



## A Long Way East of Eden 4: Truth after God

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### Truth after God 'There are no facts'

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*'What about these conventions of language? Are they really the products of knowledge, of the sense of truth? Do the designations and the things coincide? Is language the adequate expression of all realities? Only through forgetfulness can man ever achieve the illusion of possessing a "truth" in the sense just designated... What then is truth?... Truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are.'*  
- Nietzsche [1]

Does it matter whether there is a God or not? We turn now to the fourth of the areas we set ourselves to consider in response to this question.

This is the most complex one, and again some readers may prefer to move ahead to chapter 5, on love, relationships and intimacy. Yet this chapter's topic could be the most far-reaching of all for us. *If there is no God, can we really know the truth about anything at all?*

*'There are no eternal facts, just as there are no absolute truths.'* Thus spoke the nineteenth-century prophet of the death of God, Nietzsche. Kafka, one of 'modernity's great novelists, told a parable expressing powerfully the 'modern' sense of truth's inaccessibility. In it, a peasant from the countryside comes and asks for entry to 'the law'. He is told to wait by the door.

*There he sits for days and years. He makes many attempts to be allowed in and wearies the door-keeper with his entreaties... The man, who has equipped himself well for his journey, gives everything he has, no matter how valuable, to bribe the door-keeper. The latter indeed accepts everything, but, as he does so, he says: 'I accept this only so that you may not think you have neglected anything.'*

Nothing can be done to further his quest. The long years pass by.

*Finally his sight grows weak... He does not live much longer. Before his death everything he has experienced during this time converges in his mind into one question... 'Everyone strives for the law... How is it that in all these years nobody except myself has asked for admittance?' The door-keeper realizes the man has reached the end of his life and, to penetrate his imperfect hearing, he roars at him: 'Nobody else could gain admittance here, this entrance was meant only for you. I shall now go and close it. [2]*

Thus Kafka: truth is tantalizingly close, but in the end inaccessible. And as modernity continued it became fairly fashionable to agree on the absence of absolute truths; for many liberals that absence itself is almost an absolute. But very few have taken themselves seriously in advocating such a position; scratch a liberal and all kinds of self-evident absolutes would emerge just beneath the surface. (Indeed, when in *The Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche sets himself against the 'absolute value of truth', it is the liberals who are his target, since they are working with a concept

of truth that only makes sense if there is a God.)

But that was the generation now aging, the generation we now call the 'modernists'. They didn't quite believe in their own relativism. Things are changing. Now it is the postmodernists who have succeeded to the ideological supremacy; and they do. No God; no eternal truths and no way even of saying what is objectively true; few of us have yet grasped how deep run the implications of postmodernism. But in the next years, perhaps, we will learn what it really means never to know, or speak, absolute truth.

In this chapter, then, we'll seek to understand first how this situation arose, and look at its link with the 'loss of God'; then, we'll examine its massive and widespread implications for our contemporary lives.

## Nothing more than words

If there is no God, can we know the truth about anything at all?

This basic question was raised years ago by Charles Darwin, the father of evolutionary theory. *'The horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would anyone trust the convictions of a monkey's mind?'*<sup>[3]</sup> If all our thoughts are in the end just physical, chemical events inside our brains; if there is no revelation from outside; why should we consider that they bear any relation to objective truths about reality?

The issue is central for Nietzsche, as Ian Markham notes in *Truth and the Reality of God*.<sup>[4]</sup> Nietzsche too focused on the peculiar way that our 'reason' apparently arose from random evolution: *'If everything evolved, then human minds and logic must have evolved too.'* But if 'rationality' emerged (or is emerging) from a purely random process, then why should its productions match up with 'truth'? Indeed our 'rational' statements about the world assume a whole range of things: that it is stable and coherent, that it is ultimately intelligible, that our brains can understand it correctly. But if, as Nietzsche says, there is no God, then the world's apparent coherence is fortuitous; likewise, if there is no ultimate cause for its intelligibility, then 'it

would be just good fortune that we are able to explain anything at all'. But then the 'essential condition for truth is undermined', for if the universe's intelligibility is just a lucky accident, how likely is it that it really is intelligible? And what then becomes of our attempts to explain it, or our hope that true explanations are possible? If God existed, it would not be a lucky accident that the world made sense: *'In a universe that God intends, then understanding and rationality are intended.'* But in the God-less universe that Nietzsche believed in, *'understanding and rationality become accidents which might or might not be justified';* and in consequence *'argument, logic, truth itself have all become absurd'*. (Markham cites Nietzsche's remark that this loss of truth extends to science: *'Physics too is only an interpretation and arrangement of the world (according to our own requirements, if I may say so!).'*)

We find the same question right back in Descartes, four centuries ago. As soon as Descartes had (he thought) proved his own existence from the existence of his thoughts, he hastened immediately to demonstrate the existence of a Creator God. This, thought Descartes, would mean that our created reason was a tool worth using. And so it might be – at least if it is operating in tandem with the divine reason. To the Christian, all knowledge is, in the long run, revelation; and it is almighty God, not us, who ensures we are able to know what we need to know.

But now that God is dead, what happens to our faith in reason?

It's a vital question. But a second problem follows it. In recent decades, the philosophical avant-garde have become deeply sceptical whether also the words we use can have any reliability as tools for expressing truth about reality.

To begin with, it was only religion that seemed under threat. Philosophers questioned whether language that arises within, and describes, the universe of our senses could be used to speak of anything beyond it, such as God. Some, such as Wittgenstein, implied that therefore the appropriate expression for God was the silence of ineffable mysticism. Others, such as A.J. Ayer, announced simply that any metaphysical or

theological principles which could not be verified by the senses were meaningless nonsense (apart, of course, from this principle itself).

But more recently the high profile emergence of the deconstructionists has taken matters a huge step further. Now it is questioned whether our language can speak of, or 'mirror', truth and reality at all; or whether it is not a self contained system, forever ambiguous, forever undermining and contradicting its own meanings. Language, what we say to each other, is a 'self referential' game. Words have no 'given' meanings rooted in external reality, they relate only to other words, their meanings 'slip' continually. Language does not 'converge' with reality; it is simply incapable of conveying unambiguous truths about the external world. Roland Barthes set out the consequences of this unflinchingly: it is the end, he insisted, of reason, of science, and of law. And, we might add, of history, philosophy, sociology, politics, and ethics, considered as expressions of objective truth about how the world was or is.

Our immediate reaction to such dramatic claims may be disbelief. Surely this is just the latest fashion?

Possibly. The fashions of the academic industry deserve a good deal more irreverent scepticism than they receive. In recent decades, we've seen styles of thought rise and fall like chart hits or skirt lengths: structuralism usurps the catwalk from existentialism, and is in turn displaced by post-structuralism, deconstructionism, postmodernism. To some degree the reasons are economic. Younger intellectuals need to make their names; publishers are pressed for new ranges of radical perspectives to publish. So, once a new thought-fashion attains a certain critical mass of media attention, its further development is guaranteed, as herds of aspiring academics seize their chance to express, in their own speciality, the new outlook. But this reduction of knowledge to the exploitation of the latest fashion adds to our contemporary sense of the inaccessibility of truth: we know what is modish today, but we know too that some totally different way of thinking may have mastered the catwalk in fifteen years' time. The hemlines will have shifted, the thought-fashions will be new ones.[5]

Deconstructionism might appear one of the more

bizarre thought-styles to snatch a place in the sun – the equivalent, perhaps, of hair dyed green. But in fact it represents a starkly logical development of the last century of western thought. Its current cultural dominance, particularly in the intellectual and media scene of north America and France, cannot be overstated. (Even as I write, there comes to hand a careful discussion of the Canadian academic scene that assumes the future ethos cannot be other than 'postmodern, deconstructionist'.) It is very hard to see the pendulum swinging back as if deconstructionism hadn't happened. So what is this movement whose assumptions of the inaccessibility of truth have become so dominant in the contemporary scene?[6]

Deconstructionism, or post structuralism, grew out of the structuralist movement. Structuralism was described by David Lodge as the first intellectual movement to be born, flourish and die without anybody noticing; and indeed its esoteric French sages do seem a little like the mystical eastern gurus who entranced the '60s hippies and then vanished. Nevertheless, it offered insights of considerable importance. One of its key hopes was to see how, underneath the various phenomena of human culture, there could be identified the 'deep structures' within the human mind. This approach became highly influential, for instance in the study of literature and popular culture. (Roland Barthes' brilliant *Mythologies* was a good example of what could be done with the latter.) Many practitioners of structuralism could be seen as attempting, in the footsteps of Levi-Strauss and Saussure, to put the 'humanities' onto a scientific basis.

But what Barthes and others ('post structuralism') came to realize was that the thing could not be done.[7] The processes of interpretation they were employing could be made to yield not just one, objective, meaning, but any number of alternative or even contradictory understandings. They could see – and indeed desired – no place to stand outside the game of language, from which to 'fix' this 'play' of meanings and verbal signifiers. And what began as a change in the understanding of written literature soon generalised to a militant scepticism about the meaning of verbal communication as a whole.

Older approaches to literature had assumed that

the meanings of what was written must largely be determined by the intention of the original writer. Yet there was always a problem: strictly speaking, we cannot know what that original writer intended except through the very words we are trying to understand. By the 1950s this insight had become part of orthodoxy, and over-emphasis on the author's intended meaning was being rejected as the 'intentional fallacy'.<sup>[8]</sup> But then another issue arose: if the meaning of a set of words is not determined by the author's intention, then perhaps any reader can make what she chooses of it. Deconstructionists like Barthes took this idea to its logical conclusion. Interpretation becomes less a search to understand some original idea or 'truth' underlying the words; it is more a personal, even hedonistic, game,<sup>[9]</sup> in which the reader, as much as the original writer, reinvents or re-creates their own meaning. Words carry no absolute, 'given', external meaning,<sup>[10]</sup> no unalterable 'message' about the world from writer to reader, they simply 'are' in themselves.

