 22.

⁸³ Boeve notes, however, that some forms of theological reflection and practice may continue to remain meaningful for a minority of individuals living in the new context.

terns.⁸⁴

During the last two centuries, theology was confronted by narratives of knowledge and emancipation that accused the faith of superstition and oppression. Theologians responded in one of two ways: either by adapting to the context and developing a correlation theology,⁸⁵ or by rejecting the context and considering it as hostile to the Christian tradition.⁸⁶ In a word, correlation or rejection. Boeve argues that correlation strategies no longer function as a theological method in the current postmodern context. For the method assumes a close relation between “life, culture, society, [and] history.”⁸⁷ With the disintegration of the Christian cultural horizon in the West, this relationship has come undone. Increasingly, theologians find themselves in a globalized and pluralized world, rather than in a (presupposed) dialogue between a modern secular context and the Christian tradition. At the same time, the modern view of knowledge has come into question. For in modernity, knowledge is seen as being communicable, transparent, and universal. In modernity the domain of truth was determined by secular reason alone (i.e., what one could demonstrate scientifically was thought to be true). In response to this modern epistemology, theologians relegated their expressions of faith, more and more, to the discourse of ethics. Ethics became the bridge for dialogue with the modern context.⁸⁸ However, these very modern epistemological assumptions of clarity and universality are critiqued in the postmodern context. In their place, postmodern authors give attention rather to “heterogeneity, difference, and radical historicity,” while criticizing the universal “grand narratives.”⁸⁹ Other theologians, for example those in the “Radical Ortho-

⁸⁴ Theological activity is a continual, dynamic process of “repetition and interpretation, processes of handing down and selection” (Boeve, “Critical Consciousness,” 450).

⁸⁵ Correlation theologians believed they had theological grounds for attempting to connect modernity with faith, since they thought of God as present wherever people pursue rationality, freedom, and human dignity. As a theology, correlation is a modified strategy for maintaining contact with an increasingly separate and antagonistic secular culture.

⁸⁶ See Boeve’s discussion in Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval*, trans., Brian Doyle (New York; London: Continuum, 2007), 30–49.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

doxy” camp, embrace the postmodern criticism in order to castigate secular modernity. Once the modern framework is rejected, they look back to a “neo-Augustinian conceptual framework,” to develop a new (postmodern) epistemology, where the particular “participates in its infinite eternal source,” avoiding, thereby, the finite’s ultimate dissolution in either a modern epistemology or postmodern nihilism.⁹⁰

Although Boeve argues that the modern correlation strategy has ended, he contends that it should not be abandoned.⁹¹ Rather, it should be *radicalized*. He maintains that “modern correlation theology is *not* suffering from *too much* recontextualization but rather from *too little*.”⁹² Indeed, Boeve maintains that the correlation method itself should be recontextualized. Dialogue with the context should continue—not on the basis of “consensus, harmony, and continuity”—but with a sensitivity toward “plurality, difference, and particularity.”

5.2 Lost plausibility and radical heterogeneity

Boeve’s engagement with Lyotard’s thought functions on the level of the philosophical/theological. He engages in an extended conversation with Lyotard’s radical difference thought, and finds insights for a plausible recontextualization of the faith. For Lyotard sensitizes theology to the hegemonic tendencies shared by all stories, thus making us aware of our own story’s propensity towards oppression. He also informs us regarding the plausibility modern master narratives have lost in the current context. Lyotard gives us access to a current critical consciousness, where the particular is privileged over the universal, and one becomes conscious of irreducible particularity and plurality. Theology gains an understanding of a

⁹⁰ Boeve, *God Interrupts History*, 36–37.

⁹¹ Boeve writes, “For theologians who analyze the contemporary situation in terms of plurality, there is no longer an easily identifiable secular culture to which Christian faith is related and in which Christians live their faith. Theology is no longer engaged in a dialogue between two partners but immersed in a dynamic, irreducible, and often conflicting plurality of religions, worldviews, and lifeviews. Many Christians today, especially in Western Europe, are becoming increasingly aware that the Christian faith (with its own plurality) is only one position among others on the field of religions and convictions” (*ibid.*, 34).

⁹² *Ibid.*, 37.

postmodern critical consciousness that is vigilant against overarching, oppressive narratives. Boeve engages with these insights in order to fund a recontextualization of the faith that is plausible for the postmodern context.

Boeve reads Lyotard's assessment of the current condition as "incredulity towards master narratives" as the lost plausibility of such stories.⁹³ The narratives of knowledge (rationality and technology) and of emancipation have failed to achieve absolute clarity or the utopias they promised.⁹⁴ Failure of such master narratives stimulates the postmodern consciousness. One becomes aware of the way that these stories try to explain complex reality in an absolute and universal way. In the process, grand narratives try to reduce complexity to the logic of their own internal rule. However, their hegemony is unmasked and the idea that any all-encompassing universal story can regulate the linking of all phrases in our world is abandoned. No universal perspective exists; rather every discourse and narrative is seen to be contingent and particular. But modernity continues; its processes are unabated. So it is legitimate to call the current postmodern context as hyper-modern or "radicalised modernity."⁹⁵

With the loss of a single, universal perspective we discover the radical contingency of all narratives—personal, national, or of a people. Our story is not necessary; it could have been different. For instance, a founding narrative is tied to a particular people, place, and time. The events narrated in such a story are not necessary. Rather, they are contingent on the context in which they occurred. Things could have occurred differently. From a postmodern perspective, only those narratives that recognize their limits and contingency—as grounded in a particular context—can be con-

⁹³ Lieven Boeve, "Thinking Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context: A Playground for Theological Renewal," in *Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context*, ed. L. Boeve and L. Leijssen, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 14.

⁹⁴ Master narratives of knowledge aim for absolute clarity in order to dominate reality through technology; whereas narratives of emancipation posit a future utopia towards which history aspires. The narrative, therefore, wrestles against the present (and previous) context(s) on its way to establishing the longed for utopia. Boeve maintains that the promises themselves became obstacles to human flourishing. See *ibid.*

⁹⁵ Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 51.

sidered legitimate.⁹⁶

According to Boeve, we cannot help but tell stories, and he points to Lyotard's assessment of the current situation. Namely this: the postmodern critique unmask the Enlightenment narratives of knowledge and emancipation as hegemonic.⁹⁷ But today there is a master narrative that attempts to regulate the linking of phrases and gestures in terms of *exchange*. Lyotard maintains that capitalism is the master narrative now dominating the world. The economic narrative strives to regulate the event (i.e., the *Is it happening?*) according to the schema of making money by gaining time. Rather than trying to realize an ideological program (i.e., an historical utopia), capitalism is building a worldwide market.⁹⁸

Boeve identifies Lyotard's philosophy of the phrase as a discourse of the Idea of heterogeneity. Lyotard argues that philosophy should attempt to remain open to the event, while bearing witness to radical heterogeneity. However, as Boeve makes clear—and as Lyotard himself recognizes—in the concatenation of phrases something is always forgotten, “often even this forgetting is forgotten.”⁹⁹ By regulating the event according to their own particular logic, discourse genres translate the differend into a litigation. Thus, they necessarily forget the event. It never happened. Master narratives are particularly culpable here. Boeve summarizes Lyotard's view as such: “Philosophy is therefore first of all the critique of master narratives.”¹⁰⁰ As a result, Boeve identifies master narratives as “degenerated discourses of the Idea, where the Idea as Idea, that is to say as an unpre-

⁹⁶ Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 91.

⁹⁷ We agree with Boeve's assessment: people continue to tell stories to make sense of their world. And narratives continue to emerge that attempt to master human existence (e.g., the attempt to bring the world into submission under Sharia law). Some have claimed the demise of the master narratives, following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War; however, we continue to see the terrible influence such stories have in the world today.

⁹⁸ Lyotard, *The Differend*, 179 [D255].

⁹⁹ Lieven Boeve, “The End of Conversation in Theology: Considerations from a Postmodern Discussion,” in *Theology and Conversation: Towards a Relational Theology*, ed. J. Haers and P. De Mey (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003), 198.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

sentable general concept, is not respected.”¹⁰¹ Of course, discourses of the Idea are one of the plurality of discourse genres functioning in language. Boeve recognizes the validity of this genre, but he rejects its ambition to dominate all other phrase regimens and discourse genres through determining the rule for the linking of phrases.

5.3 Boeve and the Christian grand narrative

So what should theology make of Lyotard’s critique of Christianity? As stated earlier, Lyotard identifies the Christian narrative as the grand narrative *par excellence*. The Christian grand narrative is extremely hegemonic: able to link to any event under its rule of loving whatever happens *as if* it is a gift from God. Boeve writes that “from the perspective of Lyotard’s language pragmatics, the main problem of master narratives is diagnosed as a severe and structural forgetfulness of the differend, which results in massive forms of injustice.”¹⁰² Boeve argues that the Christian narrative can function as a grand narrative, identifying such as “the hegemonic discourse of the Idea of love.”¹⁰³

Boeve cites Lyotard’s statement that the Christian narrative became the dominant grand narrative, through linking to whatever happens, according to its rule of love.¹⁰⁴ Boeve notes that the event is already loved before it occurs, for the Christian narrative recuperates whatever happens—in advance—bringing it within its own narratival border.¹⁰⁵ The Christian master narrative does this through an *idea* of love. In this sense, it shares a similar strategy with the modern master narratives, which regulate the event according to the ideas of emancipation (liberty) or knowledge (reason). Boeve identifies how the master narrative—as discourse of

¹⁰¹ Lieven Boeve, “Jean-François Lyotard on Differends and Unpresentable Otherness: Can God Escape the Clutches of the Christian Master Narrative?,” *Culture, Theory, and Critique* 52, no. 2–3 (2011): 274.

¹⁰² Lieven Boeve, *Lyotard and Theology: Beyond the Christian Master Narrative of Love*, Philosophy and Theology (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 49.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Boeve, *Lyotard and Theology*, 50. For the passage cited, see Lyotard, *The Differend*, 159 [D232].

¹⁰⁵ Boeve, *Lyotard and Theology*, 50.

the Idea—forgets the differend.

In a modern master narrative, however, this particular nature of the Idea is forgotten, for within such a discourse, (a) the Idea is the goal that legitimizes the narrative from the end, (b) it universalizes the instances of the universe of phrases, (c) it explains reality (and thus its referent can be presented), and (d) it regulates the linking of phrases in an exclusive and thus hegemonic way (e.g., connecting prescriptive phrases to descriptive ones quasi-automatically), while at the same time discrediting whoever links (= thinks or talks) differently.¹⁰⁶

However, the Christian narrative has a characteristic that distinguishes it from the modern master narratives. The Christian narrative is not legitimated by a longed-for-end; rather, it flows from a primeval set of narratives.¹⁰⁷ Still, Boeve recognizes that the narratives found in scripture are re-told and recontextualized through the faith community's experience with the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, Boeve writes, it is possible that "origin and end... come together" as the early Christians met together to celebrate "in word and gesture, in story and ritual" the resurrection-event as "promise" or "anticipation."¹⁰⁸

Secondly, when the Christian narrative universalizes the phrase instances, it functions like a modern grand narrative. In so doing, the Christian narrative shows that it has "universal pretensions." This is seen in the disappearance of particular names and the exclusive use of general categories.¹⁰⁹ In the Christian master narrative, the Idea of love is instantiated over each of the (universalized) phrase instances, which idea circulates among each of the instances. Boeve summarizes the narrative in this way:

¹⁰⁶ Boeve, *Liotard and Theology*, 50.

¹⁰⁷ Boeve writes, "The Christian narrative is not legitimized proceeding from the end. Rather Christianity stems from a *particular, partly mythical, narrative tradition*. The roots of the Christian narrative lie in a canonized set of stories, so that one comes to conclude that its legitimation comes from the origin, or its beginnings, rather than from the end, or its sense of finality" (ibid., 51).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 54.

“God, who is love, as addressor tells us addressees the story about love (referent): ‘because I, who am love, have loved you, you must love (me).’”¹¹⁰ By universalizing each instance, its particularity is undone. Once again, the differend is forgotten. The event can never happen.

The Christian master narrative shares a third characteristic with modern master narratives, when it makes the cognitive claim that reality is all about love. Love is seen as the dynamic force that drives history towards its goal—which is love. The story pretends to be able to explain reality, as all master narratives do. It claims to “present reality as it is.”¹¹¹ According to the Christian narrative, history is established by the dynamism of love. The story provides a way of measuring historical events, and it places them within a historical field that love establishes. Boeve notes that the distinction between history and salvation history disappears in this hegemonic narrative. Persons and events contributing to the forward movement of love are good and holy. Whatever resists is considered sinful and evil.¹¹²

Finally, Boeve receives Lyotard’s criticism of the Christian narrative. It functions as a hegemonic discourse when it regulates the linking of phrases according to its rule of love. The narrative forgets the diversity of phrase regimens and discourse genres, as well as their radical heterogeneity. However, in contrast to the modern master narratives, the Christian narrative does not forget the event. Instead, the narrative retells the event as a gift of love, thus signifying whatever happens as grace. Thereby, the occurrence is inscribed within the Christian narrative of love. As Boeve notes, “The occurrence remains, but its event-character is disowned.”¹¹³ As a master narrative, the Christian narrative regulates all phrases, includ-

¹¹⁰ In this regard, Boeve refers to such passages as John 14:21–23 and 1 John 4:7–12, to show how Lyotard might come to such a conclusion. See Boeve, *Lyotard and Theology*, 54.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹¹² Boeve says that the cognitive pretension becomes especially evident when authorized groups (such as a magisterium) instantiate themselves in the addressor-instance, “as the spokesperson of love and deems itself able to make authoritative pronouncements within a cognitive language concerning history and reality” (*ibid.*, 56).

