



A Long Way East of Eden 6: Our Gods Have Failed Us

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One By One Our Gods Have Failed Us Can we do without God in the twenty-first century?

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At the end of the millennium, our western culture feels, as Thomas Hardy suggested, like a cemetery of dreams. And the dreams have died at a moment of global environmental crisis, when we need vision to motivate us for change more than ever before.

It wasn't always so. For centuries Europe saw a 'dialogue of visions' as to the nature of life, truth, and meaning. We inherit that debate; but what marks our own time is that the dialogue has ground to a halt – not because it has been resolved, but because we have seemingly run out of ideas.

As we said earlier, this study is a resource with topical modules that different readers may find fruitful or prefer to skip; what follows is a thought-experiment, a speculative chapter. Some readers less interested in history and literature may prefer to move on to the subsection titled 'From dream to dream' where we move on to more recent politics and rock'n'roll. But, at the start of a millennium, it's good to grasp how we got to where we are. To understand our postmodern west, we need to understand what we've inherited.

The story that follows isn't offered as infallible. But isn't it roughly what happened?

The long road out

It's not easy to make sense of history. But the Dutch philosopher Dooyeweerd [1] offers a helpful way of bringing together our understandings of the past.

We can re-express it like this: In each era since we turned away from the Bible's God, our culture has been shaped by one or more 'god-substitutes'. These aren't gods that we actually 'worship', but they're the next thing to it. They're the things that 'matter most' to us, the principles that dominate our lives, determining our sense of what's important; the sources we look to for truth and meaning, for the understanding of right and wrong. Our culture's story is, among other things, the history of successive 'god-substitutes', and of how well they 'reign' as our gods. One after another they hold this role, until their inadequacies become obvious; then we lose faith in them, they are replaced by a different 'god', and the story begins again.[2]

It's a fruitful way of thinking, focusing our attention on what matters most for the hearts, minds and imaginations of an era. It's one that an atheist or Christian can be equally comfortable with.[3] Let's give it a try.

Our long 'succession of gods' can be illustrated from Britain's arts and literature. When an artist writes a poem or a novel, she has to decide what to write about. That is, to choose what is worth celebrating: what is most significant in the world, what is most worthy of record.[4] So may we see the story of our art as a series of judgments as to what really matters? That could chart for us the 'gods' we've used to replace the Father we no longer believe in.

The seventeenth century is a good place to begin: that crucial period when the Bible first became widely available to ordinary people, resulting in a joyous, Europe-wide rediscovery of individual faith. Of course the Reformation was a muddled amalgam of political, economic, and religious factors, with religious banners masking loyalties of many kinds. Yet still it was a crucial historical

moment, when the 'nearness of God' – God relating directly to us as individuals, rather than via a cumbersome and dubious religious structure – suddenly became vital to Europe's consciousness. With the liberation of the biblical text, each individual's response to God was seen to stand at the heart of existence. The individual received a significance that was dramatically new.

Such a change of consciousness had massive repercussions. For example in the growth of democracy: if God reveals his ways to individuals, not just to the authorities, and if the most important thing in the world is our individual response, then that has political implications; our own views have significance just as much as those of the authorities. Of course the Reformation left British politics a long way from universal suffrage; but the strong link between the rise of Protestantism and the rise of parliamentary democracy, championed by the Puritans, is not coincidental. There were implications for art as well. As Dooyeweerd's fellow-Dutchman Hans Rookmaaker points out, in the painting of this period we see a marked shift in what is thought to be worth depicting. Where earlier painters had chosen to paint the saints or the heroes of Greek legend, now the ordinary individual seemed worth celebrating. Artists in the Protestant culture of Holland like Jan Steen, or indeed Rembrandt[5], become concerned to paint realistic scenes of ordinary people going about their ordinary lives. They were working within a culture that grasped that God was deeply interested in ordinary people, not just in heroes and saints.[6]

And when we look at the literature of this period, don't we see that same re-valuing of the ordinary person? We find Christian poets like Donne, Herbert or Marvell, writing about love or worship as they feel to ordinary people. It is in the Reformation context, too, that the novel arises – perhaps the branch of literature pre-eminently interested in the development of the ordinary individual. The English novel may be said to emerge with the radical Baptist preacher John Bunyan, then more clearly with Daniel Defoe (also clearly beginning from a Protestant background, eg. in *Robinson Crusoe*).[7] The clarity of the sense of the biblical God at the heart of the Reformation worldview affected their politics, their painting, their literature; it mattered what God they worshipped.