Or let's put it another way. One of the valuable insights deriving from these thinkers is a more sophisticated understanding of the role of the reader (or hearer) of a communication. It is obvious that different readers can interpret a message in many different ways. In other words, the meaning of the text in itself is inaccessible; we have only what results from the text's interaction with the expectations and 'pre-understandings' of one or another reader. No text ever has a 'single valid interpretation'. Thus the word, the message, is inevitably cut adrift from anything it might have signified; it is subjected to a free play of interpretation, in which we cannot speak of right (that is, truthful) or wrong understandings – only of more or less interesting ones.

It may be responded that this is not how communication works in everyday life. We all know, more or less, how to interpret someone who cries out, *'Help, my daughter is drowning in the lake.'* But, the deconstructionist might reply, the greater the quantity of 'text', the greater the degree of 'slippage', of indeterminable meaning. So, when we come to the 'big questions' of history, philosophy, ethics, the degree of 'slippage' is such that the 'texts' of our world cannot be read as saying anything specific, definable and coherent about anything. About the big questions of the world, we can never learn,

nor speak, what is 'true'. None of us can 'catch truth by the tail'; there are only words, gyrating in their own self-contained universe.

Words, then, are not mirrors through which we perceive eternal, coherent 'truths' about a 'present' reality that preceded the words and is reliably expressed through them. They have no fixed meanings; they 'slip' around, they can indeed be 'pushed' around if we have the power. Power, not some eternally existent truth, determines what we come to understand as meaning. And on a broader scale, our interpretations and belief-systems are likewise not mirrors of what is 'really there' beyond our language; they too are verbal constructions, which means that they are shaped for us by whatever are the most powerful forces in society.<sup>[11]</sup> And, since all of them are 'man-made' rather than 'realistic', they will all equally be revealed as incoherent as the words begin to 'slip'. In fact 'deconstruction' takes its name from these writers' aim to 'deconstruct' and reveal the self-contradictory falsity of the supposed truths and belief-systems which each of us constructs within the 'prison house' of our own language. We distort and contradict ourselves all the time, because our words will not stay still, and their tendency to 'slippage' negates any possibility of their expressing any coherent picture of truth-about-reality. 'Truth' of any objective kind remains inaccessible; 'to write' is (says Barthes) an intransitive verb, because there is nothing external to language that can truly be written about. Foucault insists on the folly of the 'will to know', as if what is 'out there' could somehow be known and expressed. What he is writing, he says in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, *'does not set out to be a recollection of the original or a memory of the truth.'*

The Christian will respond that it is indeed only because there is a God that we can pass beyond our 'prison house' to know (or communicate) anything; that all knowledge, of whatever topic, is ultimately revelational, given to our individual minds through God; and that it is because God the Holy Spirit is almighty that he can overcome (or orchestrate) the inadequacies of our minds and our words to reveal truth when he so chooses.<sup>[12]</sup> Because God is 'the Word', and because language is something he created for a purpose, communication is possible. Genesis

begins, 'And God said, Let there be light, and there was light'; language matches reality.[13]

*'Thought and speech are God's gifts to creatures made in his image', wrote the evangelical mystic A.W. Tozer; 'these are intimately associated with him and impossible apart from him. It is highly significant that the first word was the Word: "And the Word was with God, and the Word was God". We may speak because God spoke. In him word and idea are indivisible.*[14] Because there is a God, certain things are either true or false; and we can (at least sometimes) know which are which.[15] But all this is nonsense if God is dead.

To the Christian, deconstructionism is intriguing from another angle. As we have noted elsewhere, thinkers like C.S. Lewis (and, from a different perspective, the Dutch philosopher Dooyeweerd) have argued that the history of human culture can be seen as an attempt to 'fill in' the space left by the loss of God, by 'deifying' or making idols of particular aspects of the world. But the problem with turning something into an idol is that nothing but God is big enough to take God's place; by turning something into an idol, you risk distorting and destroying it.

With structuralism, we may say that the thing idolized was language: much of human culture – fashion, car design, wrestling – was understood through the model of language, of *langue* and *parole*. Isn't it interesting, then, that structuralism's exaltation of language led directly into a movement that denied the ability of language to function at all for communicating real information?

And that is exactly the starting-point for deconstructionists such as Barthes and Derrida. Quite overtly, they take their cue for the death of

language as communication of reality from the death of God. So Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*, draws heavily and overtly on Nietzsche. When Derrida denies that a word can be a 'sign' pointing unambiguously to an external reality, what he is really refusing is the notion of 'a sign signifying a signifier itself signifying an eternal verity, eternally thought and spoken in the proximity of a present logos' ('logos' being the Greek for 'the Word' from John's Gospel). In the 'epoch of Christian creationism', he says, reading and writing were 'preceded by a truth, or a meaning already constituted by or within the element of the logos'. And it was because, or if, God's truths, God's 'eternal verities', were there first that our words could function as trustworthy signs: *'The sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth. The age of the sign is essentially theological.*[16] But now we no longer believe in a God who is that 'Logos', that 'eternal Word'. Language and reality are not, as we had believed, two created systems that match each other. So the death of God is fundamental to the divorce of language from truth. Barthes was equally plain:

*We now know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of an Author-God), but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings... blend and clash... Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile.*

His choice of expression is clear about both cause and effect: the cause is the lack of an Author-God, paralleling the real God; the result is the reduction of the text to a variety of meanings in insoluble conflict. And this is truly far-reaching:

*Literature (it would be better from now on to say writing), by refusing to assign a "secret", an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary, since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law.*[17]

From the other side of the Atlantic, Richard Rorty makes a similar point. *'The suggestion that truth, as well as the world, is out there is a legacy of an age in which the world was seen as the creation of a being who had a language of his own.*[18] But *'The pragmatist... wants us to give up the*

*notion that God, or evolution, or some other underwriter of our present world-picture, has programmed us as machines for accurate verbal picturing.* [19]

Renowned culture-critic George Steiner summarizes the deconstructionists' position: *'God the Father of meaning, in His authorial guise, is gone from the game; there is no longer any privileged judge, interpreter or explicator who can determine or communicate the truth, the true intent of the matter.'* We have broken with the *'Logos-order as Western thought and feeling had known it since, at the least, the tautology spoken from the Burning Bush'*, where God declared himself *'I am who I am'*. *'The issue is, quite simply, that of the meaning of meaning as it is re-insured by the postulate of the existence of God. "In the beginning was the Word." There was no such beginning, says deconstruction; only the play of signs and markers amid the mutations of time.* [20] Jean Baudrillard, radical postmodernism's most flamboyant guru, has argued the same way:

*All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning, and that something could guarantee that exchange – God, of course. But what if God himself can be... reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless... There is no longer any God to recognise his own, nor any last judgment to separate true from false.*

Elsewhere he adds,

*This is where we are today, undecideability, the era of floating theories... All contemporary theories are floating and have no meaning other than to serve as signs for one another. It is pointless to insist on their coherence with some "reality", whatever that might be.* [21]

God is dead; interpretation is up for grabs. Make of the world what you can; you will never know if you were right or wrong. [22]

And all this can go a long way further. *'I'm very far beyond issues like whether I'm writing about factual reality any more'*, Whitley Streiber told an interviewer regarding his book on his supposed

childhood experiences with alien beings. At the more serious end of the spectrum, Sokal and Bricmont's book *Intellectual Impostures* documented the tendency of key postmodernist writers (Lacan, Irigaray, Baudrillard and others) to illustrate their culture-criticism with scientific or mathematical material that, carefully examined, bore little relation to reality: Baudrillard's phrase about the *'multiple refractions of hyperspace'* being a good example, since hyperspace is a concept established in science fiction but not in science fact. (It was Baudrillard who made a name for himself by his argument that the Gulf War never happened.) A.N. Wilson, in a polemical attack on postmodernism, cited an English archaeologist who *'considers it perfectly "valid" to accept the American Indian myth that their people rose to that continent from a subterranean spirit-world, rather than having crossed the Bering Straits 10,000 years ago. In the "post-modernist" view, one idea is just as acceptable as another'*; indeed, adds Wilson, from a *'politically correct'* perspective the narrative of the Zuni tribesmen has an attractiveness that the *'western scientific outlook'* lacks.

If, then, the deconstructionists are right; if there is no God and nothing to distinguish 'true' from 'false' and 'realistic' from 'unrealistic'; if language no longer brings with it a 'single valid interpretation', so that we have no possibility of any truly accurate 'theories' or understandings of objective fact or reality; if, in short, we must with Barthes 'refuse' God, reason, science, law; what then?

The bestselling mystery novel *The Name of the Rose* was written by Umberto Eco, an Italian scholar linked with the structuralist movement and its successors. It's an interesting example of how these ideas translate into the terms of mainstream fiction.

Eco's preface begins by quoting the opening of John's Gospel: *'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. This was beginning with God, and the duty*

*of every faithful monk would be to repeat every day with chanting humility the one never changing event whose incontrovertible truth can be asserted.'* But, he continues, *'We see now through a glass darkly, and the truth, before it is revealed to all, face to face, we see in fragments (alas, how illegible) in the error of the world.'*

And that is the keynote of the action. When the narrator's master, William, exposes the villainous Jorge's plot, he concludes, *'I arrived at Jorge through an apocalyptic pattern that seemed to underlie all the crime, and yet it was accidental... I behaved stubbornly, pursuing a semblance of order, when I should have known well that there is no order in the universe.'* The narrator asks if William is not more or less concluding that God does not exist: *'William looked at me without betraying any feeling in his features, and he said, "How could a learned man go on communicating his learning if he answered yes to your question?"'*

Truth is illegible, pattern illusory, order non-existent, and all learning under question in the absence of God. And in the end fire consumes the abbey, along with the 'greatest library in Christendom' in other words, the repository and summation of Western learning. Years later, however, the narrator returns to the abbey. He finds scraps of parchment in the rubble, and begins painstakingly to collect *'every relic I could find... the glimpse of an image's shadow, or the ghost of one or more words... sometimes a half page had been saved.'* He studies them with love, seeking to reconstruct the text from which they came.