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 56.

ing the descriptive and the prescriptive. In this way, the Christian narrative describes love and prescribes it as normative. Love is both the origin and the end of existence. This results in love governing every form of discourse, including “history, prayer, ethics, ritual, cognition, argument, etc.”¹¹⁴ Again, those who work to fulfill its goal for history, from within the narrative, are saints who have a right to speak. However, those who find themselves outside of that narrative are heretics, who are silenced.

According to Boeve, when these four considerations are taken into account, one can understand how Lyotard came to see Christianity as a hegemonic master narrative. Boeve identifies this grand narrative as a discourse on the Idea of love, which elevates love into a universal principle for the governing of all discourse and gestures. The divine command to love begins to circulate around the (now) universalized instances in this way: “If you are loved, you must love; and you will be loved, only if you love.”¹¹⁵ The question Boeve asks, therefore, is this: “Can God escape the clutches of the Christian master narrative?”¹¹⁶

5.4 The model of the Open Narrative

For Boeve, Lyotard helps theology see its own tendency towards ontotheology. For, according to the latter, all narratives tend towards totalization. And the Christian narrative, qua narrative, is not exempt from such. Theologians too quickly forget the particularity of the context from which they make—often universal—claims. Indeed, Boeve writes that theology appears “to be possessed” by an “ontotheological impetus.”¹¹⁷ Too often the radical witness of the event is (always, already) received and recuperated as grace within a closed theological narrative, where the occurrence helps the narrative achieve its goal. Theology often attempts to situate God within its narrative as a way of authorizing the latter,¹¹⁸ or it func-

¹¹⁴ Boeve, *Lyotard and Theology*, 57.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹¹⁷ Boeve, “The End of Conversation in Theology,” 208.

¹¹⁸ An example that Boeve gives is a sacramento-theology constructed upon a neo-Platonic cosmology, where every creature’s being is grounded upon God’s being in an *analogia entis* (analogy of being). Here theological truth is built on a discourse that situ-

tionalizes the event to make it work for whatever is at stake in its discourse. In the current postmodern context, such strategies must be abandoned. Rather, heterogeneity, plurality, and difference should be respected. Boeve contends that theology should not relativize itself, but link phrases together in confession of “the God who reveals Godself in history, but can never be grasped or encapsulated in it” (i.e., in our theological narratives).¹¹⁹

Boeve finds inspiration in Lyotard’s philosophical project, for the latter mentions other discourses which attempt to bear witness to the event. Among these are the philosophical and Jewish discourses. Lyotard describes the former discourse as one in search of its rule.¹²⁰ As we said earlier, Lyotard understands philosophy as a discourse attempting to bear witness to the event through a search for the inexpressible phrase: i.e., for the rule or phrase that can express what cannot yet be put into words. Jewish discourse, on the other hand, is based on the voice, spoken to the patriarchs, which is now inscribed in the scriptures. Jews listen to the voice—now text—and interpret what it says by reading, re-reading, and reading once again those same scriptures. The Jew positions himself as one who does not “ask for an answer” but asks “in order to remain questioned.”¹²¹ Lyotard views this practice as a remaining open before the event, as a discourse without a governing rule, that witnesses to the heterogeneity of discourses and phrases. These two discourses (one philosophical, the other theological) point to the possibility of discourses striving to remain open to radical difference. Boeve recognizes in Lyotard’s philosophy a specific discourse that attempts to remain open to otherness and difference. The philosophical discourse, according to Lyotard, is one that

ates God as the ground of Being. As Boeve notes, “In this perspective, theological truth is supported by ontology” (Boeve, “Thinking Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context,” 6–7).

¹¹⁹ Boeve, “The End of Conversation in Theology,” 209.

¹²⁰ In *The Differend*, Lyotard remarks concerning that same book, “You really are reading a book of philosophy, the phrases in it are concatenated in such a way as to show that that concatenation is not just a matter of course and that the rule for their concatenation remains to be found” (129 [D180]).

¹²¹ Boeve, “Can God Escape?,” 269.

tries to link to the presented phrase in a way that remembers the differend, while critiquing those discourses that functionalize the event.¹²² This causes Boeve to ask if there are other such “open” discourses. From this intuition, Boeve develops his model of the “open narrative.”

An “open narrative” takes heterogeneity seriously, while recognizing its own particularity and contingency. Influenced by the postmodern critical consciousness, such a “little” story abandons attempts to tell a universal story. Rather, it tries to tell a particular narrative situated within a specific time and context. It is *our* narrative,¹²³ rather than one told by an objective observer. As Boeve writes, “Our narrative is not *the* narrative about humanity and the world in which we live: it is *our* narrative.”¹²⁴ The open narrative functions as a model—a conceptual pattern, since, according to Boeve, no ideal open narrative exists “as such.”¹²⁵

An open narrative has three characteristics. First, it has “an *open sensitivity to otherness*.”¹²⁶ Such a narrative cultivates a sensitivity towards whatever interrupts it, paying particular attention to those events occurring at the boundaries of our story. An open narrative resists the impulse to close itself off—and protect itself—from that which challenges its narrative, choosing a certain vulnerability before whatever happens. Secondly, an open narrative “offers [a] witness to otherness” as it “attempts to express its *interruption*.”¹²⁷ The experience of unexpected otherness, at the border of our narrative, makes us aware of the limitations of our own particular narrative. An open narrative refuses to reduce the strangeness of

¹²² The differend will be translated into a litigation and forgotten by the phrase that follows. But Boeve writes, “We should learn to do this in a way which does not forget this forgetting” (Boeve, “The End of Conversation in Theology,” 208).

¹²³ Boeve maintains that the postmodern condition teaches us that “culturally speaking” our narrative is “a *particular narrative* among a plurality of other narratives” (Boeve, *Lyotard and Theology*, 95).

¹²⁴ Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 93.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 92. Boeve also writes, “‘The’ open narrative as such does not exist. There are only particular narratives which can learn the lessons which can be gleaned from the recent past. This might also be true for the Christian narrative” (Boeve, *Lyotard and Theology*, 94).

¹²⁶ Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 95.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

the other to simply one more event concatenated in, or encapsulated within, our story. For the disruption of our particular narrative makes us aware of the other that exists outside of our own personal experience, which challenges us to bear witness to its witness. Finally, an open narrative stimulates a “*critical praxis*.” Encounters with irreducible otherness cause us to conduct both an internal and an external critique. This stimulates a critical consciousness as we choose to take “*self-critical and world-critical judgments and actions*.”¹²⁸ An open narrative recognizes difference and eschews attempts to negate the other’s alterity. This occurs on the level of one’s praxis. As Boeve notes, one who follows an open narrative refuses to use God to legitimize his or her particular narrative, or abandons attempts to functionalize the other. Such a person refuses to absolutize his or her own truth, unlike the Nazi who claimed “*Gott mit uns*.”¹²⁹

Boeve believes that the question of truth comes down to relationship and praxis. Through an open narrative, the theologian relates to the Truth—in all its intangibility—while bearing witness to that which ultimately eludes any particular narrative. Truth is no longer limited to the *content* of a story. Rather, narratives “*live in the truth*” as they “point to the elusive other, to that which continues to escape them.”¹³⁰ The theologian gives up on mastering God or neighbor through narrative. Rather, in postmodern thought, s/he finds “a manner of expressing contextually and understandably the evangelical option for the poor, the refugee, [and] the ‘sinner.’”¹³¹

5.5 Interruption and the event of grace

As we said earlier, in the current postmodern context, Boeve thinks that correlation theological methodology should be radicalized. In place of a too-easy correlation between context and faith, or a perceived rupture between both, Boeve argues for “interruption.” He thinks that “interrup-

¹²⁸ Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 96.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹³¹ Lieven Boeve, “De Weg, De Waarheid En Het Leven. Religieuze Traditie En Waarheid in De Postmoderne Context,” *Bijdragen. Tijdschrift voor filosofie en theologie* 58, (1997): 185–186 (my translation).

tion” as a theological concept is both “*contextually* adequate” and “*theologically* legitimate.”¹³² This concept recognizes both continuity and discontinuity between Christian faith and the context, while holding them “together in an albeit tense relationship.”¹³³

Interruption does not mean rupture. It does not signify that the relationship between faith and the context has ceased; rather, it signifies that the linking of expected phrases in the narrative is disturbed, delayed, or suspended. Room is made for an otherness, within the narrative, that cannot be witnessed to but *through* the narrative. As Boeve says,

It involves the intrusion of an otherness that only momentarily but nonetheless intensely halts the narrative sequence. Interruptions cause the narrative to collide with its own borders. They do not annihilate the narrative; rather they draw attention to its narrative character and force an opening toward the other within the narrative.¹³⁴

In place of a presumed continuity between Christian faith and a secular Western context, Boeve argues for the experience of pluralization. Within the context of a pluralized field, many different stories signify the words “truth, rationality, and humanity.” And, unlike previously, secular rationality, as a meta-discourse, is no longer able to regulate the meaning of these terms across multiple lesser narratives. They no longer function as univocal terms. Rather, truth, rationality, and humanity are seen to be already signified within the particular narratives in which the words are already embedded. No single narrative—nor its governing rule—can regulate the signification of these terms.

However, Boeve views the experience of interruption as a benefit for the Christian narrative. For the encounter with the other interrupts the natural closure of the narrative, interrupting its tendency to make victims. And Boeve believes that there are *theological* reasons for thinking in terms of interruption. For Boeve gives a number of examples where God interrupts the narrative of scripture, forcing it open precisely at the point

¹³² Boeve, *God Interrupts History*, 41.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

where it threatens to close. Among those examples are: sending Moses to liberate the people from Egyptian slavery, Jesus' ministry of healing bodies and forgiving sinners, and Jesus' identification with the naked, poor, hungry, and imprisoned.¹³⁵ Indeed, Boeve considers God as the "interrupter," who is most clearly seen breaking open closed, repressive narratives in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

6. Conclusion

Development brings about—along with technological advancements—the dispersal of knowledge within radically heterogeneous, particular languages, or discourses. In the postmodern condition, knowledge is no longer legitimated by a single over-arching narrative, whether of religion, emancipation, or science. For the modern grand narratives—birthed out of the Enlightenment—proved incapable of keeping their promises. Often these stories became oppressive and totalitarian, and millions of people were victimized in the past (and current) century. Lyotard calls the situation of their lost credulity "the postmodern condition."

This change in the culture inspires theology towards an inner critique of its own narrative. This inspires a recontextualization of the faith, since previous expressions or understandings may no longer be credible or understandable for a large number of our contemporaries. Theology's task is to explain the faith for such people. For theology bears witness to the Truth, and to the event of love—what Boeve calls the "event of grace." Boeve provides theology with a thoughtful engagement with Lyotard's thought regarding the current context, and he indicates a plausible way of re-expressing the faith in terms relevant for people living in a postmodern culture. For we indeed find that the event of divine love comes unexpectedly, surprisingly into our lives, as Boeve suggests. Theology, therefore, bears witness to this event.

However, theology should pay particular attention to the stories it tells, for every witness must betray the event somehow. A different link could have been made. Another phrase could have followed. Every narrative forgets the event as it concatenates a string of phrases, striving to

¹³⁵ Boeve, *God Interrupts History*, 46.

come to a good end. Lyotard gives us insight into the current critical consciousness: namely, that grand narratives have lost credibility. Even so, groups continue to tell these destructive, dangerous, oppressive tales—even in our time. Lyotard helps theology *ex negativo*, by explaining how the Christian narrative degenerates into a master narrative. In fact, it can become an especially strong hegemonic narrative, since the Christian narrative is a story about love.

Thus, Boeve encourages theology to bear witness to the event of grace, to the experience of love that transcends language. After all, our story—the Christian narrative—is a particular story. It tells us of a God who reveals Godself in time and space, to specific individuals. God’s love is revealed preeminently in Jesus of Nazareth. For cultural and *theological* reasons, Boeve suggests that we bear witness in “open narratives”—stories that try to remember its own forgetting, even though our best attempts will always fall short of the event. Language is limited. But we must tell our story somehow, through language, as we remember the necessary betrayal of the event. In this way, we bear witness to one who refuses to be mastered by our narrative, and who interrupts them when they threaten to close. To the God who escapes every attempt to enclose Him in a narrative.

Bibliography

- Boeve, Lieven. “Critical Consciousness in the Postmodern Condition: A New Opportunity for Theology?” *Philosophy & Theology* 10, (1997): 449–468.
- Boeve, Lieven. “De Weg, De Waarheid En Het Leven. Religieuze Traditie En Waarheid in De Postmoderne Context.” *Bijdragen. Tijdschrift voor filosofie en theologie* 58, (1997): 164–188.
- Boeve, Lieven. “Thinking Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context: A Playground for Theological Renewal.” In *Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context*, edited by L. Boeve and L. Leijssen, 3–35. Leuven: Peeters, 2001.