Today, postmodernity has subverted much of this. We saw in chapter 1 how our loss of the Reformation confidence in individuality has implications for democracy; we saw in chapter 2 how our loss of confidence in any direction or 'shape' to individual life has (among other things) eroded the feasibility of the novel. To be westerners is to be great-grandchildren of the God-centred Reformers; but it is also to be heirs to the dialogue that has happened since.

For in the late seventeenth century, the Reformation worldview was replaced by other ways of thinking. Why? Was it because of fatal contradictions in the thinking of too many 'Christians'? – for example in their failure to take seriously Christ's apparent outlawing of force?[8] They taught, indeed, that personal faith was all-important, and this emphasis on individual choice implied diversity; yet many sought to impose a state church into which all were coerced by law, and were even willing to use the sword to further their religion. Too often, the Reformation was simply incomplete. It was a paradox as brutal as an Ulster 'Protestant' carrying a Bible saying 'Love your enemy' yet hating his 'Fenian' neighbour; and it could lead only to conflict worsened by passionate conviction. It is true that the bloody Civil War in England and the Thirty Years' War on the continent were at least as much about new political forces and nation-states consolidating their power as about doctrinal disagreements.[9] But did the long years of conflict under religious banners leave a climate of weariness with anything approaching a clear religious stance? At any rate, by around 1680 there came a reaction against much that the Reformation had stood for, with the period we call the Enlightenment.

This, we might say, was the West's first major attempt at a 'god-substitute', centring its culture on faith in 'natural' human reason, rather than faith in divine revelation.[10] Christians insisted that unaided human reason, being part of a broken world, has a fundamental problem in perceiving ultimate truth. Enlightenment thinkers tended to deny the problem[11]; natural human rationality, for them, took the place of a 'nearby' God, and was thoroughly trustworthy as the pointer towards a new dawn of civilisation.[12] ('We hold these truths to be self-evident', the

starting-point of the American Declaration of Independence, is a quintessentially Enlightenment statement.[13] We see this optimism in much of the work of Pope, perhaps the most important English poet of the early eighteenth century; a similar easy confidence marks a novelist like Fielding.[14]

But soon there began to be bad dreams as to whether this was enough to live by. At the end even of Pope's *Dunciad*, a nightmare of chaos overwhelms human society, and the closing words are '*universal darkness buries all*': instead of the clarity of human rationality, the night of Dulness falls on humanity. The terrible final book of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* offers a parallel nightmare: human beings, devoid of true reason, are merely animals wallowing in the mud. In both these masterpieces we sense a shared fear: what if reason is not enough? What if humanity will not be governed by it? The anarchic brutality of the world depicted by Hogarth, or by Smollett, undermined Pope's easy confidence that '*Whatever is, is right*'.^[15] And as the century continues we find writers sensing that rationality isn't enough (see *Tristram Shandy*), and looking elsewhere for different principles or values around which to orient what they depict: the 'sentimental movement', rediscovering the value of feeling (Mackenzie or Sterne; or, from a different angle, Hume); primitivism (Macpherson's *Ossian*, looking back to the world of Celtic myth, and even, in a sense, Walter Scott); or the dark side of the psyche, in Gothicism. The rationalistic 'god-substitute' had proved insufficient; Enlightenment simply didn't satisfy the intuitions which insisted that, somewhere, there must be more. But this breakdown – first, of the old consensus that God's revelation held the key to truth; then, of the replacement faith that human reason is an infallible guide – triggered the search for alternatives that has characterised our history.

So at the end of the eighteenth century^[16] comes the emergence of themes we associate with Romanticism, in poets such as Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats; writers marked by a rejection of what Blake calls the '*mind-forged manacles*' of the Enlightenment, and the rules of neo-classical poetics (as subverted by Wordsworth and Coleridge) and conventional behaviour (see Byron and Shelley) that went with them. The result might have been a whole

'*rediscovery of God*', and indeed that did take place to a certain extent.^[17] But in general the '*marginalizing of God*' that began in the Enlightenment continues in the mainstream of Romanticism.^[18] As American postmodernist Rorty rightly argues, Romanticism attempts to salvage the spirituality of Christianity by placing it in a de-supernaturalized context – by giving it, in effect, other 'gods'.