At the narrative's poignant conclusion, he realises that this search for the lost truth is fruitless. *'The more I reread this list the more I am convinced that it is the result of chance and contains no message. It is a hard thing for this old monk, on the threshold of death, not to know whether the letter he has written contains some hidden meaning, or more than one, or many, or none at all...'*

*'It is cold in the scriptorium, my thumb aches. I leave this manuscript, I do not know for whom; I no longer know what it is about; stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus.'* [23]

## Truth is Impossible

Deconstructionism has come to dominate the intellectual scene only in the last couple of decades. Yet it is not alone. As the 'loss of God' gathered pace, other twentieth-century trends moved us in the same direction. Together they have led us towards a profound 'death of hope' as to whether the truth really is 'out there'; as to whether we can ever really know truth about anything that matters.

At least nine major factors have conspired to dissolve our hope.

(i) We are heirs to a century-long process: the nineteenth-century 'loss of faith' in traditional Christianity, and the subsequent exploration of alternatives. Earlier last century, there flourished the great mythic alternatives to Christian faith: utopian Humanism, utopian Freudianism, utopian Fascism, utopian Marxism. It is important to grasp how different is our atmosphere now from that time when so many huge, confident dreams were in the air. We cannot imagine anyone today writing with the blithe assurance of, say, communist J.B.S. Haldane: *'Mammon has been expelled from one sixth of the planet's surface. It was men, not angels, that cast him out.'* All that is over. It seems, to quote the sad finale of Hardy's *Collected Poems*, that *'We are getting to the end of dreams'. 'Those who speak do not know; those who know do not speak.'* The competition of Utopias left us profoundly doubtful that anybody knew the truth.

(ii) At the same time, the two great atheistic faiths of Marxism and Freudianism had a deep and lasting effect in making us aware of the non-intellectual factors that affect our beliefs. Marxism introduced the concept of 'ideology': we are strongly motivated to hold beliefs that will safeguard our economic position. Freudian psychoanalysis reminded us of the many factors from our familial or sexual experience that drive us to 'believe' what we do; what we think are beliefs are often only rationalizations, and concealed beneath them are the real motives for

our conduct. Both approaches put a question-mark over the value of any deeply-held belief. (Translated into its most knockdown mode, this produces: *'You think you believe in God, but it's only because of your neurotic need for a father figure'; 'You think you're an atheist, but it's only because of your neurotic need to protect your independence'; 'Freud only "believed" his own theory because he disliked his father and hated his Catholic nanny.'*) Both Marx and Freud are outmoded now, but they have played a major role in undermining our belief in serious intellectual exploration as a way to truth.

(iii) To this we must add the aftermath of the second world war. Fascism and Nazism were self evidently 'big ideas' that thought they were right. The result, among many '50s intellectuals at least, was a deep distaste towards any such confidence. For a while, indeed, certain kinds of academic had an almost neurotic(!) tendency to use the term 'totalitarian' (or 'fascist') for ideas claiming any degree of certainty. Except, of course, for their own; they did not intend the uncertainty to spread to their basic humanistic assumptions. But no one is secure from challenge; they were setting the tone for our own much deeper collapse of certainty.[24]

(iv) The overwhelming influence of our era, therefore, a generation later, is the profound scepticism of 'postmodernism'. Jean-Francois Lyotard, author of *The Postmodern Condition*, singled out this hopelessness as the key feature of our time, when he spoke (in the postmodernists' best-known phrase) of our *'incredulity towards meta-narratives'*. We have, he was saying, become deeply sceptical towards any 'big stories' that might 'explain it all'.

He is not talking about religion here. In context, Lyotard is observing the failure of the 'big ideas' of modernity – Marx, Freud, Darwin. In 'Note on the Meaning of "Post-"' he emphasizes particularly the *'disappearance of the Idea that rationality and freedom are progressing... We can observe and establish a kind of decline in the confidence that, for two centuries at least, the West invested in the principle of a general progress in humanity.'* [25] It is the humanist dream that we no longer believe: we have little trust in science, little hope in progress, little faith in the welfare state. We don't believe in any big solutions. The bureaucrats and

the detail managers have now inherited the earth; and we don't trust them either, but anyone with big ideas is absolutely beyond the pale, and only the naive listen to them.

(v) Other social forces have combined to make it almost ill-mannered to believe anything too definitely. Modern western society is increasingly pluralistic. Ethnic diversification has made the tolerance of multiple belief-systems more and more important for social stability. (In the coming years we may see the social fabric strained most where two belief-systems collide – for example in Islamic and liberal approaches to animal rights, or the enforcement of homosexual equality, which was a key flashpoint when President Clinton clashed with the east Asian governments.)

Now, it is true that one does not have to lack strong convictions in order to be tolerant (and supportive) of individuals holding very different ones. Nonetheless, pluralism has created a context where it is 'socially useful', and may well be seen as 'progressive' or 'helpful', to be unable to pronounce a verdict on the claims of any of the great belief-systems. Liberalism has been defined as a system in which you can believe whatever you like so long as you don't believe it's true. The social pressures are on us to deny the possibility of truth; the ideal liberal 'pillar of the establishment' (in education, for example) is someone incapable of making up their mind too definitely on fundamental issues.

(vi) But there are still other factors in our loss of confidence about knowing and expressing truth. Western culture has always had an anti rational side, which surfaced in Romanticism, and later in Futurism, Surrealism, Dadaism; thence into pop culture – M.S. Escher posters, the Goons, *Monty Python*; or Douglas Adams' brilliant *Life, the Universe and Everything*:

*'And when the trial continued,' he said in a weeping whisper, 'they asked Prak a most unfortunate thing. They asked him,' he paused and shivered, 'to tell the Truth, the Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth'.....*

*..... Arthur shone his torch full on Prak's face.*

*'We thought,' he said, 'that you were meant to be telling the Truth, the Whole Truth and Nothing but*

*the Truth.'*

*'Oh, that,' said Prak. 'Yeah. I was. I finished. There's not nearly as much of it as people imagine.... I can't remember any of it now. I thought of writing some of it down, but first I couldn't find a pencil, and then I thought, why bother?'*

Why do we enjoy the surrealist overturning of reason? Partly for its imaginative adventurousness: the creative joy of newness, of seeing things other than as they are. But it has also to do with freedom from what Weber called the 'iron cage'. With the loving providence of God long vanished, what modern rationality has created is an enormous, soulless technological system, turning us into pawns, ciphers, computer numbers. And science: science has given us the Bomb, BSE, genetically-modified food, all kinds of horrors. All this has made us hostile to reason in general. We feel a sense of relaxation in the Zen offer of truth that is no truth: *'What is the sound of one hand clapping?'* (*'Something like this'*, Tallulah Bankhead answered the sage, slapping him round the face.)

(vii) Yet even science moves now in regions where the concepts of human reason begin to seem woefully inadequate tools. Quantum physics in particular has encountered situations in which there are things it is impossible to know, observations it is impossible to make. (If you think you understand quantum mechanics, it has been said, it simply shows that you don't.) Again, theoretical developments such as Heisenberg's uncertainty principle (which is primarily concerned with what it is possible for an objective observer to measure) need not necessarily be viewed as pointing to a wider nihilism. New Age pantheists like Capra have claimed these developments as support for their approaches; so have some Christians. Nonetheless, quantum mechanics has filtered into the wider culture primarily as a metaphor for denying the accessibility of truth; or even the existence of objective reality at all.

Tom Stoppard took the idea up in his entertaining play *Hapgood*. Stoppard brilliantly presents a spy comedy, involving attempts to tell whether Kerner, a defected Russian scientist, is a double agent. To this, he links the idea of the inaccessibility of truth in the physics that is Kerner's work. Does

light come in waves or particles? Experiments can prove either, says Kerner – the observer can choose. And similarly, *'A double agent is like a trick of the light... You get what you interrogate for.'* Blair, the old spycatcher, won't have it, and to the end of the play he's insisting explicitly on the importance of an 'either/or'. *'One likes to know what's what'*, he says firmly on another occasion. Kerner laughs at him: *'Oh yes! Objective reality. Objective reality is for zoologists. "Ah, yes, definitely a giraffe."'* And later, offering a clear definition of what science is perceived to say about truth: *'Your certainty is also amusing – you think you have seen to the bottom of things, but there is no bottom.'*

(viii) But if, in high science, language is proving no longer adequate for truth, we have also created other contexts fairly central to society that break the link between language and truth in deeply personal ways.

Two obvious examples might be the institutions of marriage and the church. For many of us in the West, marriage vows are now accepted as having a strange linguistic status. It is important to commit ourselves verbally *'Till death us do part'*, for example; yet at many weddings everyone knows that those five words are hedged around, modified almost out of existence, with a host of ifs and buts. It might be different if we believed in real divine providence in the decisions leading to marriage, but we don't. At the heart of our sexuality, therefore, stands a communal moment marked by the fact that our words do not and cannot match what is true. And the deep significance of the event to us – and, too often, its associated pain – surely means that our inability in this case to trust words, to *'mean what we say'*, will spill over into the way we grow to view language, truth, and promising in general.

Alongside this we should set other activities in many parts of the official 'church'; most obviously the repetition of the creed. A profound divorce between language and truth is created by bishops and priests who state, each week, *'I believe in God the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ his only Son... On the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven; from thence he will come to judge the quick and the dead'* – when they simply don't. The issue is not merely one of intellectual dishonesty. The crucial point is

that, since these often-recited creeds are treated in the rest of life as having only a very limited truth, the words are being used to express something markedly different from their face value. Thus many parts of the church establishment institutionalize a use of language which clearly does not (for them) convey truth, but is its own self-referential game; deconstructionism encore.