- Boeve, Lieven. "The End of Conversation in Theology: Considerations from a Postmodern Discussion." In *Theology and Conversation: Towards a Relational Theology*, edited by J. Haers and P. De Mey, 189–209. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003.
- Boeve, Lieven. *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context*. Translated by Brian Doyle. Vol. 30 Louvain Theological & Pastoral Monographs. Leuven: Peeters, 2003.
- Boeve, Lieven. *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval*. Translated by Brian Doyle. New York; London: Continuum, 2007.
- Boeve, Lieven. "Jean-François Lyotard on Differends and Unpresentable Otherness: Can God Escape the Clutches of the Christian Master Narrative?" *Culture, Theory, and Critique* 52, no. 2–3 (2011): 263–284.
- Boeve, Lieven. *Lyotard and Theology: Beyond the Christian Master Narrative of Love* Philosophy and Theology. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *Le Différend*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1983.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Vol. 10 Theory and History of Literature. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Vol. 46 Theory and History of Literature. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *Pacific Wall*. Venice, CA: Lapis Press, 1990.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *Libidinal Economy*. Translated by Iain Hamilton Grant. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993.

Liotard, Jean-François. *Postmodern Fables*. Translated by Georges Van Den Abbeele. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Liotard, Jean François. *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport Sur Le Savoir*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979.

Readings, Bill. *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics Critics of the Twentieth Century*, Edited by Christopher Norris. London: Routledge, 1991.

Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr I. *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation I - II*. Translated by Thomas P. Whitney. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998.

**The Gospel of *Caritas*
The Church as an Open Society—Toward a More Inclusive Witness***

Jason Valeriano Hallig, Ph.D.

Today the church is at the crossroad of its life and witness. Its identity and function in the society are being challenged anew by the changing world it continually addresses. Philip Davis presents to us another challenge of the context to the church. In his essay, “The Postmodern Condition and the Christian Open Narrative,” Davis elucidates for us the challenge of postmodernism in the language of Jean-François Lyotard and the evangelical response of Lieven Boeve with his proposal of a Christian open narrative.

If the church is not able to express itself today in the language that meets the “postmodern challenge,” Lyotard and other proponents of postmodernism would probably call on the church to cease and de cease. Postmodernists claim that Christianity with its claim for meta-narrative has lost its credibility and, therefore, its cultural relevancy, notwithstanding its ecclesiastical authority. Consequently, it had to be abandoned if not totally abolished. Christianity, however, is not new to challenges—be they of faith, praxis, or witness. It has historically expressed and re-expressed itself in the language of various cultures and contexts at different times. It has done contextualization and re-contextualization for effective witness and mission. In the recent book I have written entitled, *We Are Catholic: Catholic, Catholicity, and Catholicization*,¹ I argue for the necessity of Christian apologetics. And one of the best approaches to Christian apologetics is dialogue, which Jerry H. Gill proposes in his book, *Faith in Dialogue: A Christian Apologetic*. He says,

Against the backdrop of these standard postures toward apolo-

* *Editor’s Note:* This article is a response to Phillip E. Davis, “The Postmodern Condition and the Christian Open Narrative,” *Mediator* 12, no. 1 (2017): 1–44, above.

¹ Jason V. Hallig, *We Are Catholic: Catholic, Catholicity, and Catholicization* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016).

getics, I should like to invite the reader to take up a more dialogical posture when reasoning about Christian faith, whether approaching it as a believer or as an unbeliever. It is my conviction that the only apologetic appropriate both to the nature of Christian belief and to the pluralistic character of our times is one which is open enough to acknowledge the limitations of religious knowledge and faith as well as to affirm their reasonableness. We must remember that even believers “see through a glass, darkly,” and that there is no inherent contradiction between confidence and humility.²

Davis’ support of Boeve’s deep engagement with Lyotard’s thought challenges us to further engage in an open dialogue with postmodern contexts on two fronts—on the contextual-theological and the philosophical-theological. Davis believes that Boeve’s work can be fruitful for Christian theology. And for this, we need to join him in calling the church to a more inclusive approach to dialogue within the pluralistic context and character of our times, recognizing the fact that Christian theology has its own limitations which can be enriched by a responsible and respectful discussion with others who differ from who we are and what we believe.

The Gospel of the Church: Lyotard’s Criticism and Condemnation of Christianity

Lyotard points us all to the shift of knowledge in the post-industrial era, where knowledge is legitimized in and through the criterion of performativity. Knowledge based on metaphysical or narrational truth, such as the Christian faith, is held suspect. The new paradigm of knowledge as here proposed by Lyotard to be the postmodern condition posits another language game geared toward power augmentation rather than truth argumentation. The way to this knowledge, however, is in and through evolutionary knowledge that dynamically redefines the rules and functions of scientific knowledge in relation to reality, which under the postmodern principle of knowledge is no longer constant and universal but contingent and particular.

² Jerry H. Gill, *Faith in Dialogue: A Christian Apologetic* (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 12.

The shift of knowledge and the principles governing evolutionary knowledge have indeed tremendous implications for the church and its faith claims that are based on the meta-narrative of the gospel that serves as its overarching authority. Lyotard puts forward an accusation against institutions such as Christianity. He believes that by the use of meta-narrative as the authority for the truth, Christianity has made victims instead of victors. This is so because the very narrative that was intended to save has instead enslaved “believers,” leading toward an oppressive society under its totalitarian rule. Lyotard points to examples in the history of the church, like that of Joan of Arc and those involved in the Reformation.

For Lyotard, the Christian narrative is the grand narrative *par excellence*. Christianity with its principle of universality has created and influenced institutions that propagated either freedom, as in the case of democracy, or equality, as in the case of communism. Each has its “universal” story for humanity. Sadly, the end result is the reverse of whatever good was promised. Davis notes,

Lyotard hates such universal narratives. For grand narratives make victims, and the past century was awash in blood shed for such stories. Countless millions of people suffered under mythical, emancipator, and economic grand narratives. The ideas governing these narratives could not establish their promised utopias. Indeed, Lyotard sees these grand narratives as evil. For people who resisted their programs were silenced, starved, gassed, and shot.³

Lyotard’s accusation and condemnation of the Christian narrative, however, are based on his empirical and political observations of Christianity. His evaluation of Christianity is more socio-political and socio-economic than Biblical or theological, using philosophical epistemology under the influence of postindustrial epistemology or “postmodernism.” Under such lenses, Christianity stands guilty based on its history. This is so because Lyotard evaluated Christianity through its own theological reconstructions (via ecclesiastical hermeneutics and church dogmatics, hence, the gospel of the church), which were used as bases for what was often ap-

³ Davis, “Postmodern Condition,” 24.

plied in the areas of politics and economics. Under ecclesiastical authority (by the Roman Catholic), dogmatic theologies (by the Protestants), and even heretical claims of pseudo-Christian religious institutions, Christianity had developed meta-narratives that were indeed oppressive. And therefore, we cannot blame Lyotard for his accusation and condemnation of Christianity. However, had he evaluated Christianity from a more Biblical and theological perspective, he would have ended his conclusion differently and his challenge for Christianity today would have been a more theological-philosophical one, which in turn would have given him a more valid evaluation of Christianity.

Apparently, the nature of Christian theology (or theologies) is neither final nor static, but one that is open and dialogical. The history of the church shows how the theologies of the “church” have grown from being oppressive and exclusive to becoming more redemptive and inclusive; from political and economic to more spiritual and kingdom-oriented—a more inclusive witness of the gospel of Christ in and for the world.⁴ Indeed, when the gospel of the church is closer to the gospel of Christ, Christianity has a more open narrative, as Boeve suggests. And to this we now turn.

The Gospel of Christ: Boeve’s Challenge to the Church

A proper response to the challenge of Lyotard is to take a closer look at the gospel of Christ than at the gospel of the church. Sadly, the gospel of the church at times differs from the gospel of Christ, and what critics including Lyotard often see and attack is the gospel version/s of the church. Boeve is right that the gospel of Christ always needs a re-expression toward a more inclusive and effective witness and mission. As Davis puts it, “Older ideas, metaphors, or practices no longer convey spiritual truths as they once did.”⁵ Reflection and rethinking must always be on-going works of theology both for the church and the world. Referencing Boeve, Davis rightly notes that “with the shift from the modern to the postmodern,

⁴ For a more inclusive socio-political kingdom, see N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2012).

⁵ Davis, “Postmodern Condition,” 27.

theology must recontextualize itself again.”⁶

The language of postmodernism makes traditional theology weak, if not totally useless. The rules of the game of language and culture have changed from hegemony to heterogeneity, from universal to particular, and from consensus to plurality. To insist on the old language of Christian theology is to close an opportunity to reach out to the present world. Davis reports Boeve’s recognition of how radical theologians have taken a new approach by adapting a “‘neo-Augustinian conceptual framework,’ to develop a new (postmodern) epistemology, where the particular ‘participates in its infinite eternal source,’ avoiding, thereby, the finite’s ultimate dissolution in either a modern epistemology or postmodern nihilism.”⁷ On the philosophical-theological level, Boeve sees a window of opportunity to engage in a responsible and respectful dialogue with postmodern critical consciousness. As Davis points out, Boeve celebrates the fact that “Lyotard gives us access to a current critical consciousness, where the particular is privilege over the universal, and one becomes conscious of irreducible particularity and plurality.”⁸

To engage in dialogue with postmodernism, Boeve suggests that the Christian narrative must be open to otherness and difference. An open narrative has three characteristics: an open sensitivity to otherness, offers a witness to otherness, and a critical praxis.⁹ Openness is the key to dialogue and discussion. The church gains the right of engagement by choosing to recognize that in the postmodern context, Christian theology is not everybody’s story. Our narrative is only a narrative within narratives. The church, therefore offers a truth, not the Truth, to the other. The Truth is born out of the dynamic world of narratives; the other seizes the Truth within his/her narrative in and through mutual openness. Davis notes that “the theologian gives up on mastering God or neighbor through his own narrative.”¹⁰ In other words, the Christian open narrative invites the other

⁶ Davis, “Postmodern Condition,” 27.

⁷ Davis, “Postmodern Condition,” 30.

⁸ Davis, “Postmodern Condition,” 30.

⁹ Davis, “Postmodern Condition,” 38–9.

¹⁰ Davis, “Postmodern Condition,” 39.

in and through radical openness. Davis rightly adds, “Rather, in postmodern thought, s/he finds ‘a manner of expressing contextually and understandably the evangelical option for the poor, the refugee, [and] the “sinner.””¹¹

The open narrative is the model that Christ had taken in and through his incarnational life and ministry. In my article, “The Eating ‘Motif’ in the Gospel of Luke,”¹² I pointed out how Jesus’ manner of eating with sinners and tax collectors communicated his life and mission as the Messiah in and through a shared context, which Boeve calls “interruption”:

It involves the intrusion of an otherness that only momentarily but nonetheless intensely halts the narrative sequence. Interruptions cause the narrative to collide with its own borders. They do not annihilate the narrative; rather they draw attention to its narrative character and force an opening toward the other within the narrative.¹³

People responded in openness to Jesus’ openness for them. When people apprehended the Truth of Jesus, they confessed their faith in him. In openness for otherness and difference, Christ offered his witness.

The Gospel of *Caritas*: A Proposal toward a More Inclusive Witness

As the community of disciples, the church is given the task of making disciples.¹⁴ How does the incredulity towards meta-narratives affect not only our identity but also our function as a community of disciples? While we have no problem considering our story as one among many in a very pluralistic world, we hold on to the fact that our story is something that we have to tell to the nations. Boeve’s proposal of an open narrative is true to the nature of the Biblical story. In the context of the church, my pro-

¹¹ Davis, “Postmodern Condition,” 39.

¹² Jason V. Hallig, “The ‘Eating’ Motif in the Gospel of Luke,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 1:79 (2016).

¹³ Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval*, trans., Brian Doyle (New York; London: Continuum, 2007), 42; quoted in Davis, “Postmodern Condition,” 40.

¹⁴ See Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Double Day, 1987).

posal is that we put emphasis on the gospel of *caritas* toward a more inclusive witness, on three grounds.

First, the gospel of *caritas* is an open narrative. It was Augustine who used and developed *caritas* in the context of relationships marked either by difference or misunderstanding.¹⁵ Aware of the difference that exists in human relationships, Augustine believed that it is only in God's love that we can truly love one another. *Caritas* conveys the idea not only of self-giving, but also of other-desiring. In *caritas*, the other is desired (in the spirit of a Greek word *eros*—this of course is the good application of *eros*; cf. *cupiditas*);¹⁶ but the desire is neither in the context nor for the purpose of self-satisfaction or self-gratification (*concupiscentia*), but more on the value of the other as created in the image of God. *Caritas* is a gift of God to men and women that enables them to truly love one another as God loves them. God's love toward men and women is not only self-giving, but also other-desiring. He desires men and women not because of the inherent value we have as sinners or sinful, but because of the reality that men and women were created in his image. It is the image of God that creates the desire in God to love us just as we are. Lyotard's misconception of love as manipulative (it being a meta-narrative force to Lyotard) is a misapprehension of love as *caritas*. In fact, *caritas* in its openness, was made particular in Christ, in and through whom God calls men and women in openness to love him in and with the same openness. There is no love without openness. It is the openness of love that makes the story of difference toward fellowship and wholeness. The church is always an open society, it being a society of *caritas*.