What then replaces God, for the Romantics, as source of the ultimately significant? Perhaps childhood, considered as something pure ('*trailing clouds of glory*') before it is ruined by society (Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, Wordsworth's *Prelude*); the natural world, considered now as something untamed, supra-rational, beyond humanity, but also unfallen (Wordsworth again);^[19] visionary experience attained through drugs (Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, supposedly); the individual consciousness,^[20] embodied particularly in the Imagination (Keats, Coleridge).^[21] In various ways Romanticism offers to find what is truly significant and worthy of celebration beyond the world of everyday reason, but with God continuing to be marginal. (Can we see a parallel with what happens in Kant's philosophy, where the things that really matter – freedom and ethics, for example – likewise belong to a realm '*independent of the whole world of sense*'?)

But it didn't last. As a thought-experiment it would be worth reflecting how the elevation of these qualities to 'god-substitutes' ultimately distorted or destroyed each of them. We could consider how idolization of childhood led to the sentimentalizing of children in Dickens, perhaps a prime factor making him unreadable today; or, how treating nature (divorced from God) as the source of life turned into its becoming the unfeeling source of death in later authors like Zola; or again, how the emphasis on feeling over thought led to the utter degradation of feeling in de Sade. But a deeper and tragic question lurked beneath the Romantic vision: do we really find a higher truth as we look beyond the rational to the Imagination; or are we just 'imagining' it, wandering in our own daydreams?

The question is put powerfully by Keats, at the close of *Ode to a Nightingale*.^[22] Keats listens to and celebrates the beauty of a bird's song. But at

the end of the poem the bird is gone, and Keats asks, 'Was it a vision, or a waking dream?' Was it a truly significant glimpse of ultimate beauty, or just the kind of fantasy that comes between sleep and waking?[23] As the nineteenth century continues, the issue becomes more urgent. In Tennyson, guru-bard to the Victorians, we often sense the despair of a man who hardly dares hope that the things he most cares about have ultimate reality. In Browning, too, isn't there a deep sense of loss, of seeking to forget the big questions in the rush into action – everything is lost, but anyway keep riding?

For at the heart of the apparent confidence of nineteenth century Britain was a violent collapse of certainty. Up till now the Christian framework had underpinned the dominant values, even though in many ways the culture had moved far from commitment to the biblical God. But now came the first really major intellectual assault on Christianity, from German biblical criticism and from Darwin's theory of evolution.[24] It was the age of the 'loss of faith': just when the Romantic dream was seeming a fantasy[25] and dwindling into sentimentalism, so too the Christian framework appeared to be collapsing. Don't we see in many Victorian writers – in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, in Arnold's 'Dover Beach' (quoted in chapter 5) – a profound sense of loss and doubt as to whether any foundation is left for significance? And is there not doubt, too, as to whether goodness is something with any real basis or source or power? (That is, is there really any 'god'?) Dickens' villains, for example, have tremendous vitality, but his good characters seem pale by comparison (eg. in *Oliver Twist*); it is very hard to understand why in the end they triumph.[26] The reason, one suspects, is that Dickens himself didn't know. (Dostoevski's *The Idiot* poses a similar problem.)

So doesn't much of the major literature of the last 150 years reflect a quest for new 'god-substitutes', for alternative bases for values and significance? We see the Pre-Raphaelites – William Morris, Christina Rossetti, Dante Gabriel Rossetti – looking back to the Middle Ages. George Eliot is almost an early liberal-humanist: for her God is 'inconceivable', immortality 'unbelievable', yet still there remains duty, 'peremptory and absolute'. Others look to science as the key: but the French Naturalists such as Zola reveal the

scientific universe as a machine pursuing its impersonal, deterministic purposes, with no care for the human beings trapped in the process. (At the end of *L'Assommoir*, for example, the heroine is found dead and 'turning green already'.) And none of this quite suffices; towards the end of the century a different alternative appears, with the swing away from visible reality among the first precursors of the modernist movement. Even if there is nothing to live by in the mundane world, they seem to say, at least we can look for something meaningful and significant in the separate universe of art and in the personal aesthetic consciousness; in France with the Symbolist poets, in Britain somewhat differently with the Aesthetic movement – 'art for art's sake', that being all there is to truly celebrate.

Twentieth-century literature offers a vast proliferation of 'god-substitutes', responding to the issue of what is worth living for.[28] But don't we find many of modernism's greatest literary achievements building on this 'aesthetic god'? In different ways Joyce, Yeats, Woolf and Pound seek an autonomous aesthetic construct that will somehow make sense of this meaningless world, or contain an order and meaningfulness that this one lacks. The influential philosopher G.E. Moore pointed to two spheres as containing that which was truly worthwhile: art and relationship. E.M. Forster gave expression to the latter in his famous remark that, faced with the choice of betraying his country or his friend, he hoped he would betray his country. (Perhaps these two remain the central 'god-substitutes' for modernity: Posterski and Bibbey's recent surveys of Canadian youth values likewise highlight music and friendship as the things that really matter.)