(ix) A final factor dominating our attitude to the possibility of truth is the triumph of visual media over the written word.

Television and related media are notoriously poor at handling complex idea structures. As a result, the whole social position of such structures is threatened in a culture that these media dominate. Image tends to displace verbal content, observes Neil Postman in his important study *Amusing Ourselves to Death*; and if the link between language and truth has grown tenuous, that between image and truth is weaker still. Words do not guarantee their truth content, says Postman, but they do at least tend to *'assemble a context in which the question, Is this true or false? is relevant.'*[26] The visual image, in contrast, raises no such question: *'There is no beginning, middle, or end in a world of photographs... The world is atomized. Here is only a present and it need not be part of any story that can be told,'* whether true or false.[27] Overtly at least the image makes no truth-statements, it is disconnected; it has the status of a dream, a vision, a fantasy. To an increasing degree, therefore, the most compelling impressions around us are precisely not to do with reality, or with truth.

Postman observes how in recent elections the short 'soundbite', the telling visual image wrapped up by a brief punch line, has become far more important than carefully planned statements of policy.[28] Such trends were evident in British politics from at least the 1980s. Did Thatcher triumph, or was it Saatchi and Saatchi? In Labour's renaissance, the 'new image' (Brahm's in the background, red rose replacing red flag) preceded the policy review, both in time and importance. Even if we had anything to say that was true, it is hard to say it audibly in such a situation; even when there is genuine substance, and the language seeks to convey something that

is true-to-reality, the media context makes it very hard to recognise. What is sincere or truthful comes across instead merely as a good image of truthfulness. (Was this a problem faced by Tony Blair in the last British election? That a man who (it seems) genuinely was sincere found it impossible not to come across merely as someone good at pretending to be sincere?)

In the media context, then, even verbal language ceases to be 'about truth'. In a consumerist society where language is the only 'reality' we can grasp and image is all-important, the advertisers will tend to dominate;[29] but when we watch advertisements, we don't really expect them to be 'about truth', or even about their products' qualities. Propaganda tends to replace persuasion, because persuasion is about asserting that certain things are objectively true. Likewise we permit the *Sunday Sport* to be sold in the same newspaper racks as 'quality papers', not so much out of pleasure at such mind-bogglingly wonderful headlines as 'Space Aliens Turned My Son Into An Olive', but rather because we doubt if any of the newspapers really 'tell the truth'. That's not what the media are for.

Jesus, it will be recalled, was the Word[30]; not, firstly, the Image. Martin Buber told of a rabbi so dumbfounded by the implications of the huge words, 'And God said', that he never got beyond the opening verses of Genesis where they occur.[31] At the heart of Christian faith was the belief that God speaks, to each individual, and that therefore reality can be expressed, and known. But there is no revelation now. Now, so many pressures conspire to make truth seem impossible: the bedlam of competing ideologies, the doubts about the reliability of our reason, the misuse of science, the misuse of language, the pressures from multiculturalism, and the flood of images that simply marginalize any question of truth. We have abandoned the notion of a loving God as Revealer,[32] but it grows harder to believe we will find truth otherwise; if it must be done DIY, carrying it through against the social pressures may be a task for the master-spirits only. The rest of us will live as victims of an indistinguishable swirl of part-truths, lies and videotape. Somehow we thought that anyway.

And so we return to Barthes: the farewell to God was a farewell in general to expression of truth in

language, and thus to reason, to science, to law.

We still have to confront the issue of what it will mean to live in a world where we will never know what is true.

## Style triumphant

So much for the philosophical background story. Now for the life-implications.

We don't normally think of *The X-Files* as optimistic. Yet the slogan, '*The truth is out there*', is a sign of refusal of despair; it offers the hope that, against all the odds, two people might come to know reality. But that, we may feel, is where the fantasy-element comes in. We find it all too easy to believe in the other side of the coin – Mulder's enemies, all the systems and people out to obfuscate things. According to postmodernism, the death of God means we cannot know the truth; the very 'will to know' is folly. And among all the social pressures to the contrary, there is little to give us back a faith that we really can know.

What shall we do then? If we cannot learn the truth, then neither can we speak what is true. But we will still go on speaking, and writing and selling print – for economic reasons if for no other. So, among the hallmarks of a culture marked by post-God despair about truth, we will tend to find: a dominance of style in the absence of content or substance; a focus on the media of communication, rather than any messages they might have contained; a dominance of image and surface over depth – whatever that might be.

Medium plus message equals Marshall McLuhan, another of the gurus who had fifteen minutes on the catwalk in recent decades. McLuhan's famous epigram '*The medium is the message*' was a perceptive observation that what the newer media primarily communicate is themselves, rather than some external, detachable message about the world. But it extends further: it could have been a motto for a whole culture distrustful of 'message'. Is it not a recurrent feature of the post-war decades that 'medium' has displaced 'message' in one field after another?

Philosophy, for example, has largely given up on discussion of the historic 'big issues' (particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world). Most of the past

decades' major movements have poured scorn on the idea of inquiry into the nature of reality or the meaning of existence, becoming dominated by analysis of language. In literature, a dominant force has been various types of formalism. Modern painting has often been concerned to give attention to the medium of the painting itself, rather than any thing represented.[33] '*I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry*': avant-garde musician John Cage.

Now the postmodernists have taken the trend further, with their overt denial that there is anything coherent to be said.[34] Indeed, some have cultivated a near-impenetrable style (Derrida, Lacan, Foucault and Baudrillard all spring to mind) that seems almost a rejection of comprehensibility. Some of this is the element of showbiz that seems part and parcel of Gallic intellectualism; but it is also a logical development of their atheism.[35] In discussing purpose in Chapter 2, we noted how Robbe-Grillet ruthlessly pursued the implications for plot of Sartre's atheistic disbelief in a patterning of events – and nearly strangled the life of his own novels. So too here: if truth is inaccessible and reason (as Foucault insists) untrustworthy, then the near-incomprehensibility of the radical postmodernists comes close to expressing these realities,[36] even at the price of their own ability to communicate. (But not, the cynic might add, at the price of their ability to market books.)

But something still remains, and that something is style. It is a mark of this group of thinkers (and Barthes and Foucault in particular) that they have deliberately avoided a consistent, definable position. Yet, observes White, as they have moved through a variety of stances, what has given unity to their work has not been a set of beliefs but rather a certain intellectual style.[37] '*One thing is needful*', wrote Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*, "*giving style*" to one's character.[38] When reason cannot be trusted and knowledge is ambivalent, when there is nothing truthful to say, still there is style.

And as elsewhere, what begins in the intellectual stratosphere finds its parallels in popular culture. Is it coincidence that, after the death of the big ideas of the '60s, we moved (via the backlash of '70s pessimism) into an era where designer style became far more central to culture than at any

previous stage in the century?[39] It's been a theme of youth culture for the last three decades, from the New Romantics (whose icon was Boy George, the self-proclaimed 'man without convictions') onwards. Disco replacing message; nothing to say, nothing to believe; but when all else is lost, still there is style? MTV has been incredibly influential in setting the tone of youth culture; and here too, said one of its co-founders, 'We're talking about dealing a mood to you. It's the style, not the substance.' 'When you get down to it', said MTV's president, 'the only thing we have is image.' [40]

The Word is dead. But if you have nothing to say now, say it with style. And if indeed we have seats booked on the ecological Titanic, let's at least dress up for dinner.

## Living in a World Without Truth

But the loss of truth impoverishes.

Indeed, taken to its logical end (and in the absence of God it is unclear how we find our way back), the collapse of truth-knowing means the loss of the distinction between reality and illusion. That, in turn, means nothing less than the collapse of sanity. But this would be the endpoint; no-one suggests we are going that far.[41] Instead, we need to look at specific losses; because we do pay the price for the death of truth in a wide range of important areas.

First, and self-evidently, the loss of confidence in meaningful communication shuts us up in the prison-house of the self. Friendship depends on genuine communication.[42]

Second, loss of faith in truth-speaking soon comes to mean loss of truth-speaking itself. In north American intellectual life, postmodernism increasingly controls the agenda. It may not be entirely coincidental that the Patterson/Kim survey of American attitudes showed 20% of the citizens of this culture that is increasingly dominated by disbelief in absolute truth reported themselves lying every day, consciously and premeditatedly. (75% have regularly lied to their friend, 73% to their lover, 69% to their spouse, 58% to their best friend.) 'We lie, and we don't even think about it. The people we lie to most are those closest to us', concluded Patterson and Kim. 'Lying has become

*a cultural trait in America. Lying is embedded in our national character. That has not been understood around the world.*[43] (Anyway, 'One should ask oneself carefully: "Why don't you want to deceive?"', says Nietzsche during his sustained attack on the 'will to truth'; 'especially if it should appear – and it certainly does appear – that life depends on appearance... and when life has, a matter of fact, always shown itself to be on the side of the most unscrupulous...' [44])

Third, loss of truth leads to captivity in other ways; to subjectivism, and thence to egoism. Truth is whatever you like; thus one reading of quantum mechanics has given the Shirley MacLaines fuel for a faith that they can turn the universe into whatever they want it to be – New Age egoism.[45] The same captivity to egoism grows visible elsewhere in postmodernity, when we note just what it is that the deconstructionists finally make of the arts. As John Carey has observed, very few deconstructionist critics actually serve to lead the reader into a new affection for a book; in general they write largely for their own sake.[46] (There seems an egoism even in the apparent goal of dazzling opacity.) The loss of truth about the world beyond words risks the steady loss of the universe outside the self; experience of the real grows rare and becomes 'epiphany' (James Joyce). Or as the Christian would say: the prison of hell is one in which the self is left with itself alone.[47]

'You will know the truth and the truth will set you free', said Jesus. Again, truth delivers from the captivity of deceivers. Or as St Paul put it, truth ensures that we 'will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men'.[48] We cannot simply live without truth. As Chesterton said, when people stop believing in God, it doesn't mean they believe in nothing, it means they believe in anything. Paradoxically tied to postmodern scepticism is the gullibility of a new gnosticism: we feel there must be some spiritual secret, and we'll seek it almost anywhere – in the extraordinary rigmaroles of UFOs in New Age cults, for instance – because we no longer really hope to distinguish what is true. (This is particularly true of the overload of information on the internet.) An alternative twist, in north America at least, is when a significant proportion of the

culture starts to welcome our ignorance. We need no 'big ideas', no 'master narratives'; 'dumbing down' is fine, and a simpleton like Forrest Gump is as worthy to shape the nation's destiny as, ummm, a Reagan. Why watch the news?[49] You won't understand, and anyway they're lying. *'All I Really Needed To Know I Learnt In Kindergarten'*. But then the doors seem wide open for deception.