Second, the gospel of *caritas* is more personal than philosophical or propositional. Lyotard's overemphasis on "difference" made men and women as impersonal beings who operated or lived in and through techniques and technologies. We cannot simply define persons in the language of progress and prospects. Life is not only defined by our love of knowledge (reason/philosophy) but more so by our knowledge of love

¹⁵ As quoted by T. A. Noble, *Holy Trinity: Holy People: The Theology of Christian Perfecting* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 57–62.

¹⁶ Noble, *Holy Trinity*, 62.

(revelation/theology). The Christian witness puts more premium on the personhood of men and women than on their productivity or performativity. Hence, rather than spending our time with nightly news to engage in intellectual witnessing, we should pursue personal and authentic relationships with those who are different from us. The church must strengthen relationships in the context of personhood. Love dissolves differences and divisions; it creates union of persons (not a collection of individuals as postmodernists suggest) in and through openness. Hence, the church is an open society.

Third, gospel of *caritas* is dynamic and progressive. Creativity and productivity are not foreign to love and the church. In fact, the world is as it is today because of the contributions of Christianity, contrary to Lyotard's accusation that Christianity with its meta-narrative simply made victims. The communal aspect of love, in fact, cultivates growth and progress. Love lets us live for the other. This is what H. Ray Dunning calls authentic freedom—that openness for the other.¹⁷

Conclusion

In and through his accusation and condemnation of Christianity, Lyotard challenged the church to rethink its narrative, reflect on its ways, and refocus its message. Both Boeve and Davis believe that the church cannot just ignore postmodernism as elucidated by Lyotard. I agree that the challenge of context is always valid and legitimate. Boeve and Davis are right that we need to do some *recontextualization* of the gospel for a condition that no longer values meta-narratives but micro-narratives. To do so, we must give attention to the gap between the gospel of the church and the gospel of Christ. My proposal is that *recontextualization* must give importance to the gospel of *caritas*. It is only in and through the gospel of *caritas* that an open narrative becomes incarnational, practical, and personal, and so gives room for otherness and difference.

¹⁷ H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and holiness; A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill, 1988), 280-283.

A Wesleyan Historian's Response to Postmodernism

Floyd T. Cunningham, Ph.D.

This paper began as a response to colleague Dr. Phillip Davis's lecture at Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary in March 2016 on "The Post-modern Condition and the Christian Open Narrative."^{*} Davis was a student of the Flemish Roman Catholic theologian Lieven Boeve, and received his Ph.D. at the University of Louvain. Davis's dissertation dealt with the French post-modernist philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard. As Albert Outler encouraged the followers of John Wesley to do as Wesley did and "plunder the Egyptians" (from Exodus 12:36), that is, to "exploit the full range of secular literature, science, and philosophy—always with a view to the enrichment of one's Christian wisdom and the enhancement of his effectiveness in communicating the Christian message,"¹ Davis has "plundered" the post-modernists that we may be wiser and communicate more effectively the gospel to this present age. Davis's main argument is that a "theology that seeks understanding" can "benefit from engaging with Lyotard's post-modern critical philosophy."² Davis's paper has directed our attention to postmodernism in a very specific way by focusing on one prominent proponent of the movement, and on one theologian deeply engaged with postmodernism. I will respond from the standpoint of a historian teaching in the Asia-Pacific context and informed by the Wesleyan tradition.

"Simplifying to the extreme," said Lyotard, "I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives."³ Davis rightly warns against reducing our understanding and criticism of Lyotard to this simplification, but it

^{*} *Editor's Note:* The referenced lecture is published above: Phillip E. Davis, "The Post-modern Condition and the Christian Open Narrative," *Mediator* 12, no. 1 (2017): 1–44.

¹ Albert C. Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Discipleship, 1975), 5.

² Davis, "The Postmodern Condition," 3.

³ Jean-Francois Lyotard, "The Postmodern Condition," in *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. Keith Jenkins (London: Routledge, 1997), 36.

provides an initial point of dialogue between history and postmodernism, and Davis himself focuses on the “Christian Open Narrative.” How is a historian of the Christian faith, accustomed to Wesleyan ways of interpreting the world to respond to postmodernism and, in particular, to this skepticism toward overarching interpretations of reality?

Historians have drawn away from grand theories of historical development. If Lyotard accentuates the “small narratives,”⁴ historians too have focused on discrete monographs that disclaim broad implications. “Teleological narrative history,” historian Gordon S. Wood comments, “cannot be truly scientific; it is simply story-telling, not essentially different from fiction.”⁵ Like postmodernists, historians generally doubt that objectivity is achievable. All empirical studies, including their own, are tainted with subjectivity and relativity. Yet historians, like other writers, continue to tell what they hope will be intelligible and persuasive stories.⁶

At the same time, Christians believe that in one way or another God is involved in the affairs of this world. God provides the ending as well as the beginning-point of history. There is a revealed, Biblical narrative of God’s choosing. Theologians discuss the acts of God but disagree as to how God works presently. A Wesleyan understanding of God’s work in history is more interactive than determinative and, as a result, it seems to me, Wesleyans have little difficulty discarding determinative views of history. As Christians, Wesleyans understand that the effects of sin are universal, and that sin induces pride as well as the tendency to make idols of self and society. As a result, Wesleyan historians find it not so difficult to understand as inevitable the unrecognized prejudices that rest in the mind of even the most skilled and dispassionate scholars. Understanding sin, Christians are realists. The Wesleyan caveat is optimism that through

⁴ See Ernst Breisach, *On the Future of History: The Postmodernist Challenge and Its Aftermath* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 2003), 105–106.

⁵ Gordon S. Wood, *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 53.

⁶ See George G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown: Wesleyan U. Press, 1997), 101–117. See also Ron Creaseman, “The Loss of Metanarrative: Resources for Formulating a Wesleyan Response,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 35 (Spring 2000), 166–167.

grace besetting prejudices may be recognized and confessed so that one might possess a chastened and self-emptied approach to one's field of study.

I. Historiography and the Search for Meaning

One can find competing historiographical ideas across time. What unites the writing of history is its attempt to coherently describe events of the past. Writing history necessitates narration, connecting events together in plausible patterns of meaning. As such, historical accounts (like other explanations of human behavior) stand or fall depending upon plausibility. History involves interpretation of events. Emerging interpretations challenge existing ones as historians attempt to persuade readers that their narration makes better sense of events. This happens repeatedly.⁷

"Pre-modern" history performed a clear function within society. History told stories of the past that transmitted values from generation to generation. Story-tellers did not worry about documentation or even the historicity of their stories. The stories functioned as "myths" in the sense that they conveyed an over-arching set of values. Various religious myths recount sacred time, which is not separated from any other sense of time. Within the *chronos*, in the Hebrew and Christian tradition, God speaks and acts. Yet, when stories of olden times are retold, it is with the clear intention of comparing and contrasting the present to the primitive past. The present is shown to have fallen away from the original ideals and ethos of the people. In the case of history in the Hebrew and Christian tradition, nonetheless, the hearer hears of past failures as well as past glories. One can see this in Psalm 78, in Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*, and in the Puritans' jeremiads. Time and again the ancestors fell away from the covenant. This was just as important for the Hebrews and Puritans to remember as God's faithfulness, patience, and long-suffering. The ancestors kept resisting God's grace and, hence, the predicament in which they found themselves. The moral lesson is, clear:

⁷ Beverley Southgate, *Postmodernism in History: Fear or Freedom?* (London: Routledge, 2003), 147. Similarly see Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1970).

do *not* be like your fathers and mothers. You can do better than they. You can keep the covenant that they constantly broke. Trust in God as they did not. Thus, the Hebrew-Christian narrative does not serve to justify the present but, rather, to judge it.⁸

God both punishes and rewards. The assumption of pre-modern historians is that Providence or Fate controls history. The “causative factors” of events are reduced to the hand of God. Nineteenth century narratives were powerfully emotive. For instance, like his Puritan ancestors, historian George Bancroft wrote dramatic stories unencumbered with annotations that told grand tales of God’s working among a chosen people, of heroic conquests and the annihilation of lesser peoples, and, ironically, of the rise and progress of humanitarian benevolence along with colonial domination.⁹

Determinism remained in the modern era. Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published in 1776, described the inevitability of great cultures imploding. Gibbon discussed history as a “register of human follies, crimes, and misfortunes.”¹⁰ Both Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, writing in the twentieth century, followed Gibbon. Like him they described inevitable cycles of growth and decline among civilizations and offered morals and lessons from the failures of past civilizations.¹¹

Meanwhile, sounding somewhat like the medieval writer Joachim of

⁸See Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1976); Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina Press, 1988). Bozeman draws upon the work of Mircea Eliade.

⁹ On Bancroft, see David Noble, *Historians against History: The Frontier Thesis and the National Covenant in American Historical Writing since 1830* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press), 18–36. On the return of the narrative to history, and concerns regarding it, see Lawrence Stone, “The Revival of the Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History,” *Past and Present* 85 (November 1979), 3–24, and see Gordon Wood’s 1982 criticism on this basis of Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, reprinted in Wood, *The Purpose of the Past*, 40–61.

¹⁰ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire: The Fall of Rome and the Triumph of the Church* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 53–63.

¹¹ Mark T. Gilderhus, *History and Historians: A Historiographical Introduction*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 59–64.

Fiore and his dispensational divisions of history, August Comte (1798–1857) offered a metanarrative that viewed civilizations as in stages of development. The “theological stage” was followed by the “metaphysical” and then by the “positive” era. The latter was characterized by science and the ascertainment of natural and physical laws governing the universe including society. Collective human behavior could be understood based on objective and dispassionate inquiry. The viewpoint that all societies were at varied points on a historical continuum carried over into the discipline of anthropology under E. B. Tylor (1832–1917), who placed civilizations and current societies on a spectrum from primitive to modern.¹²

Karl Marx (1818–1883), in the early nineteenth century, provided an alternative metanarrative in which historical events and human motivations were reduced to the struggle over commodities—to class struggle. Through the lens of cultural materialism, with its presuppositions regarding the basic needs of human beings, Marxists interpret past events and forecast future struggles, and believe that through revolutions history was coming to a culmination that would produce an idyllic, classless society. Beyond class struggles, as a mode of interpretation materialism gave primary historical importance to economic factors. Like scholars influenced by other metanarratives, those influenced by materialism assumed that they knew more than the people themselves involved in the struggles of life as to why events happened, and as to why inequalities and injustices persisted in the world. Their etic approach attributed less importance to the worldviews of the people they were studying. Historians such as E. P. Thompson, who saw no positive good in the working class's attraction to Methodism, warned, nonetheless, that history must not be speculative. He called upon historians to examine the historical record closely to prove what he was sure to be the reality of class struggle. Economic historians today, nonetheless, are not likely to explain the past through theories of economic determinism, but, rather, trace how present economies have come to assume their present forms.¹³ Other modern historians adduced

¹² Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1983), 272–273; Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1996), 16–29.

¹³ Breisach, *Historiography*, 270–271, 293–297; Gilderhus, *History and Historians*,

causation from a variety of other overarching factors, from the environmental to the psychoanalytic.¹⁴

The criticism of history by postmodernists has centered on several aspects. Roland Barthes, for instance, said in 1970 that “historical discourse does not follow reality, it only signified it; it asserts at every moment: this happened, but the meaning conveyed is only that somebody makes that assertion.”¹⁵ This presupposes the hesitancy of historians to recognize the limitations of their methodology and objectivity. As we will see, this has not been the case. Historians have been self-critical. The second criticism of historians is that they impose a theory of progress upon history, which, if true, would represent a form of “metanarrative.” A whole school of historians, indeed, lent themselves to a progressive understanding of history. More and more, however, historians have disdained imposing theories of progress upon empirical evidence. Unlike social scientists, historians have not, for the most part, constructed theoretical frameworks. They have criticized “theory” for substituting for explanation, and for blunting the edge of historical investigation. Evidence, say modern historians, must be allowed to speak for itself.¹⁶

55–58; Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob. *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 221. For the application of Marxism to social theory see, for example, Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* (New York: Random House, 1979), and the same author’s *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches: The Riddles of Culture* (New York: Random House, 1974). On the impact of social and cultural history on economic history see Kenneth Lipartito, “Review Essay: Reassembling the Economic: New Departures in Historical Materialism,” *American Historical Review* 121 (February 2016), 101–139.

¹⁴ Representative of these modes of interpretation are Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920); John T. McNeill, Mathew Spinka, and Harold R. Willoughby, ed., *Environmental Factors in Christian History* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1939); Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1958); and James R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* (Urbana: U. of Illinois Press, 1963).

¹⁵ Quoted from Barthes’s *Introduction to Structuralism* in Breisach, *On the Future of History*, 73.

¹⁶ Breisach, *On the Future of History*, 12, 44, 52–52, 60, 90. See Oscar Handlin, *Truth in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 1979), 88–93, 252–290.