Communism and Fascism are two great myths of 'modernity'. Ultimately, didn't they both destroy the 'gods' they had deified? Communism deified the State, the collective – and by the time Russian Communism finally fell, it was obvious to any visitor how anything public, that belonged to the State, was completely neglected by the average citizen. Nazism deified Germany, the 'master-

race' – and left Germany divided in two for the next 40 years. What we deify, we destroy?

But these two 'god-substitutes', like their predecessors, had their problems. So many of the best novels of this period struggle with the inadequacy of human relationships (the devouring relationships in Lawrence, Conrad's themes of betrayal and isolation, or the sense of failure in the close of Forster's *Passage to India*). And art:[29] what is art? In the autonomous universe of art, how do we know what is significant and worthy of record? When we believed in God we could go back to the beginning of the Bible, and see a Creator who makes things and declares that they are very good; beauty had real meaning because it came from God. But now that God is dead, what is beauty? Is it purely subjective? Is there any difference between the sound of a Beethoven concerto and of a concrete mixer? What (if anything) is of value? What is genuinely worth the artist's celebrating?

The last thirty years crystallised this problem with the shift to postmodernism. Postmodernism is a complex phenomenon, but isn't one of its characteristics precisely this doubt? Andy Warhol produces a sculpture that is an exact replica of a box of Brillo pads. And why not? In the past we made sculptures of human beings. But what is so special about them? In a chance universe they are no more significant, no more worthy of celebration, than anything else. Jeff Koons made a name for himself with (among other things) a giant stainless steel rabbit. Earlier in the century, Marcel Duchamp presented a toilet as a work of art; in the 1960s, Piero Manzoni tinned and sold his own excrement. (*'Of course it's art'*, says Damien Hirst, famous for his dead shark in formaldehyde and his cow's head being eaten by maggots, *'it's in an art gallery.'*)

The music of John Cage poses a similar question. Beethoven might write symphonies for violins, clarinets, flutes; but why are these sounds more 'privileged', more significant, than anything else? In Cage's famous piano piece *4'33"*, he does not

even play the piano. Why, after all, should we give the term 'music' to pieces of wood striking pieces of wire? The sounds of people laughing or jeering, arguing or demanding their money back, would be as much an expression of music as the wood and wire. The reasoning is logical enough. Cage once wrote, *'I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry.'* All that is left at that point is the act of speaking, of words without meaning. It is the last extremity of formalism: the medium is the message because there is nothing else. Many of Beckett's writings present only a voice speaking in the dark (surprisingly often in hell), with nothing worth saying, wanting indeed to stop but unable to do so, therefore going on, meaninglessly, hopelessly, for page after page after page. That end-point is all there is left to be said. And we have to ask: if there is no God, what else is there to celebrate and believe in as a source of significance? Have we any logical alternative to postmodernism?

At the end of a millennium, then, we are heirs to an extended but failed dialogue: from the excitement of the Reformation, with the rediscovery of the individual's enormous significance before God; through the Enlightenment's turning away from God's revelation in the name of autonomous human reason, then the swing in turn from the inadequacies of that 'reason', to non-rational sources of significance; then on through the searchings of the nineteenth century, through the modernist era often seeking meaningfulness or order in separate universes of art; and now postmodernity, when those myths too have lost their meaning. Today, all the syntheses and 'god-substitutes' have broken down; we are *'incredulous towards meta-narratives'*; we have little left to build upon, celebrate or rejoice over, little to say except to go on saying very little. In such a world, art may become increasingly difficult; so, too, may life. We live in the *'twilight of the gods'*, as heirs to three centuries of failed 'god-substitutes'.

But perhaps youth culture has taken up the search where its elders failed. Let's explore the story again, starting this time in the '50s.

Once again, we can guess at the 'god-replacements' that briefly flavoured our world before giving way in inadequacy to their

successors. Once again, what follows is hypothetical. But we're asking the question, isn't this roughly what happened? Might this story explain where we are?

In these last few pages we've focused on 'high culture', but many aspects of 'high culture' have lost their significance now. (Dickens is far better known in Russia than in England, though Russia is changing too.) So this time we'll focus more on popular culture, on rock and fashion and politics. In particular, postmodern art seems, to many people, totally irrelevant; if the collapse of values means there is nothing left to celebrate, nothing to say, then the whole enterprise of 'high art' is meaningless. Dripping paint on the canvas? Sitting by a silent piano? Nice work if you can get it; nothing in it for me. But in this same period there burst onto the scene a new set of impulses, and particularly a new music, that clearly could find something to shout about. This was a new beginning; this was the time for rock'n'roll.