But there is more. *'We're looking for the truth of ourselves, not other people's truth'*, artists Gilbert and George told interviewer Wolf Jahn; so even scientific truth *'is only for the moment, isn't it? It wasn't always true that the earth goes round the sun... Maybe we've got it wrong even now, maybe there's some completely new way of seeing it.'*[50] Too bizarre? But Nietzsche argued a century ago that our modern 'faith in science' inevitably rests upon a *'metaphysical faith... that Christian faith, which was also Plato's faith, that God is truth, that truth is divine.'*[51] And as we saw, Barthes is very direct about the implications of postmodern atheism in this regard: *'By refusing to assign a "secret", an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text)', we liberate 'what may be called an anti theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law.'* Indeed, postmodern writers such as the followers of Feyerabend have expressed scepticism as to whether our scientific beliefs are anything more than that: our own subjective, institutionalised constructions, products of our will to power.[52] Even the respected Thomas Kuhn argues that we *'have to relinquish the notion, explicit or implicit, that changes of paradigm carry scientists and those who learn from them closer and closer to truth'*. For Feyerabend, meanwhile, scientists are *'salesmen of ideas and gadgets... not judges of truth and falsehood.'*[53] (Postmodern analyst Adam Phillips likewise says he views psychoanalysis as *'poetry, so I don't have to worry whether it is true or even useful, but only whether it is haunting or moving or intriguing or amusing.'* The modernist Freud, father of what he thought of as the science of psychotherapy, would have been amazed at this disinterest in truth; one wonders how Phillips' patients feel.[54]) If it is not moving ever closer to 'truth', what then drives the scientific enterprise? Lyotard's assessment in *The Postmodern Condition* is brutally frank. *'Scientists, technicians and instruments are*

*purchased not to find truth, but to augment power... The games of scientific language become the games of the rich... An equation between wealth, efficiency, and truth is thus established.'*[55]

The loss of truth from the scientific world might not seem too pressing an issue for many of us. But what happens to us when the same loss of truth-knowing comes to dominate the legal system too? We saw last chapter how our 'post-God' collapse of ethics poses major problems for law's credibility; but what if we now lose our commitment to truth as well? After the O.J. Simpson murder trial, Simpson's lawyer, Robert Shapiro, was asked by television interviewer Larry King whether the defence was in pursuit of the truth *'Absolutely not,'* Shapiro replied. King then asked Shapiro what he personally thought of Simpson's guilt or innocence. *'It doesn't matter what I think,'* Shapiro replied. *'What I believe is something that really is of no importance.'*[56] Such words could only be said in a certain climate, when truth is ceasing to be the issue at law. But what if, besides this, the dominant postmodern attitude to texts grows accepted, that there is anyway no *'single valid interpretation'* of the text of a law? We recall Lewis' prediction of a time coming when *'rival readings would... cease to be "right" or "wrong" and simply become more and less brilliant "performances".'*[57] That could be entertaining as literary theory but terrifying as legal practice. Foucault would be right: not truth but power (the power to pay for the star 'performer' as your lawyer) would determine what interpretation of the law the judge and jury find most 'interesting'.[58] Several high-profile trials in America have come close to this already; and the important point is that, if the deconstructionists are right, such a situation merely reflects the reality of what it means to interpret texts, after the death of God.[59] In full postmodernity, the legal system could prove a deathtrap for those who do not have power.

(But that returns us to another unsettling question raised, for different reasons, in chapter 3. If, in so many areas of post-God postmodernity, we are finally believing that truth is largely inaccessible, and the only reality in our disagreements is power: how long is it likely to be before the shooting starts? To quote a British railway-line graffiti: *'Don't Argue; Destroy.'*)

## Nothing to Pass On

But for now, the loss of truth-knowing impinges most seriously on those groups of people whose task it is to pass on an understanding of the world to the next generation. This is part of the reason for the crisis in contemporary teaching, and contemporary parenting.

It's important, and it should be obvious. To question whether we can ever know a coherent body of objective truth, whether we can express to one another a coherent understanding of our world, is also to put a massive question-mark over the value of our 'experience' or 'knowledge' or 'wisdom'.<sup>[60]</sup> What then are teaching and parenting *for*? By what right can one carry out these roles, if our authority <sup>[61]</sup> flows not from the possession (even if partial) of a true understanding of reality, but merely from our possession of power?<sup>[62]</sup>

Some commentators affirm that the results of this loss of objective truth have become plain in both higher and primary education as postmodernism has grown in influence. First, if truth cannot be known, then obviously there is a limited value in seeking knowledge for its own sake. Increasingly, therefore, the purpose of education is merely to enable the student to get a job (again, not truth but power).<sup>[63]</sup> A *Guardian* article cited Orlando Figes complaining that Cambridge students '*only want to know that what they are reading will give them answers for their exams*'. Richard Hoggart likewise complained about '*vocationalist policies in education that have convinced people that they should only learn what is immediately useful to them*.' But that impoverishment becomes reasonable if truth is inaccessible, and knowledge is to be judged primarily by what it means for our empowerment.<sup>[64]</sup>

The real impact of the loss of objective truth comes in much younger age groups, however. Melanie Phillips' angry and well-researched critique of the marked decline of the British school system, *All Must Have Prizes*, focuses on the '*fundamental uncertainty over adult authority*' at the heart of a rapidly-increasing breakdown in primary school discipline.<sup>[65]</sup> She notes in particular the influence of the pragmatist philosopher Dewey, who rejected the idea that the

teacher had objective knowledge to impart because that would be to act as an '*external boss or dictator*'.<sup>[66]</sup> She also identifies as a major factor the flight away from study of any '*objectively real*' rules, for example the rules of mathematics: '*Maths teaching in Britain has effectively been deconstructed*'.<sup>[67]</sup>

Phillips continues,

*The collapse of the teaching of literacy and of numeracy is a matter of profound significance for our society. It tells us not merely about educational fashion but about some of our deepest human values... At the most immediate level, it deprives children of their elementary entitlement to gain some control over their own environment and handicaps them in their initiation into the adult world.... Instead of authority being located "out there" in a body of knowledge handed down through centuries, we have repositioned it "in here" within each child. In doing so, we have deprived those children of the structures through which human beings have traditionally made sense of the world. Instead, children are having to make it up for themselves as they go along. They are being abandoned to disorder, incoherence and flux.*<sup>[68]</sup>

Phillips links these philosophies directly to the deconstructionist disbelief in any truths as objective and external, and sets out the drastic consequences this has had for a whole generation's mastery of the subjects concerned.<sup>[69]</sup> Enormous responsibility rests on those who train future generations of teachers in approaches based on such a disbelief in truth, she suggests. This is scarcely 'just a game', and it could have huge social consequences.

In parenting, even more than in education, much is involved besides merely passing on a wise and realistic understanding of the world. But surely it is a central component. And the belief that no such understanding can exist – that we cannot say much to our children with certainty – can only lead to a collapse of parenting confidence. This point is highlighted in Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism*. Lasch criticises American parenting fashions that emphasise only the subjective need to "*get in touch with your feelings*" and to base everyday intercourse on the communication of these feelings to others', leaving no place for objective

truths of which the parent may be aware and the child may be ignorant. (*Objective statements should be excluded from this discourse with the child... because no one can argue rationally about beliefs.*) This flight from objectivity, says Lasch, *'confirms... the parent's helplessness to instruct the child in the ways of the world or to transmit ethical precepts'*,<sup>[70]</sup> with at least two major consequences. First in the area of discipline: where there is no clear, objectively-justified framework of boundaries or standards, *'the parent's failure to administer just punishment to the child' actually 'undermines the child's self-esteem rather than strengthening it'*, because the child comes to realise that nothing he or she does 'really' matters.<sup>[71]</sup> But equally, if truth cannot be known, there can be no 'true' framework to justify the restraints needed to develop the art of self-discipline in a culture increasingly bad at it.<sup>[72]</sup>

Lasch observes perceptively that the exception to all this is in sport, where there is a built-in *'resistance to the erosion of standards... Excellence is relatively uncontroversial as a judgment of performance'*,<sup>[73]</sup> because in this area objective 'truth' can obviously be known. Significantly, athletic achievement constitutes a key source of self-worth and self-discipline for many dispossessed youth; and it does so because it offers achievement based on objectively true, accessible standards. Thus the accessibility (or otherwise) of truth impacts directly on the effectiveness of parenting and teaching in cultivating robust self-image.