A. The Question of Objectivity

A “scientific” approach to history, which claimed to be less prone than premodern history to over-arching and determinist interpretations of the great events of the past, entered the profession with the influences of the German historical seminars and their methods in the later part of the nineteenth century. Verification of historical documents and assertions became a critical part of the historian’s task. The emphasis was on uncovering the original sources of the political, ecclesiastical and social institutions of Europe. Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) was the progenitor. Ranke rejected Georg W. F. Hegel’s metaphysics of the “cunning of Reason” or Spirit directing human affairs. Neither was Ranke interested in passing moral judgment on the past, but rather sought to report “how it actually was.” Ranke sent students to dusty archives, from which, principally, they reconstructed political and institutional histories. They delved into diplomatic history, wars, and the lives and thoughts of statesmen and church leaders. Ranke expected that once history had been fairly and thoroughly recorded, men and women would see God’s providence working in history, but this was an expectation based solely on careful research and not presumptions of where and how God might have worked. American historian Henry Baxter Adams famously summed up this approach, stating that Ranke was “determined to hold strictly to the facts of history, to preach no sermon, to point no moral, to adorn no tale, but to tell the simple historic truth.”¹⁷ Like the social sciences, modern history developed “prescriptive rules” to govern the objective and fair treatment of evidence and foreswore any explicit attempt to inculcate values.¹⁸

This “positivist” perspective dominated the historical profession, including church history, throughout the twentieth century. Methodist historian Albert C. Outler wrote, for instance, that history was “the recollection and representation of selected segments of the human past in an intelligible narration based on public data verified by scientific observa-

¹⁷ Quoted in Georg G. Iggers, “Introduction,” to Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. Georg G. Iggers (London: Routledge, 2011), xii, footnote 4.

¹⁸ See Breisach, *Historiography*, 232–234.

tion.”¹⁹ Such faith in empirical methods dwelt in John Wesley himself. Wesley was strongly influenced by John Locke and a common-sense empirical tradition that placed confidence in experience as means toward knowledge, and, in his case, as a means of establishing the truth of doctrines about which the Bible might be interpreted in different ways. In Wesley the practical out-workings or utility of a theological point of view helped to determine validity. This was unlike Martin Luther and John Calvin, who, like the medieval scholastics, cared about right doctrine and little for the moral implications of doctrine.²⁰ In any case, Wesley did not doubt the graciously-given ability of human beings to understand nature and reality as it really was.²¹

Likewise, modern historians shared the conviction that one can “grasp a subject matter that is real rather than an artefact of his [or her] own construction.”²² They believed that they could not only discover historical causes and their effects, but also postulate laws that would depict and predict human behavior across time and space. Karl Popper (1902–1994), in particular, argued for truths derived from history that would be “independent of the conditions of time, place, and personal opinion,” and thus helpful and needful as a guide for humankind into the future.²³ Similarly, said Henri-Irenee Marrou, history aims to provide explanations of the past that are based on “the discovery, comprehension, the analysis of a thousand ties which, in a possibly inextricable fashion, unite the many faces

¹⁹ Outler, “Theodosius’ Horse: Reflections on the Predicament of the Church Historian,” *Church History* 34 (1965), 253.

²⁰ Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250–1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1980), 315–316; and see pages 304–309.

²¹ Frederick Dreyer, “Faith and Experience in the Thought of John Wesley,” *American Historical Review* 88 (February 1983), 12–30; Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, 3rd ed. (Peterborough, UK: Epworth, 2002), 383–388; Ron Creaseman, “The Loss of Metanarrative,” 172–173; Thomas J. Oord, “A Postmodern Wesleyan Philosophy and David Ray Griffin’s Postmodern Vision,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 35 (Spring 2000), 231–237.

²² Breisach, *Historiography*, 332.

²³ Breisach, *Historiography*, 333.

of human reality one to the other.”²⁴ Reality corresponded to its description by historians. Marrou believed there could be no jumping to “causes and effects,” but only contentment with a description of developments. Morton White, on the other hand, believed that historians, weighing the evidence, must take a particular stand or “point of view” regarding the cause of events, all the while knowing that the historian’s “adoption of that point of view cannot always be justified by what some might call scientific considerations.”²⁵ In other words, White acknowledged that the historian, having read the evidence, must seize upon a conclusion. Likewise, Page Smith asked that historians not just describe all possible causes for events and list them as factors. This, Smith said, diminished the “dramatic” quality of history. Historians must be bold enough to take a stand. Smith did not consider this to be any less from an understanding of the world’s events as they really had occurred.²⁶

Yet, already, there were seeds of doubt. Long ago, in December 1931, Carl Becker (1873–1945) delivered an address to the American Historical Association entitled “Everyman His Own Historian.” Becker was then serving as president of the Association. He defined history not as a description of what occurred in the past but as the “memory of things said and done,” and described it as “an imaginative creation” meeting the practical and even emotional needs of the historian in his or her social context. Historians, said Becker, were “subject to the limitations of time and place.” History is “conditioned by the specious present.” To an audience of historians who had great faith in their craft’s methodology, Becker called history but “a convenient blend of truth and fancy” possessing the “illusion” that the present version of the past was valid and that others were not.²⁷ Historians have a stake in the story they tell, or else they would not tell it. Cool objectivity makes for boring reading, or, as Becker put it, “complete detachment would produce few histories, and none worthwhile;

²⁴ Henri-Irene Marrou, *The Meaning of History* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 192.

²⁵ Morton White, *Foundations of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Harper-Row, 1965), 111.

²⁶ Page Smith, *The Historian and History* (New York: Knopf, 1964), 159.

²⁷ *The American Historical Review* 37 (1932): 221–236.

for the really detached mind is a dead mind.”²⁸ Similarly, R. G. Collingwood (1889–1943), expressed doubts as to the ability of historians to understand any more than what their own thoughts could construct. This disillusion with modernity, with its faith in empirical methods as well as social progress based upon objective knowledge, shook the historical profession.²⁹

For the next fifty years and more, as if to prove Becker and Collingwood wrong, historians with hopes of proving that objectivity was more than a noble dream produced passionless dissertations and monographs devoid of adjectives and strewn with footnotes to primary sources. But doubt that trained historians could tell an honest tale and speak without self-interest shadowed such optimism. Duly chastised historians accepted the limitations. They balanced between claiming too much and too little of historical investigation. In spite of epistemological questions, Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob admonished historians to believe that “truths about the past are possible, even if they are not absolute, and hence are worth struggling for.” The practice of history, they continued, “encourages skepticism about dominant views, but at the same time trusts in the reality of the past and its know-ability.”³⁰

That is, though few historians would doubt that their own subjectivi-

²⁸ Becker, “Detachment and the Writing of History,” in *Detachment and the Writing of History: Essays and Letters of Carl Becker*, ed. Phil L. Snyder (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. Press, 1968), 24.

²⁹ See R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (1936; reprint, London: Oxford U. Press, 1956).

³⁰ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, 7, 11, and see pp. 142–146, 159. See also Michael Kammen, *Selvages and Biases: The Fabric of History in American Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. Press, 1987), 96–102; The question of objectivity in the historical profession is the central problem of Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American National Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1988). See especially Part IV, “Objectivity in Crisis,” 415–629. The June 1989 issue of *The American Historical Review* examined the influences of postmodernism upon the profession. David Harlan spoke of the “epistemological crisis” in the historical profession caused by “post-modern literary criticism.” Harlan, “Intellectual History and the Return of Literature,” *The American Historical Review* 94 (June 1989), 581, 583. Similarly, the May 1992 issue of *Past and Present* was devoted to leading historians’ perceptions of postmodernism’s effect on history. See also David Noble, *Historians against History*, 140–146; Breisach, *Historiography*, 328, 332–333.

ties influence their writing, equally few would dismiss entirely the idea that there were actual objects of inquiry and that these were knowable in some way, to some degree. Postmodernist Hans Kellner comments that “Historians do not ‘find’ the truths of past events; they create events from a seamless flow, and invent meanings that produce patterns within that flow.”³¹ This is true in some sense, but historians do not “create” the events they describe. Historians would recognize that the inquirer—the historian—is also in the web of existential struggle, but few historians would be “anti-foundational”: few would believe that perceptions of reality were totally constructed by the perceiving one. I agree with William Katerberg, that despite the debates over the theory and philosophy of history “the day-to-day teaching and scholarship of most historians has not changed in any essential way.”³²

B. Postmodern Historiography

Like postmoderns, historians possess a “hermeneutics of suspicion” regarding both the objectivity of authors and metanarratives. Postmoderns regard authors, including historians with ample documentary evidence, as self-aggrandizing. Even if a historian writes scathing criticisms of his own people, it is to prove himself superior to others. Pessimism regarding objectivity is a pessimism regarding human nature. In that sense post-war postmodernism connected with neo-orthodox criticisms of theological modernism, which made human beings morally virtuous. American historians such as Perry Miller and Joseph Haroutounian turned to the dour Puritans with the idea that their darkly Calvinist views of human nature provided the best critique of cultural modernism. The “post-modern,” Haroutounian wrote in 1932, returned to the “tragic sense of life.”³³ That

³¹ Quoted in Breisach, *On the Future of History*, 76.

³² William Katerberg, “The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the Historian’s Vocation,” in *Confessing History: Explorations in Christian Faith and the Historian’s Vocation*, ed. John Fea, Jay Green, and Eric Miller (Notre Dame, IN: U. of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 102. See Breisach, *On the Future of History*, 111. Also helpful here, Oord, “A Postmodern Wesleyan Philosophy,” 216–244.

³³ Joseph Haroutounian, *Piety versus Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1932; reprint, Hamden, CT: Archon, 1964), xxv.

is, the pessimistic view of postmoderns, denying that an individual could escape his or her own *hubris*, is rooted in pre-modern Christian tradition. Such views were shared by Reinhold Niebuhr, who stated soon after World War Two that “the dominant note in modern culture is not so much confidence in reason as faith in history.”³⁴

By this Niebuhr meant that modern culture had expressed its faith in the progress and triumph of the human enterprise in history. Niebuhr associated this misguided faith in progress with Christian perfectionism, especially the sort of perfectionism preached by Methodists. The nineteenth century’s optimism toward the perfectibility of men and women and society had crashed, Niebuhr believed. Men and women could not build the kingdom of God on earth. The meaning of history was, if anything, the *failure* of history. To God must not be ascribed responsibility for the events of history, Niebuhr said. Humanity’s only hope comes from beyond history. Niebuhr influenced the profession of history, but, more than that, he shared their growing pessimism that progress in any moral sense could be expected in history. This modern culture derided by neo-orthodox theologians such as Niebuhr came under the same indictment by postmodern critics.³⁵

As a result of this awareness of human *hubris*, the rules changed in the writing of history from obscuring oneself as much as possible from the narrative to forthrightly acknowledging one’s subjectivity and one’s subjective encounter with the historical events. Contemporary historians influenced by postmodernism emphasize that narrative is based on the his-

³⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1949), 3.

³⁵ In addition to *Faith and History*, see Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1937). See Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Role in American Political Thought and Life,” in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, ed. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 126–150; and various chapters in *Paths of American Thought*, eds. Arthur M. Schlesinger and Morton White (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964). Also, see Donald B. Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919–1941* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1960), 217–269. On Niebuhr’s response to contemporary Methodism, see Floyd T. Cunningham, “The Christian Faith Personally Given: Divergent Twentieth-Century American Methodist Thought” (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1983), 56, 198–199.

torians' own place and time, on his or her subjective perspectives. While each historian attempts to be objective, and to base narratives on reliable sources, there are inevitable biases. There is always a story behind the historian that determines what questions are asked, and whose stories to tell. That every historian stands at a particular place in time and space influences which events are told and how they are retold. Speaking in South Africa in 1994, respected historian Eric Foner recognized the truth that "white scholars cannot simply think of themselves as 'raceless' practitioners of empirical research untouched by the structures of power created and maintained [in this case] by apartheid."³⁶ Historians' perspectives on their craft of research and writing evidenced pessimism that historical events could be understood as they happened, and that, even if they could, their re-telling would be laden with the conscious and unconscious motives of the re-teller. Even the original record of events possesses subjective biases unknown even to their originators, and historians shape the re-telling of events based on their own biases and the particular contexts in which they write. From this vantage point, stating one's subjectivities directly and boldly is one way to approach historical integrity. Doubting the invincibility of footnotes, postmoderns turn back to pre-modern historiography in the sense of recognizing the literary rather than the scientific nature of the historians' craft.³⁷

One should not attempt to tell the story of others, postmoderns emphasize. In the 1960s white historians were under criticism for writing about slavery and other segments of African-American history. In the Philippines, American historian Glenn Anthony May was criticized by Philippine historian Reynaldo Iletto for his understanding of Filipino hero

³⁶ Eric Foner, *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 107.

³⁷ See the "Preface," to James Bradley and Richard A. Muller, *Church History: An Introduction to Research, Reference Works, and Methods* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), and, Shirley A. Mullen, "Between 'Romance' and 'True History': Historical Narrative and Truth Telling in a Post-modern Age," in *History and the Christian Historian*, ed. Ronald A. Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 23–40. See also M. Howard Rienstra, "History, Objectivity, and the Christian Scholar," in *History and Historical Understanding*, ed. C. T. McIntire and Ronald Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 69–82.