From dream to dream

In many ways, 1950s culture reflected a blithe new confidence. The west had been through a bad time. The late '40s mood contained a sense of something gone wrong beyond the power of idealism to set right: in the bestiality demonstrated at Auschwitz, Belsen and Buchenwald, and the fearful power for destruction revealed even in the Allies' triumph. We can see something of an attempt to confront these issues in the arts – for example in the poetic movement known as New Apocalypse; and, more generally, in a brief return among the intelligentsia to Godward faith. This was the heyday of C.S. Lewis' championing of 'mere', original Christianity, for example, and of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

But as the '50s proceeded, it seemed that humankind, empowered by science, was really putting its world in order on its own. Germany saw the *Wirtschaftswunder* or economic miracle, Britain the rise of the welfare state. At the end of the decade, John Kennedy could tell America that the world's problems had been created by man, and could be solved by man.[30] British premier Harold Macmillan told his electorate, 'You've never had it so good'; and compared to the mass unemployment of the '30s, the privations and horrors of the '40s and the austerity years of the

early '50s, the point carried weight. Fascism had been defeated; communism was contained; standards of living were rising continuously.

In Britain at least, this confidence in humanity's resources was reflected in the rise of a new god-replacement, an overt humanism. In the arts there arose a deep distrust of 'big truths' of any non-humanistic kind; hence a dominance of formalism, or (in English poetry) of the Movement – poets who denied any role as 'seer' and disdained the grand concerns of an Eliot or an Auden. ('*Nobody wants any more poems on the grander themes for a few years*', wrote Kingsley Amis in 1955.) No outside revelation was needed. Even the religious Establishment was in heavily liberal, non-supernatural mode; when Billy Graham was invited to address the student Christian Union at Cambridge, his message of the need for '*new birth*' was denounced by Michael Ramsey, soon to be Archbishop of Canterbury, as '*heretical*'. [31]

Yet soon there were widening cracks in the temple of this humanistic confidence. If the '50s saw the emergence of humanism as 'god-substitute', they soon saw also its implosion. In literature, Leavis became the guru of taste, but his uncompromising humanism was coupled curiously with an insistence that British culture was in its death-throes. Clearly the facade of '50s humanism could conceal unresolved contradictions. (Few things would be more characteristic of the '60s than a loathing of the 'Great Society' '50s humanism could be so proud of.) Elsewhere the '50s saw a sense of unfocused rebellion, distrustful of an establishment incapable of living up to the ideals it proclaimed; and a sense of fresh energies seeking an alternative. John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* is the classic expression of the frustration, even if he and his fellow 'Angry Young Men' had little positive to say. The same note sounded through James Dean (*Rebel Without a Cause*); through the beatniks ('*I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked*' – Ginsberg in *Howl*); through the teddy boys. And, most of all, through Elvis and the rest. Beat and rock'n'roll were controversial from the outset; revolting impatiently against the old gods, against the '50s establishment that was modernity's final fling, against liberalism's old order that thought it knew all the answers. Rock'n'roll is rebel-music – '*Move over, daddy-o!*' As in Osborne, as with Dean,

there was no new big vision to follow, not yet. But there was radical dissatisfaction with the complacencies of the reigning 'gods'; and a hunger for something new.

Early in the '60s, new idealisms – new 'gods' – began to emerge. In America, the inaugural speech of Kennedy's 'New Frontier' administration was marked by words like 'new', 'anew', 'renewal'; the dominant image was of dynamic youthful energy taking over at the top. Of course we now know of the mafia links that lay behind the image, and the sleazy relationships – both Kennedy brothers sleeping with Marilyn Monroe, JFK's chronic gonorrhea. But that wasn't how it seemed at the time; Samuel Eliot Morrison's 1965 *Oxford History of the American People* climaxes with the *Camelot* song that came to stand for JFK, about 'one brief shining moment'. ('The hardest thing now is to explain how we once felt about the Kennedys', reflected one recent writer. Rauschenberg's *Retrospective II* (1964), featuring a spaceman and a shot of JFK, was 'the last affectionate tribute to a political figure produced by an American artist', suggested *Time*; after JFK, no more heroes.) In Britain too, the tired and scandal-prone Conservative administration was swept aside by a young Labour government mouthing idealistic rhetoric about the 'white heat of the technological revolution'. 'It seemed the time had come for young men to take over the world', Roy Hattersley wrote later. (The same optimism was mirrored exuberantly in Pop Art.)