A final aspect here is our difficulty in knowing what a word like fatherhood 'truly' means anyway. Throughout the last decade this question has been the subtext to a whole series of films; Geraldine Bedell wrote in the *Independent on Sunday* of taking her children to *The Lion King*, for example, and realising it was *'a parable about fatherhood, made for a market terrified that men no longer know how to be dad' – especially 'dads who can heal fractured families by combining toughness and tenderness.'* (She went on to instance *Look Who's Talking*, *Shadowlands*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, and *Mrs Doubtfire*.) Toughness and tenderness: how to combine them? How to learn tenderness? And – the key issue for us here – when, and to communicate what, does anyone have an objectively-grounded right to be 'tough', and how are they to go about

it? Here the 'external truths' of the nature of God as Father could offer a redefinition of fatherhood. From one angle, the issue I struggle with as a father can be seen as learning to imitate the one all-loving Father; learning slowly to interweave unstinting love, mercy and justice, and freedom and intervention. (For myself at least, that helps me understand the task I face as a parent.<sup>[74]</sup>) But the 'loss of God' has left the 'truth' of such models under heavy question. Yet we lack any clear alternatives; and we may wonder who ends up paying the price.

The definition of fatherhood by reference to God is typical of the person-based Christian concept of truth. To Christian faith, truth-principles alone are vital but insufficient; truth divorced from spiritual life becomes destructive, bones devoid of flesh. (A classic example would be how the 'true' principle of human need for a weekly sabbath-rest turns, outside the context of genuine spiritual life, from being life-restoring to being life-denying.)

As St Paul put it, *'The truth is in Jesus'*. Truth is first of all a quality of a Person, rather than an abstraction; because, if Christ is God, is infinite, then what is ultimate in the cosmos is personal rather than abstract. (Truth is a characteristic of the ultimate Christ, rather than Christ being an instance of the absolute of truth.) Jesus' words *'I am the Truth'* affirm a personal quality to truth that is far removed from the impersonal rationality of Weber's 'iron cage'.

Therefore, the truth about what kind of authority a teacher, or a father, has, or what the interplay of justice and mercy mean, lies also, firstly, 'in Jesus'. Teaching, at its profoundest, is what Jesus did – so how did Jesus teach? Love is what Jesus did – how did Jesus love? Or lead? Or discipline? How did Jesus handle sabbath? The same principle extends to many other areas of 'truth'. How did Jesus treat women?<sup>[75]</sup> What was Jesus' attitude to the Bible?<sup>[76]</sup> What were Jesus' priorities in religion?<sup>[77]</sup>

Or to put it another way: reality is the world as

God sees it. And because God is personal and has spoken to us, we now possess genuine and trustworthy (if imperfectly-grasped) fragments of a total and true 'metanarrative'. It isn't entirely accessible yet; for the time being, as St Paul says, we '*know in part and we prophesy in part*'.<sup>[78]</sup> But what we've been given, we can depend upon; and if we don't see everything clearly, still we '*see Jesus*'.<sup>[79]</sup> And we see him pre-eminently and definitively in the Bible; the written Word, opened to us by God's Spirit, is indispensable if we are to know what the living Word was like, how he lived, what he taught. This therefore defines the heart of authentic Christian faith and truth...

## A World Gone Flat

Our loss of the divine Father as archetype of human fatherhood is an instance of another aspect of our impoverishment; our crisis of knowing has deprived us of many of our structures of symbolism.

The world no longer *means* for us and our children in the way it did for pre-'death-of-God' humankind. To the biblical-Christian mind, God had created for us a world full of pictures of himself, as we noted earlier. He is the '*true bread*', the '*living water*'. He is the '*true vine*'. He is '*the door*'.<sup>[80]</sup> Things '*resonate*' in such a world-picture; a lamb is a lamb, yet also a reminder of Christ the Lamb of God; a lion is a lion, yet also a reminder of Christ the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. To the God-centred imagination, mountains have a beauty in themselves, yet in addition '*I lift up my eyes to the hills; where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth*'.<sup>[81]</sup> The sea becomes a symbol of God the Father, glorious in majesty, unfathomable in his wisdom ('*Your justice is like the great deep*'<sup>[82]</sup>) – boundless in itself, yet also a provocation to worship the even more boundless God. But all of these are lost with the disappearance of the truth-structures that gives them meaning.<sup>[83]</sup>

But that is a minor example of our more general loss of depth. Fredric Jameson speaks of the '*flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense – perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms... Depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces*'.<sup>[84]</sup> As Seamus Heaney has suggested, our postmodern era is marked by a loss, even a fear, of profundity. With the loss of truth we forfeit profundity; we are deprived of depth.<sup>[85]</sup>

A more crucial example would be the loss of history. Of course, knowing the truth of history is always difficult; there are variant understandings, and all too easily history is written by the victors. But still we could have believed that, if all that is true in each reading were combined, we could move towards a truly accurate model of what occurred – the truth as seen in God's eye, we may say. Postmodernism denies this hope, because, once again, history comes down to us primarily through words – and words continually slip and slide, words have unending interpretations and variations. No event within history contains any more significance than another. '*The true historical sense confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference*'.<sup>[86]</sup>

But here again we are deprived of depth. We will develop, perhaps, our own myth of history, with no real prospect that it matches the reality of the past. Instead, it serves primarily as a consoling story we tell ourselves to satisfy our needs. What results is the loss of the past. History becomes forgotten, we universalize the local and contemporary, and we lose touch with all alternative ways of thinking and feeling.<sup>[87]</sup> Nothing is passed on: again the word for this is impoverishment.<sup>[88]</sup>

And that doesn't refer only to a loss of enjoyment in visits to medieval castles. Rather, it means that arguments about whether the holocaust happened, whether the resurrection happened, whether or not communism was a disaster in practice, can never be settled. Those who ignore history, it has been said, are condemned to repeat it. But without God and without truth, what we believe about any such matters we will believe for no real reasons.

## Locked into the Dreamworlds

In one practical area after another, then, it makes a huge difference whether there is a God who speaks and who makes it possible for us to know truth from falsehood.

Perhaps the truly 'god-less' world is recreated in a product like Resnais' famous film *Last Year in Marienbad*.

What is it about? The film's action is difficult to describe. Certainly we see a man urging a woman that a year before in Marienbad she promised to go away with him. But who is he? A deceiver? Her husband? Her psychiatrist? A rapist? Is what he says true?

We do not know, we cannot know. We watch different versions repeated of the same events; we cannot tell fantasy from reality. And at the end of the film, when the woman leaves with the man, we do not know whether what we see has really occurred or whether it too is a fantasy in the mind of one of the characters.[89] Certainty, reason, are obliterated; the world cannot be interpreted. Is that the point of the film? Or is it to take away all understanding of content so that our attention can be held solely by the surface, the medium, the style? Probably both? We are locked into contemplation of the dream-like silver screen, because the world itself has passed beyond our understanding.

And meanwhile, maybe the man was a rapist. How different is our situation on this side of the screen? Truth matters. The current global crisis in areas like the environment might surely demand hard thinking as to what is going wrong; what is true, how we can understand it, how to respond, how to live. But maybe there is no truth to say or hear or propound; God is dead, reason is unreliable, and truth inexpressible. We have got a problem.

## In Summary...

Postmodernist thinkers have been absolutely clear that the loss of God leads inevitably to the loss – or the 'unspeakability' – of truth. Which sounds like a piece of mere academic weirdness until we see how its logic completes many of the past century's trends, and also how major and

wide-ranging are its implications. As Barthes says, the 'refusal' of God leads directly to the refusal of 'reason, science, and law'. And there are more: substance displaced inevitably by style, message by medium, depth by surface; and huge question-marks over whether we can ever speak of knowing the truth, in science or the legal system, in teaching or parenting... Or whether, in all these areas, truth is inaccessible since there is no God; and as a result the only reality is power.

And there is more besides. It seems a heavy price to pay for the loss of God. Have we made sure that the price is unavoidable?

[Go to Chapter 5]

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## References:

- [1] *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (1959 edition), pp.45-47.
- [2] Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, tr. Idris Parry (1994), pp.166-67.
- [3] Quoted in Colin Chapman, *Christianity on Trial* (1981), p.197. For a presentation of the major philosophical difficulties involved in believing in rationality (at least in its more theoretical activities) in a purely materialistic universe, see J.P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City* (Grand Rapids, 1994), pp.92-96. No one would trust the printout of a computer, he notes, if they '*knew it was programmed by random forces or by nonrational laws without a mind being behind it*' (p.97).
- [4] Ian Markham, *Truth and the Reality of God* (1998), cf. pp.90-91, 101, 105, 114-15.
- [5] Popular science sometimes seems the big exception. The intellectual dinosaur who argues that the supernatural 'conflicts with modern science' usually assumes science to be a static body of knowledge that has now mastered 98% of what there is to know, and is threatened by the idea that 22nd-century science may be preoccupied with ideas as radically different from our own as ours are from Newton's.
- [6] This section unavoidably falls into the trap of

attempting a coherent account of a school of thought that deliberately shuns coherence in its theory. But it is not unreasonable to sketch in the ways in which the deconstructionists have been most commonly understood, since what we are trying to do here is understand their impact on the wider culture. We can try to 'make sense' of them, even if they themselves deny that that 'making sense' is possible.

[7] Jonathan Culler, *Barthes* (1983), p.76, cites Barthes' dismissive remark in 1971 that in his earlier work he had '*passed through a euphoric dream of scientificity.*'

[8] The classic expression is W.K. Wimsatt Jr and Monroe K. Beardsley's essay 'The Intentional Fallacy', published in 1946 and subsequently reprinted in *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington, 1954). Other components of the mid-century liberal literary-critical mentality can be seen as paving the way for the deconstructionists' denial of words as expressions of univocal truths; Cleanth Brooks' emphasis on the importance of paradox, for example, or William Empson's on ambiguity. Or, in philosophy, liberal guru Isaiah Berlin's insistence that truth is not a unity but is made up of irreconcilable insights and values.

[9] The notion of what constitutes pleasure here is a significant one. The alternative might be that aesthetic pleasure comes from contemplation of an observed external reality (a landscape, a harmonic progression, an artwork) – the joy, as Lewis puts it, of experiencing things that are '*so and not otherwise*'. In Barthes, pleasure comes instead from manipulative power. It is a recurrent postmodern motif; pleasure from power through technology, pleasure from power in sado-masochism.