Andres Bonifacio. May looked for objective, archival sources in his study of Bonifacio, and doubted the oral sources of Philippine historians such as Teodoro Agoncillo. May, Iletto believed, deprecated the Filipino as emotional and in need of “disciplining and tutelage.”³⁸ Under postmodern scrutiny my account of Philippine Protestantism, for instance, is bound to be filled with my own biases as an American missionary serving in the Philippines for more than thirty years. Perhaps I might write about other missionaries, but I should not presume to tell the story of Filipinos. My historical tendency would be to objectify them. It is impossible for me to enter into their world. I cannot tell their story, postmoderns would say, and I should not presume to try.³⁹ Only with persons like themselves can historians sense an affinity and inner identity that transcends objectivity. This sense of inner subjective correspondence was articulated by Wilhelm Dilthey in the early twentieth century. For Dilthey the ways that historians mentally apprehend their own life processes gives them an interpretive clue, framework, and affinity that comes together in a descriptive whole. One needs an inner subjective empathy and identification with the objects of historical discussion.⁴⁰

Similarly, John Wesley understood that there was an inner, spiritual sense, a direct communication of knowledge by God that transcended either Scripture or experience. Though Wesley did not transfer this idea to

³⁸ Reynaldo C. Iletto, *Filipinos and Their Revolution: Event, Discourse, and Historiography* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila U. Press, 1998), 228; 218–237. See Teodoro A. Agoncillo, *The Revolt of the Masses: The Story of Bonifacio and the Katipunan* (Quezon City: U. of the Philippines Press, 1956); Glenn Anthony May, *A Past Recovered* (Quezon City: New Day, 1987), 102–104.

³⁹ Compare Floyd T. Cunningham, “Diversities within Post-War Philippines Protestantism,” *The Mediator* 5 (October 2003): 42–144, to Melba Padilla Maggay, *A Clash of Cultures: Early American Protestant Missions and Filipino Religious Consciousness* (Manila: Anvil, 2011). Or one might compare Raymond W. Beaver, *Partners in Mission: American Baptists and Philippine Baptists in Mission Together 1900–1985* (Iloilo: ABC, 1988), to Nestor Distor Bunda, *A Mission History of the Philippine Baptist Churches 1898–1998 from a Philippine Perspective* (Aachen: Verlag, 1999).

⁴⁰ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Pattern and Meaning in History: Thoughts on History and Society*, ed. H. P. Rickman (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961; reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 95–112.

the writing of history, knowledge for him transcended experience.⁴¹

Wesley's concern for impoverished people corresponded to a post-modern agenda that pays close attention to the oppressed struggles of minorities against ruling elites. Likewise social history, as a sub-discipline within the historical profession, like postmoderns, gave preferential attention to the voiceless lives of those who had been unheard in the textbooks of history. Coming to prominence during the same tumultuous 1960s, when Lyotard began to formulate his ideas, social historians looked closely at the behavior and the thought of the multitudes that had been forgotten or treated condescendingly by previous historians. Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger's approach to social history, and his influence upon American historiography, said one of his students, could be compared to the influence of the French *Annales* School.⁴² Like the *Annales* School, Schlesinger's students paid close attention to people and movements of people outside the corridors of social prestige and power. They included the urban poor, immigrants, Roman Catholics, Jews, women, Southern farmers, African-Americans and Latinos. Social historians described the daily lives and faith of forgotten people. Working from a variety of perspectives, they recovered the lived religion and the behavior and beliefs of the otherwise "anonymous." They understood that common participants' points of view were of intrinsic importance. Social history became the most attractive sub-discipline of history for up-and-coming historians. They were attracted to the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, whose emic approach granted integrity and coherency to religious worldviews. For social historians as well as for post-moderns history is a "constant retrieval of the suppressed 'other',"⁴³ and the multispectral dimensions of history cannot be pieced together into any grand narrative.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Thomas J. Oord, "A Postmodern Wesleyan Philosophy," 233–238.

⁴² Oscar Handlin, *Truth in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1979), 7. Also see E. J. Hobsbawm, "From Social History to the History of Society," *Daedalus* 100 (Winter 1971), 21–25, and Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown: Wesleyan U. Press, 1997), 51–64.

⁴³ Breisach, *On the Future of History*, 161.

⁴⁴ See Appleby, Hunt and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, and the review of

One social historian, Nazarene Timothy L. Smith, a student of Arthur Schlesinger, based upon Christian principles his own noble dream of historical objectivity. In the Preface to *Revivalism and Social Reform* Smith wrote: "The purpose of historical study is to explore fully and summarize accurately what really happened in the past." This reflected confidence in the historian's abilities to know. Historical consciousness was inherent in the Hebrew-Christian tradition and basic honesty compelled historians to search for the broadest possible selection of materials upon which to base conclusions. Methodology had nothing to do with faith. Smith continued, "Scholars do not pretend to have achieved absolute objectivity, any more than the old-time Methodist preachers who professed sanctification meant to claim sinless perfection. Accuracy and impartiality are, however, the historian's cherished goals."⁴⁵ Faith led to greater, not lesser objectivity. Prayer made a better scholar. Impartiality required, Smith said, "a mind under the judgment of the eternal Father, and thus aware that one's frailties and prejudices run far deeper than his power to perceive them; a spirit which is by the Holy Spirit filled with compassionate care for all men [and women], and hence ready to search first of all for what seemed true to them about their times and experiences and then to judge them with the same generosity one who knows something of his frailty would wish to be judged; an experience of being forgiven and of trusting in God's grace which makes all conclusions about other men [and women] tentative, restrained, open to correction; and, finally, a devotion to truth, de-fined as both accuracy and honesty, so great as to cause the historian to rest these tentative judgments on the widest and most objective possible reading of the available evidence." Thought and prayer are, Smith continued in an address to the quadrennial meeting of the Phi Delta Lambda, national honor society of the colleges of the Church of the Nazarene, at Miami Beach, Florida, June 17, 1972, "not enemies but allies." Faith also, for Smith, led to a greater empathy for and search in the pages of history for those who were on the ignored periphery of society. The Wesleyan in

this book by Gordon S. Wood, in *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 133–145; Brisach, *On the Future of History*, 65–66.

⁴⁵ Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1957), 10.

Smith conjoined with the practice of social history to prefer more descriptive emphasis upon the lives of the many rather than on an elite strand of theological or ecclesiastical leadership. Unlike some other social historians, Smith remained close to common people—preaching in Nazarene congregations and lecturing in various denominational colleges. He did not condescend obligingly to the common people of the past while disdaining the common people of the present.⁴⁶

The horrors of slavery and its lingering aftermath in segregation, racial prejudice and injustice was the watershed issue for twentieth-century American historians and corresponds to the Holocaust in European history and postmodern thought. Social historians, including Smith, paid attention to the issues of race that tore apart American society. One approach arising in the 1960s among American historians reduced the institution of slavery to that which could be rationalized by economic quantification. Many historians as well as African Americans were rightly outraged and turned their attention to the voiceless angst of slaves. They found ways to hear the unheard groans. All forms of historical evidence, from sermons of African American preachers, to songs slaves sang, to reminiscences of former slaves, to the archaeology of slave quarters, and records of slave ships, came into play in rehearsing the evil of slavery. But nothing was more poignant than the 1970s television series “Roots,” and subsequent movies such as the more recent “Twelve Years a Slave” and “The Birth of a Nation.” Visual media emotes historical evil for post-moderns in a way print cannot. Media is rightly criticized when it strays too far from the historical record. The standard of pure objectivity is not maintained as even a noble idea when it comes to the dramatization of

⁴⁶ Smith, *The Knowledge of the Lord*, pamphlet (1972), 10–11. See, for example, Smith, “Lay Initiative in the Religious Life of American Immigrants, 1880–1950,” in *Anonymous Americans: Explorations in Nineteenth-Century Social History*, edited by Tamara Hareven (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), and Floyd T. Cunningham, “Common Ground: The Perspective of Timothy L. Smith on American Religious History,” *Fides et Historia* 44 (Summer–Fall 2012), 38–43. On social historians tending to prefer the common people of the past to those of the present, see Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 592, citing G. Strauss, “The Dilemma of Popular History,” *Past and Present* 132 (August 1991), 133.

such events as slavery. This is to say that yes, as Lyotard maintains, where language is inadequate media may be made to be a tool for justice precisely because of its power to transcend rationality.⁴⁷

Wesleyanism not only has used emotive language to convey truth, but, at its best, has championed the poor and oppressed. Among Wesleyans accustomed to talking about the universality of grace something reverberates with an anti-elitist, egalitarian preference in history. Wesleyans, as a result, have been like postmodernists celebrative of diversity. We possess, as Scott Daniels says, a “broad tent.”⁴⁸ One way of a Christian historian reporting the gospel is to be a voice for the thousands of common people who were transformed by the message. We can tell their stories, and, in so doing, amplify muted voices.

With the growing importance of Christianity in South America, Africa, and Asia, church historians have moved beyond a Euro-centric interpretation and, more than they had before, told the story of the church beyond the West on its own terms. At the same time, there has been more focus on women in the church’s history and religious movements among ethnic groups. Influenced by the *Annales* and similar approaches to social history, and learning from anthropologists such as Geertz and Anthony F. C. Wallace, church historians have described the beliefs and devotion of common people across the centuries. They have become interested not only in the thoughts or acts of a few, but in what lay persons were thinking and in how they were behaving.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Compare, for instance, the quantitative approach of Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (New York: Norton, 1974) to Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1972). Among the many accounts in the 1970s giving voice to the voiceless see Timothy L. Smith, “Slavery and Theology: The Emergence of Black Christian Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Church History* 31 (December 1972), 497–512, and Paul Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina Press, 1979).

⁴⁸ “A Big Tent: The Generous Orthodoxy of Wesleyanism,” in *Post-modern and Wesleyan: Exploring the Boundaries and Possibilities*, eds. Jay R. Akkerman, Thomas Jay Oord, and Brent D. Peterson (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2009), 23–26.

⁴⁹ See Wilbert Shrenk, “Toward a Global Church History,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20 (April 1996), 50–54; Paul Spickard, “It’s the World’s History:

In describing this I suggest that contemporary historians avoid the idea that there is one “Christian” “grand narrative” that becomes “hegemonic,” as the postmoderns suggest. Unlike “pre-modern” Christian historians, who described the work of providence in historical accounts, and unlike those whom I would consider “pre-modern” Christian preachers who link the Bible’s apocalyptic literature with current events, Christian historians working under “modern” prescriptions of objective inquiry would never, as historians, presume to describe the mighty works of God in post-canonical history. Furthermore, historians ascribe to what might be considered a postmodern perspective by their own distrust and skepticism toward themselves as well as any overarching schemes of history, and by their concentration upon discrete segments of history.

Historians recognize that every person orients his or her life according to some particular view of the world, and that includes themselves. This worldview is constructed by the social networks of which they are a part. Each segment of experience is interpreted, understood, and responded to according to a worldview. This is a kind of “self-legitimation”⁵⁰ described by sociologists. Now and then, there is a significant “paradigm” shift that changes the ways in which people construct their view of the world. Thomas Kuhn’s history of such paradigm shifts in science pointed to the relativity of hypotheses generated by empirical science. What may be accepted today by scientists as perfectly fitting evidence, may tomorrow be overturned by a new discovery or simply by someone’s persuasively proven alternative to the given account. This is another way of saying is that there is no finality in any given interpretation, but rather, as Friedrich Nietzsche said more than a century ago, a “continuous chain of ever-new interpretations.”⁵¹ Though Lyotard has called narrative, in comparison to science,

Decolonizing Historiography and the History of Christianity, *Fides et Historia* 31 (Summer–Fall 1999), 13–29. See particularly Date T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, vol. 1: *Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), and vol. 2: *Modern Christianity from 1454–1800* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012).

⁵⁰ Davis, “The Postmodern Condition,” 8.

⁵¹ Nietzsche cited in Southgate, *Postmodernism in History*, 145. See Thomas Kuhn, *Scientific Revolutions*; Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological*

another form of knowledge (or, more specifically, another genre of discourse), Kuhn suggests that scientific theories are but another form of narrative giving structure to our understanding of and ability to cope with the world.⁵²

I believe that theologians in the Wesleyan tradition have understood this relativity of the theological task even while standing on the shoulders of successive generations of theologians. H. Orton Wiley's three-volume *Christian Theology* might have taken less than twenty years to write were he not "constantly discovering new truth," each demanding, he said, "a place in the plan of the work." Similarly late General Superintendent William Greathouse described theology as an "ongoing process" that endeavored to "interpret truth in language and thought forms relevant to each succeeding generation." Christian holiness is so grand, Greathouse continued, that "it defies any finality of expression."⁵³ The work of Greathouse's colleague, Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, provided a seismic paradigm shift among theologians of holiness. Even J. Kenneth Grider, a traditionalist and staunch critic of Wynkoop, recognized the "genius" that was at work in her *A Theology of Love*.⁵⁴

Davis's criticism of the idea that there is a Christian "meta" narrative, and his idea of an "open narrative" of Christian love resonates well with Wynkoop's *A Theology of Love*. "Love" is persuasive, non-coercive, non-manipulative. This describes the ways in which Wesleyans understand that God works in the world. The spirit and forms of love are integral to

Theory of Religion (New York: Doubleday, 1967), ch. 1, "Religion and World Construction.

⁵² Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, chapter 2, "The Problem: Legitimation." On Kuhn, see also Hans Kung, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today*, trans. Edward Quinn (Reprint, New York: Vintage, 1981), 106–111.