And in pop music, four young men from Liverpool seemed to be doing just this, with the worldwide triumph ('bigger than Jesus') of the early Beatles. That soon merged into the broader '60s counter-culture.

What were the '60s about? They weren't just a period of sexual libertinism, nor of mere overthrow of traditional standards. The culture of these years – hippies, 'flower power' – has taken a great deal of sarcasm, but they were in many ways an era of hope compared to the decades that followed. They were years of conflict, certainly, but also confidence – now almost unimaginable – that huge new possibilities were available, pointing the route to a better world. New principles arose as foundations for identity, action and ethics; new 'god-substitutes' overthrew those

of '50s liberal humanism. There was the political New Left inspired by Mao and Marcuse, unifying black power and student power, powerful enough almost to bring down the French government and certainly to terrify the American one. There was the hippie culture, proclaiming not only sexual liberation but a whole new order of 'love and peace'; the drug culture, offering complete transformation right down to the cellular level ('Grass will grow in Times Square within ten years', promised Timothy Leary); and the assured proponents of eastern religion. Indeed, rock music itself was 'going to become the answer to the day's problems', affirmed Pete Townshend.[32] Gods a-plenty; and when Eric Clapton's *Blind Faith*, or the Rolling Stones, played totally free before a host of flower children in Hyde Park, and still more in the quasi-religious atmosphere of the Woodstock festival attended by half a million, it did seem that there was a 'whole generation with a new explanation'.

But what was that 'new explanation' to be? Bob Dylan had been the voice of the simpler political protests of the earlier '60s, but soon he was concluding that 'Politics is bullshit. It's all unreal. The only thing that's real is inside you.[33] The Beatles moved in the same direction, from the simple pop of 'I Wanna Hold Your Hand' through the existential questioning of 'Eleanor Rigby' and 'Nowhere Man', thence to confidence in the power of hallucinogenic drugs to unlock reality ('A Day in the Life', 'Strawberry Fields Forever'), culminating in the full manifesto of the *Sergeant Pepper* album. 'All You Need is Love' became the anthem of the hippie movement, sung on international telecast to an estimated audience of 400 million. Many other voices proclaimed drug experience as the source of meaning – Jimi Hendrix, Pink Floyd, Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead.

For an artist like Hendrix, drugs were not merely a mind-trip; rather, blended with music and new sexual freedom, they offered a source for mystical liberation on a cosmic scale. Back in 1963 Paul McCartney had written God off ('I don't think about religion. It doesn't fit into my life'); now, he declared, he had found God after swallowing LSD. The 'god-substitute' was everything we could need: LSD 'could heal the world... I now believe the answer to everything is love.[34] Bryan Wilson of the Beach Boys agreed: 'My experience of God came from acid. It's the most

important thing that ever happened to me. [35]

But still one 'god-substitute' gave way to another. If drugs pointed to God, maybe God pointed beyond drugs, to India. The Beach Boys got into transcendental meditation, with the Maharishi opening the concerts in their May 1968 tour; Pete Townshend of the Who was into Meher Baba, and Baba's ideas would turn up in *Tommy* and *Quadrophenia*. 'We're all searching for something called God', said George Harrison; 'We are all trying to get where Jesus Christ got' [36] – although his fellow-Beatles hit the end of that particular road after their frustrating visit ('just like Butlins') to the Maharishi's Indian headquarters.

Cooling Off

But there was a darker aspect to the decade: the nihilism of the Velvet Underground, singing of heroin and sado-masochism, setting out to reflect the 'wild side' of New York which was hookers, junkies and cross-dressers. Heavily influenced by pop artist Andy Warhol, they became a gateway through which the nihilistic conclusions of 'high art' would move across into the mainstream. Unfortunately, they had truth on their side.