[10] '*In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed... but there is nothing beneath... Writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning.*' (Roland Barthes, *Image - Music - Text* (1977), p.147.)

[11] It was at this point that the post-structuralist critique made common cause with neo-Marxism.

[12] This is also a starting-point for a Christian response to the similar denials of the possibility of knowing truth that come from some varieties of determinism. The Christian accepts that, normally, our minds may be limited in all kinds of deterministic ways (educational, genetic,

ideological) from perceiving what is true. But, this does not rule out the possibility of 'grace': the moment when the supernatural power of God's Spirit creates, through his Word, the freedom to see, to know, and to choose. '*Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom*', said the apostle Paul when discussing how God enlightens minds that are normally blinded to a right understanding of their 'texts' (2 Corinthians 3:14-17). D.A. Carson summarizes the issues very simply: Christians believe that God is personal, and he speaks.

[13] But see also Michael Edwards, *Towards a Christian Poetics* (1984), who concedes much of the radical case about the non-transparency of language and then proceeds to construct a Christian equivalent of these theories on the basis of the disintegration of language since the Fall and Babel, and its incipient reintegration at Pentecost.

[14] A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (1987 edition), p.12, quoting John 1:1. Tozer died in 1963; evangelicals have tended to foresee the deconstructionist issues before they arose. In 1954, in his essay 'De descriptionis temporum', C.S. Lewis asked why there should not come a period when the art of writing would stand lower than the art of reading, and '*rival readings would then cease to be "right" or "wrong" and simply become more and less brilliant "performances"*'; exactly the postmodern position on interpretation.

[15] D.A. Carson sketches the contours of a Christian response to deconstructionism in chs.2 and 3 of his massive and brilliant assessment of contemporary pluralism, *The Gagging of God* (1996). A fuller, ground-breaking study is Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (1998).

[16] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, tr. G.Spivak (1974), pp.14-15. This divine underpinning of meaning remains fundamental, says Derrida, 'even where the thing, the "referent", is not immediately related to the logos of a Creator God.'

[17] *Image - Music - Text*, pp.146-47.

[18] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989), p.5.

[19] Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis,1982), p.165.

[20] George Steiner, *Real Presences* (1989), pp.127, 96, 120.

[21] These quotations are taken from essays excerpted in two excellent and thorough

anthologies that give a fine introduction to postmodernism and its antecedents. The first is from Baudrillard's *Simulations* (New York, 1983), reprinted in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (1993), pp.196-97; the second is from *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993), in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, ed. Lawrence Cahoon (1996), p.459.

[22] Barthes suggests that the written word, with its endless interpretations, might well 'take as its motto the words of the man possessed by devils: *'My name is legion, for we are many.'*' (Quoted by D.S. Cartwright in *Gospel Perspectives, Vol III*, ed. D. Wenham and R.T. France (1983).) The example is suggestive: the demon-possessed man is a truly 'decentred self' living out an absolute loss of God.

[23] Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, tr. William Weaver (New York, 1983), pp.3, 599,600,609 11. (The last words mean, approximately, that the name (the verbal label) for the rose is all that we can have.) In Eco's subsequent novel, *Foucault's Pendulum*, he turns to the occult (kabbalah, tarot, numerology, diabolism, Aleister Crowley, voodoo), with its offer of a secret knowledge that would make sense of the apparently unconnected world. But at the close, beneath all the complexities of secret lore, there is again a void, an inaccessibility of truth: *'I have understood. And the certainty that there is nothing to understand should be my peace, my triumph.'* This, it is worth adding, is what we also find at the end of Nobel prizewinner Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; Aureliano attains truth on the book's last page when he finally reads the prophecies of Melkiades' parchments, and it is a final mockery: he learns only of his own death. The reading act is achieved with a final reward of futility. Beneath all the explorations and seductive fascinations of occult knowledge is a final reality or fate that is foretold but meaningless; at the centre, nothing but death.

[24] There was, of course, an interlude (it seems we cannot live long without idealism): the blossoming of a whole bouquet of 'big ideas' in the '60s, each confident of transforming the world. Most obviously there were eastern religion (e.g. the Maharishi's transcendental meditation), LSD based hallucinogenic mysticism, and the New Left ('Marx, Mao and Marcuse') of student revolt. All three had less than five years between upsurge and burial. Was this the overall twentieth-

century process repeated in miniature? The '70s that followed were a profoundly cynical decade.

[25] In Docherty, pp.47-48. Lyotard continues, *'This idea of a possible, probable, or necessary progress is rooted in the belief that developments made in the arts, technology, knowledge, and freedom would benefit humanity as a whole... After two centuries we have become more alert to signs that would indicate an opposing movement... It is no longer possible to call development progress.'* C.S. Lewis made similar observations two decades earlier in 'The Funeral of a Great Myth' (reprinted in *Christian Reflections* (1967)).

[26] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1987 edition), p.61.

[27] Postman, p.75. Schultze *et al* note how in MTV *'Although some songs and artists attempt to make statements about life, politics, and the environment, the channel's carefully crafted ambience isolates these statements from any kind of meaningful community discussion or debate.'* (*Dancing in the Dark* (Grand Rapids, 1991), p.205.)

[28] Postman, pp.99-100.

[29] Cf. the editors' introduction to *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, 1995), p.14.

[30] Cf. the first chapter of John's Gospel.

[31] Quoted by Os Guinness, in *The Anglican Evangelical Crisis*, ed. Melvin Tinker (1995), p.162.

[32] Jesus presented himself as the *'light that gives light to every man'*. The point of the central Christian discipline of daily, prayerful Bible reading is precisely this continual, personal exposure to revelation.

[33] *'It does seem to me that most of the art of this century has been about "making"',* painter Bridget Riley told an *Independent on Sunday* interviewer. The same point could easily be argued about other arts.

[34] This happens to varying degrees. Baudrillard says that *'The absolute rule of thought is to give the world back as it was given to us – unintelligible. And, if possible, to render it a little more unintelligible.'* In contrast, Lyotard begins his 'Notes on the Meaning of "Post-"' by saying he is writing *'in order to avoid confusion and ambiguity.'*

[35] There is, it should also be said, something about the French intellectual tradition that can prefer to dazzle by extreme subtlety than to

convince by clarity. To such a mindset, deconstructionism is obviously germane. But might we also speculate that most French intellectuals are Jesuit atheists rather than Protestant atheists? They owe their roots to a culture prizing brilliance of casuistry, whereas an Anglo-Saxon, post-Protestant culture sets a higher value on clarity of exposition? (Of course we should be alert to the possibility raised by Galen Strawson in an *Independent on Sunday* review, that the obscurity arises because Derrida is a 'nice man but simply not very bright'.)

[36] Cf. *Structuralism and Since*, ed. John Sturrock (1979), pp.16-17.

[37] Culler makes this point about Barthes in *Barthes*, p.13; Hayden White says the same about Foucault in *Structuralism and Since*, p.86.

[38] In *The Portable Nietzsche*, p.98.

[39] In other periods too, a move away from faith in truth has been succeeded by an emphasis on style. The 1890s of Wilde and Beardsley would be an obvious example. One of Oscar Wilde's characters is challenged about a remark he has made in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. 'It is perfectly phrased,' he defends himself, 'and quite as true as any observation in civilized life should be.'

[40] Schultze, pp.205, 178. Kevin Ford applies this to politics: 'We don't know who's lying and who's telling the truth. So we vote for the one with the most attractive image. Issues are complex. Image is simple.' (*Jesus for a New Generation* (Downers Grove, 1995), p.60.)

[41] However, it is worth noting here a comment by Doug Schaupp of InterVarsity-USA, that relativism in truth has a major effect on the 'emotional complexities' afflicting students he works among in the Los Angeles area, because 'their world is continually in motion'; nothing in it is stable, and that has major psychological repercussions.

[42] Allan Bloom makes this point precisely in response to the deconstructionists and to Nietzsche: 'For Nietzsche, language can be no more than the oracular expression of absolutely individual selves and hence can never reach beyond mere perspectives to true universality, which would be understanding... Socrates talks of his good friends, Nietzsche of his best enemies. Friendship is that relation constituted by logos and is logocentric' (*Love and Friendship* (New York, 1993), p.543).

[43] James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day*

*America Told the Truth* (New York, 1991), pp.44, 48, 236, 49. The 'national character' comment should be qualified by a 1997 survey from an Italian psychological review showing that 70% of Italians confessed to telling between five and ten lies a day.

[44] From *The Gay Science*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, p.449.

[45] This way of thinking has become surprisingly influential in some areas of management theory. The idea (present in many areas of New Age thought) that imagination can reshape reality is of course a further cultural force contributing to the loss of the notion of truth, where reality has an objective givenness that can be known but is independent of ourselves and our wishes.

[46] Again we might see here the pattern of the self-destruction of idolatry that we have noted at several other points. In the absence of truth, postmodernism almost deifies the category of story and 'narrative'. But postmodernist criticism too often comes close to stifling the stories we have.

[47] Francis Schaeffer's way of describing this would be to say that, first, the 'upper storey' of values becomes divorced from the 'lower storey' of empirical reality, and then the lower storey reality itself becomes lost. C.S. Lewis, in *The Screwtape Letters*, saw the renewed experience of real pleasures and pains as one of the surest anchors against such deception.

[48] Ephesians 4:14. Tana Clark, regional director of InterVarsity in Alberta, Canada, has commented on the value in the postmodern context of the notion of truth as anchor; truth as that which holds us fast amid so many forces that would manipulate or exploit. (Truth, we might add, set again as an alternative against the Foucauldian crosscurrents of power.)