⁵³ H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology*, vol. 1 (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1940), 3; William Greathouse, "Foreword" to *Holiness Teaching—New Testament Times to Wesley*, ed. Paul Bassett (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1997), 11. As is true of many Wesleyan scholars, Wiley wrote while busy as a school administrator. He also was caring for an invalid daughter.

⁵⁴ Grider's comments came in *The Seminary Tower* (Summer 1973), 9–10. See Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1972).

the work of the Holy Spirit as Wesleyans understand it. Conceptually, an “open narrative,” one without a preconceived or predetermined end seems, as Davis says, congenial to Wesleyan ways of thought. As a historian, though, if I am asked to discern where God's wooing love has been at work in the world, I am taken at a loss. It is transcendent; it is beyond historical study.

Perhaps a historian could describe, as Ernst Troeltsch did, the “social teaching of the Christian churches.”⁵⁵ Perhaps a historian could attempt a history of benevolence or compassion undertaken by the Christian church over the last twenty centuries. Yes, we might discern in the Biblical narrative love as being the center of the story. That would be very Wesleyan. It is the story of redemption and it is the story of Christ. Love is the “end” as well. Conceivably a historian could discern a trajectory from and toward love working within the church during the “interim” period between Christ and his coming Kingdom. Albert Schweitzer described as “interim” ethics the radical teachings of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount because, he said, Jesus mistakenly thought the Kingdom imminent. Conversely, Wesleyans see Jesus' Sermon as the Kingdom or teleological ethic in itself.⁵⁶ For Wesleyans, the church must not be content with the lesser ethic, and strive toward the implementation of Kingdom ethic here and now. Perhaps one could describe the social reform efforts of the church in these ways, when it has worked to abolish slavery, to grant rights to women, and to protect children. Those efforts correspond to progressive historians attuned to the optimism of modernism as well as to postmillennialism and Methodists' social perfectionism. The Kingdom ethic of love is there in the Sermon on the Mount as well as in Galatians 3:28, which is the means by which we judge Paul's own “interim” ethics—telling slaves to be obedient to their masters, and wives to be silent in church. An “interim” ethic may allow class-segregated and ethnically homogeneous congregations, but the Church is content with these only if there are measurable increments toward the Kingdom. Paul describes a Kingdom in which there is “neither Jew

⁵⁵ Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2 vols., translated by Olive Wyon (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931).

⁵⁶ On Schweitzer see Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 2: 1870–1914 (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1985), 163.

nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.” A historian could describe the movements of the church and a church-influenced society toward Kingdom values, as the historian perceived those values.⁵⁷

But I am afraid that an equal story would have to be written of the regressions and retreats away from the ethics of the Kingdom as well as advances toward it. Such histories would, for the sake of honesty, have to be put alongside histories of the church’s complicity in maintaining arguments for slavery, racism, war, and discrimination against women. Even benevolence may be for purposes of social control and the protection of ruling classes. As Ernst Breisach concludes, history is strewn with “glorious human achievements and the ash heaps of overreaching ambitions, the morally best and the abysmally evil.”⁵⁸

Wesleyans might find affinity with liberation theology, which alerts us to the “abysmally evil” conditions of poverty, and their causes, as a narrative or paradigm for understanding historical movements. Ecumenical-minded theologians have looked for political liberation movements as places where God is at work apart from the Church. For a historian the concrete language of liberation is a bit easier to deal with than the slippery language of love, but whenever a paradigm speaks of God’s action rather than humanity’s, a historian as a historian must depart.⁵⁹

History usually has been written and often taught from the standpoint of men and mostly as story of men. Feminist historians as well as theologians and postmoderns draw attention to language and strongly advocate not only a gender-inclusive language—to the extent of avoiding masculine pronouns as applied to God—but seeing history from the standpoint of

⁵⁷ George Hunter, *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 176.

⁵⁸ Breisach, *On the Future of History*, 208.

⁵⁹ Enrique Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation (1491–1979)*, trans. and revised by Alan Neely (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), is written along the lines of liberation as a paradigm for understanding the church in Latin America. See especially pp. 3–20. See also Theodore Runyon, “Introduction: Wesley and the Theologies of Liberation,” in *Sanctification and Liberation: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. Theodore Runyon (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 9–48, and David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 432–447.

woman. What are the underlying, unstated assumptions and prejudices of middle-class Western white men who have largely composed the interpretative narratives of history? Christian historians, not just postmodern feminists, should be asking this question because self-serving sin is in the heart of everyone. Postmodern historiography enables Christians to acknowledge this blind-spot. It makes them aware of others—not only women but others marginalized out of arrogance and pride to the sidelines of historical narratives. The goal is to tell the story in an inclusive way that will incorporate insofar as possible the voices of all persons.⁶⁰

II. Postmodernism from the Standpoint of Wesleyan Historiography

The Wesleyan and Methodist revivals accompanied and contributed to the rise of modern society. The Methodist movement accompanied the shift from premodern to modern society. Bernard Semmel, like the French historian Elie Halevy before him, argued that Methodism enabled the English proletariat to transition from the traditional to the modern. Methodism was partly responsible for the “happy transition of British men and women to the modern world.”⁶¹ The nineteenth century, which has been called the “Methodist Age” in American history, was a century of prolonged revival in which scientific inquiry accompanied the eventual securing of both prohibition and the abolition of slavery and women’s rights to vote. Like other men and women of the modern age, Wesleyans possessed confidence that human beings possessed the capability to discover, understand, and change the world.⁶²

Wesleyans appealed to the grace that gifted them with disinterest-

⁶⁰ Diane Elam, “Romancing the Postmodern: Feminism and Deconstruction,” in *the Postmodern History Reader*, ed. Jenkins, 66–74. Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, “Men, Women, and God: Some Historiographical Issues,” in *History and the Christian Historian*, 91–105; Susan Juster, “The Spirit and the Flesh: Gender, Language, and Sexuality in American Protestantism,” in *New Directions in American Religious History*, eds. Harry Stout and D. G. Hart (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1997), 334–361; Breisach, *On the Future of History*, 184–189.

⁶¹ Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (New York: Basic, 1973), 9–19; 192.

⁶² C. C. Goen, “The ‘Methodist Age’ in American Church History,” *Religion in Life* 34 (Autumn 1965), 562–572; Winthrop Hudson, “The Methodist Age in American History,” *Methodist History* 12 (April 1974), 3–15.

edness and freed them from prejudices of gender and race and from class orientations injurious to objective inquiry. To put it in holiness language, Wesleyans believe that by grace they may be emptied of self-centeredness as well as any self-interest that might skewer their ability to weigh facts and judge fairly. They possess congeniality to liberal arts, which, in turn, provides an open-mindedness and tolerance regarding the views of others. At the same time, Methodists and other Wesleyans have sent thousands of missionaries around the world. Theirs is not an open-mindedness that believes all ideas equally true, but an open-mindedness that allows all ideas to be fairly understood.

Like modernism, the revivals of Methodists would seem to have promoted individualism. Revivalism sometimes degenerated into mechanistic and programmatic efforts to reach the “lost.” At the same time, the connection between individualism and revivalism do not go unquestioned. Revivals, by their very nature, came upon groups and forged community. If Whitefield’s revivals tended to leave individuals adrift, Wesley’s purposefully did not. He set converts in a Society, where they participated in class meetings, and some in bands of like-minded souls seeing sanctification. American revivalism powerfully connected and organized people.⁶³ Indeed its hymns and preaching often centered upon self, and holiness churches’ emphases too often have been upon the entire sanctification of individuals alone without balancing that with an equal call to responsible participation within community. Both the Asia-Pacific context and the Bible call upon us to seek ways by which our call to holiness may be received and embodied collectively. Our personal holiness cannot be conceived apart from what and who we are as one part of a body of believers seeking to find out what it means, in this time and in this place, to be a holiness people. This represents a repositioning of holiness that places the emphasis upon community, not the individual.⁶⁴

⁶³ See, for example, Ellen Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion: The Social Origins of Camp Meeting Revivalism* (Knoxville: U. of Tennessee Press, 1999), 213–241.

⁶⁴ See *Embodied Holiness: Toward a Corporate Theology of Spiritual Growth*, eds. Samuel M. Powell and Michael E. Lodahl (Downers’ Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999); J. Ayodeji Adewuya, *Holiness and Community in 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1: Paul’s View of Communal Holiness in the Corinthian Correspondence* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001);

Historians speak only of the human response to God, not directly about God's doing. Historians are not privy in the same way as the inspired prophets and apostles to knowledge of God's specific acts. The canon is closed. We are not inspired to say with the same certainty as the Biblical writers "this is how God acted" when it comes to, for instance, the Councils, or the Reformation, or even Pilot Point, Texas, where the Church of the Nazarene was born. Historians allow others to tell their stories, but, of course, still choose which stories to tell. It is in choosing which stories to tell that historians' own points of view and agendas come to the fore, more than they might be willing to admit. This need not be an indictment. Should not the telling of the historical story be transformational? Is that not, really, the historian's goal? For instance, there was a flurry of interest among historians in the 1960s in abolitionism because of the correspondence between the turbulent times in which the historian lived and the decades preceding the Civil War. Similarly, the Vietnam War brought historians' attention to the Spanish-American and Philippine-American wars and to studies of the roots of American imperialism. History about events toward which no one sees relevance yields nothing.⁶⁵

As a matter of faith, Wesleyan historians believe that God's persuading, prevenient grace is at work among all people at all places in time—among the slaveholders and slaves as well as the abolitionists, among the anti-imperialists and the annexationists as well as Filipino "insurgents." This understanding of history is congenial to the Wesleyans' understanding that God works dynamically, by the gentle promptings of grace, and with human response—rather than by manipulation. The Wesleyan theological framework puts emphasis on the human response to God. There is a dynamic interrelationship between the grace given human beings and their freedom to respond. The voluntary cooperation of human beings to God's intentions is the way in which God interacts with the world.

As Wesleyans, we have understood well that knowledge is not an end in itself. Like Monastics, Wesleyans have been "less concerned with the

Floyd T. Cunningham, "Holiness Embodied in the Asia-Pacific Context," *Didache: Faithful Teaching* 4 (January 2005).

⁶⁵ See Katerberg, "The 'Objectivity' Question," 112–115.

acquisition of an explicit knowledge of God's salvific plan than with the consent to this plan," as Jean Leclercq wrote of Saint Bernard.⁶⁶ A right heart leads to God. "Being" precedes "doing" and when it comes to truly "knowing" God, being is more important than "knowing." Indeed, Wesleyans would understand with postmoderns that "becoming" is the essence of being. Perfection is in the uncompleted pilgrimage to fulfill one's potential, and is not absolute. One might have wrong doctrines, and still be found as a pilgrim in God. Formation and intimacy in community resonates among Wesleyans.⁶⁷ We possess a philosophy of history that sees God as the great Persuader. Wesleyan historians will note the many human variables and contingent factors that go into the making of history, and not ascribe all that has been or is solely to God. God has not pre-determined what will happen in each historical moment.⁶⁸

The postmodern emphasis on the usability or "performability" of knowledge fits well. Wesleyan theologians have been a bit less prone than others, I believe, in dissecting theological obscurities. Wesley balanced Scripture, experience, reason and tradition and tested doctrines and Biblical interpretation by the behavior that the doctrines produced. We have been less concerned than other traditions in apologetics. This emphasis on practical knowledge is very close to pragmatism and may be one reason that Methodism performed well in America. It implies that all that is in the curriculum of theological education, for instance, must prove its practical value in ministry. This corresponds with the postmodern emphasis on the "functionalization of knowledge."⁶⁹ Theology must not only be preach-able, it must be livable.

The relative lack of concern for apologetics among Wesleyans and our preference for the applicability of knowledge means that our preachers may preach from the early chapters of Genesis, for instance, and find its

⁶⁶ Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham U. Press, 1982), 220.

⁶⁷ M. Robert Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Upper Room, 2000), 11–12 (preface to the 2000 edition).

⁶⁸ See Floyd T. Cunningham, "Telling the Story of the Church of the Nazarene: A Wesleyan Reflection on Church History," *The Mediator* 4 (2002), 1–14.

⁶⁹ Davis, "The Postmodern Condition," 9.

stories meaningful and “true” because they resonate with human experience. Thus, as Davis mentions in his section on “narrative knowledge,” there is a “different set of rules” governing the “truth” that we derive from such stories and the “truth” that we derive from science. The truth derived from Biblical narratives resonates with us on a more deeply existential level than other narratives. Christian identity is formed by Biblical narratives. They became part of the interpretive framework and enable communication across cultures. The narratives invite the individual into a community that participates in the on-going work of God.

There are various ways in which historians, including historians in the Wesleyan tradition, can accept a postmodern approach. Wesleyans’ doctrines of grace lead them to be open toward the world, and that includes both philosophy and science. Their schools allow students to find meaning in scores of disciplines. Their theology of love drives them toward rather than away from the sinful world. It compels them to be open and optimistic toward an unfolding universe that is being guided persuasively with love by God.

Postmodernity: An Invitation to Quiet Confidence in Biblical Studies*

Darin H. Land, Ph.D.

Dr. Phillip E. Davis has offer a timely and thought-provoking paper, with much to reward deep reflection on the nature of both our world and our faith. Our times are exceedingly complex, calling for our best efforts to cope with the constant changes while remaining faithful to the Lord of our traditions.