As we look back now to the '60s, there is a delightful childlikeness about the optimism; but none of the ideals quite worked. [37] Politically, the vicious 1968 brutality of Mayor Daley's Chicago police, followed by the re-election of Richard Nixon, showed that the old order was quite capable of resisting the new left; the left itself turned now in an increasingly autocratic direction, confirming Marcuse's comment that every revolution is a betrayed revolution. (The Beatles set their faces against the new, destructive mood in Lennon's song 'Revolution'.) LSD likewise didn't deliver; the girl who wrote down the secret of the universe while tripping, then found that what she had written was 'If I stand on the tips of my toes I can touch the ceiling,' was not the only one to find how this god had failed. George Harrison visited the psychedelic heartland of Haight-Ashbury and reported, 'That was the first thing that turned me off drugs. I expected them to be all nice and clean and friendly and happy and the first thing you see is lots of dirty people lying around on the floor.' One of LSD-prophet Leary's original disciples, Allen Cohen, remarked, 'One of the fantasies we had is demonstrably false. This is the belief that if

you take enough psychedelic drugs you will become holy... love will flow from you. It doesn't work... You can't carry over even the profound experiences you have. You can feel very loving under LSD but can you exert that love to someone who previously you didn't like? The long range answer is no. [38]

If Harrison was unimpressed by Haight-Ashbury, his fellow-Beatles became equally underwhelmed by eastern religion, expressing their deep disillusionment in 'Sexy Sadie', originally titled 'Maharishi'. All they had needed, seemingly, was love; and, unable to figure that one out, they broke up. Most painfully, the mass idealism of the free Woodstock festival proved to be built on sand; reality broke in four months later at a similar event in Altamont, California, as Mick Jagger sang 'Sympathy for the Devil'. A man was beaten to death by the Hell's Angels the Stones had brought in to police the festival; Jagger – the same Jagger who had declared 'I'm free to do what I want any old time' – was left pathetically pleading, 'I mean, like people, who's fighting and what for? Hey, people! I mean, who's fighting and what for? Why are we fighting? We don't want to fight... I mean, like every other scene has been cool... [39]. 'It was like a nice afternoon in hell', said Jerry Garcia afterwards, 'It was so weird.'

Altamont, the Grateful Dead's manager remarked later, was the end of the '60s; the day the music died. Bob Dylan had retreated into country pastoralism on *Nashville Skyline* (1969), the Byrds likewise with 'Sweetheart of the Rodeo'. Back in the cities, a craze for witchcraft began to sweep the counterculture. (This was also the heyday of the 'Jesus movement': things were tending to go one way or the other.) As the '70s began it became clear, as John Lennon said, that the dream was over. The deaths within ten months of Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and the Doors' Jim Morrison symbolized the end of an era; Paul McCartney began proceedings to dissolve the Beatles in the same period.

The gods had failed. [40] 'Won't Get Fooled Again', sang the Who. To Frank Zappa the 'whole hippie scene' was 'wishful thinking. They wish they could love, but they're full of ****'. [41] Lennon's summary of the counterculture was deeply depressed:

Nothing happened except that we all dressed up.

The same bastards are in control, the same people are running everything... I no longer believe in myth and Beatles is another myth. I don't believe in it, the dream is over. And I'm not just talking about the Beatles. I'm talking about the generation thing. The dream is over. It's over and we've got to get down to so-called reality.[42]

(Somehow a straight line leads from that to the greed-is-good 'realism' of more recent times.)

'Talkin' 'bout my degeneration.' Jesus dead, '50s humanism dead, and now the '60s dreams vanished too; these were the days of the scandal of Watergate, and idealism gave way, if not to the outright courting of corruption, then to cynicism and an overt loss of hope for any real meaning. (And, in fashion, an almost deliberate tastelessness.) The cover of the 1963 edition of Colin Wilson's bestseller *The Outsider* had announced, without irony, *'an inquiry into the sickness of mankind in the mid-twentieth century'*; an emblematic '70s moment came when *Monty Python* denied any such inquiry, recycling the phrase at the close of one episode as patently ludicrous. Something had grown old and died in the meantime – or between the days of '60s songs like 'Blowing in the Wind' and 'Where Have All the Flowers Gone?', where the ideals and values seemed so real, and the '70s dominance of 'cool', pessimistic, uncommitted, maintaining a safe distance. Logically enough, on the religious scene the huge promises of the eastern-based cults of the '60s (TM, Divine Light Mission, Zen Buddhism) gave way to psychotherapeutic self-help groups (EST, Synanon, Insight). With so many other dreams dead, what remained to foster was the self; self-expression, self-discovery. The '70s became known as the 'Me Generation' (Tom Wolfe), or, in the title of Christopher Lasch's celebrated volume, the 'Culture of Narcissism'.[43]