[49] *Time* reported in 1990 that the generation then under 30 'knows less, cares less and reads newspapers less' than any in the past fifty years, and warned that they were therefore an 'easy target of opportunity for those seeking to manipulate public opinion' (quoted Schultze *et al*, p.201). All the main British news programmes lost viewers in the later 1990s.

[50] *Independent on Sunday*, 3 October 1999.

[51] From *The Gay Science*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, p.450.

[52] See, for example, David Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imagery* (1976).

[53] Both these quotations are taken from chs.6

and 7 of Vinoth Ramachandra, *Gods that Fail* (1996), which offers a perceptive Christian response to the radicals' scepticism concerning the scientific enterprise.

[54] Quoted in *Independent on Sunday*, 26 November 2000.

[55] One could agree with Lyotard's words, as a critique of the workings of public science, without denying objective truth as something that nonetheless exists. But the postmodernist marginalization of truth removes that possible counterbalance, so that what is left in the world of science is merely the play of power. And the displacement of truth by power changes the whole nature of scientific debate. 'As Max Planck said of disputes in theoretical physics, "One can never manage to convince one's opponents, only to outlive them"', writes Charles Jencks in *What is Post-Modernism?*

[56] Quoted by Ravi Zacharias in 'The Court of Last Resort', in *Just Thinking*, Spring/Summer 1996, on the stimulating website [www.rzim.com](http://www.rzim.com).

[57] This is recognised explicitly in Wayne Morrison's legal textbook *Jurisprudence: from the Greeks to postmodernism* (1997), p.294. In postmodern perspectivism, says Morrison, 'each and every view is one among many possible interpretations... There are obvious applications to the understanding of legal texts and legal material... Perspectivism holds there are no independent facts (in the sense of facts that do not need themselves to be interpreted) against which the various interpretations can be compared so that we can agree on which interpretation is "correct". In this case, the task of making sense of processes or sets of institutions, such as the legal system, or reading texts, such as legal texts, may be a question of obeying certain methodological rules and/or imposing order among many possible interpretations'. 'Imposing order': law is determined not by truth but by power.

[58] We should note, however, the validity of the postmodernist critique that this was equally true of modernist legal theory. Morrison notes the 'intimate connection between legal positivism' (the 'dominant tradition' in jurisprudence in the last 150 years, p.4) 'and power' (p.346). Once legal positivism cut itself loose from the 'natural law' tradition of law reflecting the will of God, it became a purely human construction – or, one might say, a construction of some humans for others – with no intrinsic connection to morality (p.218). Even Hart, the doyen of legal positivism,

admitted that 'Here all that succeeds is success' (p.375). But at that point its entire moral legitimacy becomes questionable; and this has become a central concern for much of modern jurisprudence. Derrida himself observed (in a symposium titled *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*) that 'Since the origin of authority, the foundation or ground, the position of the law can't by definition rest on anything but themselves, they are themselves a violence without ground. Which is to say that they are themselves unjust, in the sense of "illegal"'; they are always dependent on issues of enforceability, hence of power (quoted in Morrison, p.522.)

[59] The goal of deconstructionist legal theorists, says Morrison, is to show that 'any settled law of the text is open to destabilisation. Every interpretation which tries to replace the openendedness of the basic text with a final – authoritarian – interpretation usurps the life of the text' (p.521). We recall the postmodern president Clinton's famous statement to the Senate hearings on the Lewinsky affair: 'It depends on what the meaning of "is" is.'

[60] We noted a related problem earlier, in our section on purpose. But there the cause was the lack of reason to believe, after the loss of God, in the value of the process of maturity; whereas here the issue is whether truths that matter can ever really be known or spoken anyway.

[61] It is difficult even to state the issues here. In our culture it is hard not to feel a built-in, kneejerk reaction at any defence of 'authority'. In fact, as Lasch points out, the loss of 'truth' does not remove the realities of control from our society; they have merely reappeared, in a therapeutic guise. ('The popularization of therapeutic modes of thought discredits authority, especially in the home or the classroom, while leaving' their own forms of social control and their own 'domination uncriticized' (*The Culture of Narcissism* (New York, 1979), p.315).) Somewhere beneath the mid-century liberal allergy to all 'authority' lay a fantasy of everyone eating their sandwiches in the sun together, rather than the law of the jungle which the true negation of all authority creates. (The triumph of the mafia in post-communist Russia has shown that all too clearly.) Here again, mid-century liberalism indulged in easy rejection of the notion of authority without really thinking through what follows; again, it is postmodernists like Foucault who are drawing out the full results of this kind of atheism.

[62] A good example of the resulting confusion is the following quotation from an Open University senior education lecturer: *'Instruction is a term that is very rarely used in the British context... Any conception of accuracy in the teaching of reading will be based on unequal power relations between the reader and the arbiter of accuracy.'* (Quoted in Melanie Phillips, *All Must Have Prizes* (1997 edition), p.87.) The consequences are predictable.

[63] One must also bear in mind here the enormous influence of the '80s new-right philosophy that measured everything in economic terms, by the 'bottom line'. But if there are no other standards (such as the value, and possibility, of learning 'truth for its own sake'), then the only feasible criterion for assessing an education is financial. 'Let the market decide' is centrally postmodern.

[64] Lyotard argues that this also inevitably characterises the entire research system: with 'truth' no longer a prime value, *'In the discourse of today's financial backers of research, the only credible goal is power.'* (In Cahoone, p.497.)

[65] Phillips, p.xviii.

[66] *Ibid.*, p.212.

[67] *Ibid.*, p.13. In noting Phillips' identification of the problem, we aren't implying a particular view regarding the present government's solutions. But in case Phillips sounds unduly concerned, it is worth noting the development of 'ethnomathematics' – feminist and ethnic-specific approaches to mathematics – under the auspices of the USA's National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. One leading figure in ethnomathematics argued recently that students' 'thinking or approach must not be structured for them, so that they are not being led to "the right" (that is, objectively true) "way" of solving a problem.' Meanwhile, an American Federation of Teachers report found that in every respect US maths students lagged far behind their counterparts in France, Germany or Japan.

[68] Phillips, pp.27-28.

[69] One response to this would be that education has to do with internal growth as well as with mastery of external facts and principles. Which is certainly true; but it is hard to imagine personal growth that does not include a maturing understanding of how the world really is – again, what our loss of truth denies.

[70] Lasch, pp.286-88. Phillips adds, *'The child has become an autonomous and solitary individual, left alone to construct his or her own*

*meaning from the world... Children have been saddled with a burden of adult responsibilities well beyond their years. What child-centred theories have done is to destroy the very concept of childhood itself'* (pp.235, 271).

[71] Lasch, p.316; cf p.308. Cf. also the impeccably liberal Miriam Stoppard on the need for discipline based on clear standards: *'Research has shown that children do not actually like a lack of discipline nor do they thrive when they are undisciplined. In fact they do best when the limits of behaviour are clearly defined for them. It is your role to set standards for behaviour and conduct appropriate for the age of your child... When aggressive behaviour in a child becomes a regular feature, however, it is usually a response to two things: a lack of effective restraint and discipline from the time he was born, and a feeling of insecurity in the child.'* (*The New Baby Care Book* (1990 edition), pp.17,283.)

[72] Cf. Lasch, p.304. This chapter was drafted soon after the 1998 football World Cup, from which England were eliminated partly (and dramatically) because one of their most gifted players, David Beckham, lacked self-discipline in the area of retaliation.

[73] Lasch, p.190.

[74] Floyd McClung, *The Father Heart of God* (1985). Obviously the model of God as Father must be balanced in its application to human fatherhood by recognition of our human tendencies to misunderstand, mistreat and dominate. But its loss is serious. Mark Simpson asked, in the *Independent on Sunday* (4 February 2001), *'What is it that boys are supposed to grow into these days? Masculine certainties have vanished, in many cases, along with dad'*, going on to suggest that homosexual identity often *'represents a solution of a kind to the problem of being fatherless in a fatherless world, and the bastard boy's hollow ache for male intimacy.'* That 'ache' isn't helped at all if the world is Father-less as well as fatherless.

[75] Cf. Ann Brown, *Apology to Women* (1991), ch.7.

[76] Cf. John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (1972).

[77] Cf. John Stott, *Christ the Controversialist* (1970).

[78] 1 Corinthians 13:9, 12.

[79] Cf Hebrews 2:6-9.

[80] John 6:32-35, 7:38-39, 15:1, 10:7.

[81] Psalm 121:1.

[82] Psalm 36:6.

[83] Cf. Derrida's remarks about the *'book of Nature'* as the *'book of God'* in the first chapter of *Of Grammatology*.

[84] In Docherty, pp.68, 70.

[85] Obviously this issue relates to our discussion in chapter 2 regarding our culture's loss of transcendence, of anything of supreme value that is worth living for.

[86] The classic postmodernist statement here is Foucault's essay 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', from which this sentence is taken. Once again, the issue is rooted in Foucault's explicit denial, following Nietzsche, of any *'theogony'*, of the Christian story of *'the origin... the site of truth... the point where the truth of things corresponded to a truthful discourse'*; thence, of the Fall where this truth was lost, and of history as *'a field of knowledge whose function is to recover'* this place of origin. (Which, incidentally, could also describe Marxist or Freudian history.) *'The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled. Necessarily, we must dismiss those tendencies that encourage the consoling play of recognitions.'* (Foucault's essay is reprinted in Cahoone, pp.360-79.)

[87] This seems a hallmark of the rise of 'cultural studies' and 'media studies' in the Western university system, at the expense of disciplines such as literature and history. (One can say that without denying the value of the newer disciplines, from which, obviously, this study itself has benefited very significantly.)

[88] Hence C.S. Lewis' insistence (in *The Screwtape Letters*) on the need to read writers of different eras, so that we see beyond the false certainties of our own culture.

[89] The screenplay was written by the renowned French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet, whose hatred of meaningful plot we touched on briefly in chapter 2. In Robbe Grillet's novels likewise it can be impossible to reconstruct what has occurred.

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