Davis mediates for us Lyotard’s penetrating analysis that the Christian metanarrative co-opts small narratives by insisting that, despite appearances to the contrary, every event is and must be received as from the hand of an all-loving God.¹ It is undeniably true that sufferers have often been told by the Church to set aside their tears because everything will turn out well by-and-by. Nevertheless, it would appear that Lyotard fails to recognize the laments of scripture—likely because the popular theology that he criticizes also fails at this point. This theology fails to note Jesus’ tears (John 11:35, but also Matt 26:38 and parallels), and it misappropriates Paul’s assertion that all things work together for good (Rom 8:28).

Yet Lyotard does recognize the persistent Biblical eschatology, according to which we see God’s final triumph. Significantly, Wolfhart Pannenberg has invited us to view our story, not as eschatologically oriented, but as post-eschatologically oriented.² As Pannenberg has noted, the Christian eschatological narrative is proleptic, wherein the eschaton is both past and future. The rehearsal of the Christ-event, therefore, becomes not a re-telling alone, but also a re-being. The future is already in our past, since the

* *Editor’s Note:* This article is a response to Phillip E. Davis, “The Postmodern Condition and the Christian Open Narrative,” *Mediator* 12, no. 1 (2017): 1–44, above.

¹ Davis, “The Postmodern Condition,” 22–23.

² Wolfhart Pannenberg. *Systematic Theology* (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; vol. 3; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 595–607, esp. 605.

quintessential mark of the eschaton, namely, the Resurrection, has already occurred—as the firstfruits. Thus, our present existence is “out of time,” and this opens the Christian narrative in profound ways. It adds a note of depth to the already/not yet in which we declare that somehow, through the intricate interweaving of our disparate stories, pain and suffering are, not subsumed as Lyotard perceives, but redeemed.

My own introduction to the thought world of postmodern philosophy came through the writing of Thomas Kuhn, perhaps most famous for popularizing the now-ubiquitous phrase, paradigm shift.³ For Kuhn, a paradigm shift in scientific knowledge occurs when a cognitive framework previously enjoying widespread acceptance as true is replaced by the widespread acceptance of a competing framework that more adequately incorporates the salient data of the system that the paradigms purport to explain. In other words, the community of scientists holds a particular view about a topic of common interest, such as the nature of gravity. In order to maintain that view, certain data is emphasized, while other data is ignored or deemed anomalous (perhaps due to inaccurate measurements). Over time, the number of anomalous data points may grow to such an extent that the scientific community comes to recognize that its preferred theory can no longer be relied upon to adequately explain the validated data. In such a time, a new theory may emerge that has power to explain those data points unexplained by the old theory. A paradigm shift occurs when the community as a whole abandons the old theory in favor of the new one. It is important to notice, however, that new theory must have greater explanatory power, not merely different explanatory power. That is, the new theory must be able to explain both the previously explained data as well as the previously anomalous data.

This idea of paradigm shift brings to the surface the notion of scientific knowledge as a social construct. The original theory is something that the community held to be true. Anything that did not fit the theory either went unnoticed or was explained away as irrelevant or mistaken. Thus, scientific knowledge is a construct of human processes that does not

³ Thomas S. Kuhn, “Revolutions and Changes of World View,” pages 111–135 in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

entirely conform to the world as it is. The body of knowledge, or theory, both selects what is deemed noteworthy and blinds humans—for a time, at least—from seeing anything that does not fit. In this way, scientific knowledge is a social construct. It is a small step from the realization that truth (with a small “t”) is contingent upon human perception to the claim that all Truth (with a capital “T”) is relative. But, of course, that is not what Kuhn and the postmodernists are advocating. Theirs is not so much an anti-Truth position as an agnostic one.

If I may illustrate with an example, consider an image that I often use with my Biblical Hermeneutics students. In the image, the cartoonist depicts a boy stands in the distance with an apple on his head. In the foreground is a modern military tank. Overhead stands a burning sun. In order to make sense of the image, one must weigh the communicative value of each its constituent elements. Some elements are assessed to have great weight, while others are assessed to be inconsequential to the communicative task. In this particular image, for example, I would say that the tank and the boy-with-apple are meaningful, while the sun and the gears on the tank are inconsequential. But a competing theory of what the cartoonist intends to communicate might select the sun as significant. By excluding the sun from my field of reference, I have marginalized that competing theory, whether or not it exists at this time.

If I have correctly understood Lyotard as presented through Davis’s eyes, I may conclude that Lyotard and Kuhn have much in common. Both appear to adopt a kind of “how-much-more” logic that goes something like this: if even scientific knowledge—which appears to be objectively true because it ostensibly conforms to the way things really are in the material world—is socially conditioned, how much more is social knowledge socially conditioned. Moreover, if knowledge of the physical world and of the social world is so constructed, then metaphysical knowledge must be socially constructed, as well. I suspect, however, that this last statement assumes facts not in evidence. Although much of our understanding of metaphysics proceeds on analogy with physics, there seems to me to be no necessary socially constructed limitation on the former.

But it matters very little whether my suspicion on this point is accurate, because the paradigm of what it means to know has already shifted.

Unless we proceed with care, we will find ourselves in the laughable position of the king in *The Little Prince* who proudly claims that even the stars obey his every command because they recognize that he is so wise, since he is wise enough to command them only to do that which they already intend to do. Far from speaking powerfully and relevantly into the broken places of our world, we become the benign, kindly old sovereign who is harmless enough, but essentially useless.

The above train of thought impinges on Biblical Studies on several points, including that of hermeneutics, or the study of how meaning is created, transmitted, and apprehended. Since creation, transmission, and apprehension are human processes, they are subject to the same kinds of constraints as other forms of knowledge. Thus, one's ability to know what a Biblical text means is limited due to the social location of the interpreter. That location shapes the interpreter's sensitivity to the relevant data, determining to a certain extent what textual attributes are deemed to carry significance for meaning and those features that are incidental. Of course, one's sensitivity to more features is enhanced through training, but that training becomes itself the seedbed for a new social location of the interpreter. Thus, there appears to be an escapable limitation to our ability to know what a Biblical text means. It is this realization that has led to post-modern hermeneutical projects that despair of any attempt to recover the authors' intended meaning, such as reader response criticism, deconstructionism, social location interpretation, and certain forms of liberation theology and feminist hermeneutics.

Nevertheless, one should not mistake this widespread despair of knowing the authors' intent for an insistence that the author had no intent. We may not know the authors' intent with the degree of accuracy we imagine, but that does not mean that we cannot make considerable progress toward recovering the intended meaning. It does mean, however, that there must be an abandonment of triumphalism in Biblical interpretation. Yet a triumphalist stance was never the path toward true understanding, at all. As the very word itself implies and as others of noted, "understanding" requires that one "stand under" the text in readiness to submit to its claims on our lives, not to "stand over" the text in triumphant mastery over its message.

On the other hand, while we ought not to stand with puffed chests proclaiming that we have mastered the meaning of the Bible, neither should we cower behind our desks or our doors in despair. There is no need for timidity at this point. While we may not know everything we wish to know, we have understood much. Yes, paradigm shifts will surely occur in our interpretation of what the original author intended, but we should not fear that those shifts will amount to an absolute destruction of understandings that have gone before. Just as a paradigm shift in scientific knowledge must incorporate all that older theories had explained plus all that was previously unexplained, so also paradigm shifts in Biblical Studies do not absolutely reject that which came before. Rather they take up the previous perspectives and enlarge them to include previously unexplained factors. In this way, theology arising out of scripture is not so much rejected by paradigm shifts as refined thereby.

What is required of us, then, is a kind of quiet confidence. Confidence that our interpretations of Scripture are substantially aligned with its intended meaning, as well as confidence that we can identify and reject those interpretations that are clearly aberrant. But quiet because we also recognize that at any given point our interpretations may need to be refined. This kind of quiet confidence is perhaps something akin to the “open narrative” that Boeve urges us to embrace.

To return to the language of Lyotard, phrase implies subject and event (for isolated being) or subject, event, and object (for being-in-relation). But as Martin Buber emphasized, the Judeo-Christian phrase exists as subject-subject (I and Thou)⁴—with or without event. A meaningful phrase, therefore, can exist in the absence of a phrased event that co-opts all other phrases. As a result, the Christian narrative is not necessarily hegemonic, as Lyotard implies—though, of course, it can itself be co-opted by those whose experience renders them unable or unwilling to enter into a subject-subject relation. Instead of being hegemonic, as Boeve has shown, the Christian narrative can avoid the tendency to hegemony by maintaining an open stance toward the other. But one should note that this openness

⁴ See Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (trans. Ronald Gregor Smith; Edinburgh,: T. & T. Clark, 1937).

is precisely what the core of the Gospel has always insisted, based as it is on a God who by nature eschews privilege in favor of embracing the marginalized (Phil 2:6–7). This becomes, to borrow the favored expression of our colleague, Larnie Sam Tabuena, intersubjectivity.

In this connection, it is noteworthy that at a recent international gathering of scholars from the guild of Biblical Studies, a program section was offered on the topic of Open Theism. Whether Open Theism will prove to be a paradigm shift or a passing fad remains to be seen. Of course, there are many who feel deeply threatened by the very idea of Open Theism. They fear its apparent challenge to the immutability and sovereignty of God. But it should be recognized that the Wesleyan critique of Reformed Theology has always questioned the formula of that immutability and sovereignty—without, it should be noted, denying that God is sovereign. Thus, Open Theism may someday prove to be a theology that embraces that which came before while more adequately explaining those elements of the scriptural witness that had been marginalized.

One should recognize that the centrality of scripture to the life of believers is not threatened. In part this is because scripture itself continues to offer its careful readers the privilege of finding our own stories within the stories of scripture—stories that affirm those who find themselves marginalized by the power structures of our metasystems.

In sum, if I may be permitted to borrow the language of Paul in his letter to the Galatians, let me conclude thus: “All [Lyotard and Boeve] asked was that we should continue to remember the poor [and marginalized], the very thing [we] had been eager to do all along” (Gal 2:10). And these thinkers have added greatly to our ability to articulate our message in a way that resonates with the thought world of our postmodern context.

Call for Papers

The Mediator provides a forum for dialogue about theological issues related to ministry in Asian and Pacific contexts. In keeping with this purpose, the editorial committee seeks quality papers related to Bible, theology, missions, evangelism, and church growth. Also welcome are reviews of publications, including books and music. Contact the editor for more information.

Guidelines for Submission

1. Please submit all proposed articles to the editor (dland@apnts.edu.ph) in electronic form (Microsoft Word is preferable). Please put “Mediator Submission” in the subject line.
2. Articles must be written in standard international English.
3. Authors must provide complete bibliographical information either in citations or in a bibliography at the end. Citation style may be either parenthetical or footnote style, but must be consistent within each article. If used, format as footnotes rather than endnotes. Use shortened form for subsequent citations rather than *Ibid*.
4. Articles must conform to the latest edition of Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers*.
5. Papers may be of any length, although authors may be asked to condense longer papers.
6. A list of non-standard abbreviations should be provided.

Information

Mission

Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary, a graduate school in the Wesleyan tradition, prepares men and women for Christ-like leadership and excellence in ministries.

Vision

Bridging cultures for Christ, APNTS equips each new generation of leaders to disseminate the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout Asia, the Pacific, and the world.

Strategic Objectives

1. Provide solid biblical, historical, and theological foundations and encourage lifelong learning.
2. Demonstrate the power, spiritual formation, and transformation possible within a multi-cultural community of committed believers.
3. Create a dynamic environment that reinforces spiritual gifts and graces, and the call to ministry.
4. Challenge to reach across ethnicity, culture, gender, class and geographical region for the sake of the Gospel.

The seminary exists to prepare men and women for ministry in the Asia-Pacific region and throughout the world by developing personal and professional attitudes and skills for analytical reflection upon Christian faith and life, and competencies in the practice of ministry. Since its founding in 1983, APNTS has trained men and women for a wide range of vocations. Today, over 350 graduates serve as pastors, teachers, Bible college presidents, missionaries, and various other church and para-church workers.

The Mediator

Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary

Degrees and Programs

APNTS offers the following academic courses:

- **Master of Divinity (90 units)**
- **Master of Arts in Religious Education (48 units)**
- **Master of Arts in Christian Communication (48 units)**
- **Master of Science in Theology (48 units)**
- **Doctor of Philosophy in Holistic Child Development (60 units)**

English is the language of instruction in the classrooms. Students must pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the APNTS English Proficiency Exam to register. A score of 500 is required for the M.Div., 510 for the M.S.T. (Pastoral Ministry) degree and 550 for the M.A., M.S.T. (Biblical Studies, Faith and History, Intercultural Studies), and Ph.D. degrees.

Faculty

The well-qualified teaching staff upholds a high level of education. Adjunct and visiting professors from both within and outside the Asia-Pacific region help expand students' worldviews.

Accreditation

APNTS is accredited by the Philippines Association of Bible & Theological Schools (PABATS), Asia Theological Association (ATA), and the Association for Theological Education in Southeast Asia (ATESEA), and is recognized by the Philippines Commission for Higher Education (CHED).

Contact

For further information or for an application, please write to the address below:

Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary

Ortigas Avenue Extension, Kaytikling
Taytay, Rizal 1920
Philippines

Fax: (+63) 2-658-4510

E-mail: apnts@apnts.edu.ph

Website: www.apnts.edu.ph