But again, '70s cool seemed to have realism on its side, unlike the god-alternatives of the preceding decade. What the '60s had deified was now despised. David Bowie told *Newsweek*, *'I hated the whole togetherness, peace, love thing. It was conceited, flabby, suffocating – and didn't mean what it said'*[44] – exactly what a beatnik might have said about the hollowness of an earlier humanism. Thus if the dominant musical voice of the '60s was the Beatles' idealism, in the

early '70s the keynote was contentlessness: the Europop of Abba or Boney M[45], the self-indulgent triple-LP fantasias of 'art-rock', or the mindlessness of 'Get It On' – the result of Marc Bolan's profitable switch away from his earlier sub-Tolkien hippie anthems. (1960s hero John Peel refused to play the new Bolan.) Hippie kaftans gave way to the poseur-flamboyance of glam-rock (Bowie and Iggy Pop, both heavily influenced by Velvet Underground nihilism), or the black, even satanically-oriented pessimism of heavy metal, which *NME's* Phil McNeill described as *'the sound of the '70s. It has underpinned the whole decade.'* Lester Bangs listed:

a representative sampling of song titles from heavy metal albums by the genre's acknowledged punjabs: "Paranoid", "Killing Yourself to Live", "Children of the Grave", "Into the Void" (Black Sabbath); "Aimless Lady", "Winter and My Soul" (Grand Funk Railroad); "Dier not a Lover", "D.<ead> O.<n>A.<rrival>", "Hangman's Dances" (Bloodrock); "Into the Fire", "Living Wreck" (Deep Purple)... Heavy metal music in its finest flower had one central, obvious message: There is no hope. Whatever you do, you can't win.[46]

Perhaps this collapse of values in white-dominated culture helps us understand the repeated importance of black music as a source for new life. It is striking how often fresh momentum comes from this direction – with its roots in gospel, in convictions that certain things are right, are wrong, are worth celebrating, worth singing about; that love is a reality, that people matter.

When such certainties have lost their grounding in white culture, there comes a desire for the conviction voiced by an Aretha Franklin, a Stevie Wonder, a Bob Marley; the sound of a reality for which our hearts are hungry. Don't we sense that, after the '60s, white popular culture oscillates between cynicism, irony or nihilism on the one hand, and romantic longings for something deeper, something with tradition and value? And, tragically, that these longings seldom encounter anything credible, no 'gods' with any substance; so as a result they grow purely commercial, economically-oriented, hollow at their heart?[47]

'I have nothing to say and I am saying it...'

1950s humanism dead, '60s alternatives imploded; little left to believe in. But the story goes on. The main musical (and stylistic) movement of the late '70s amended that 'little' to 'nothing whatsoever'. In 1976 punk burst onto the scene.

Here indeed was a new burst of raw energy; but its motivating 'god' was a radical nihilism, expressed in posed violence and deliberate ugliness. Punk was the music of the 'blank generation' struggling with recession and unemployment, angrily in reaction against its predecessors. Sting told a *TV Times* interviewer, *'Supergroups like the Who and Led Zeppelin had things all their own way, releasing records of over-produced, over-rehearsed, hackneyed music' while a 'whole generation is being flushed down the drain. Many have no work, they feel unfulfilled, humiliated and abused. Punk groups articulate their frustrations.'* In furious reaction to the previous generation's 'concept albums' (Mike Oldfield, Yes, Electric Light Orchestra), punks proudly declared their lack of musical skills, proclaiming themselves 'garage bands', 'three-chord wonders'.

But the nihilism went deeper. The Sex Pistols called for 'Anarchy in the UK'; 'No Future' was the slogan their followers painted on walls across Britain. If the 'fascist' establishment was rejected, from the monarchy downwards (as per the Pistols' 'God Save the Queen'), so, equally, were the gods of '60s idealism. *'Dosed out of their heads the whole time'*, sneered Johnny Rotten about the hippies. *'Yeah man! Peace and love!'*[48]

But there was something profoundly pessimistic – to put it kindly: massively selfish, to be less generous – about the 'looking after number one' that resulted from this rejection of 'peace and love': *'I'm in love with... my pretty little self, and nobody else'*, to quote the Pistols. Punk was consistent, but punk was hate: *'I Hate Pink Floyd'* was Johnny Rotten's trademark t-shirt, and *'I hate them, I'd love to murder them'* was his comment on his fellow-Pistols after the band broke up. The results were consistent too: the punk habit of bands spitting at their audience; the movement's self-image as exploitation, embodied when Malcolm McLaren, the Pistols' creator, proudly presented his machinations in *The Great Rock'n'Roll Swindle*. (*'Of course I exploited them'*,

McLaren said of his next project Bow Wow Wow, *'and I'm proud of it!'*[49]) Consistent, too, was the image of aggression cultivated at punk concerts – the girl blinded by a glass thrown at the stage at the 100 Club, and, finally, Pistols bassist Sid Vicious overdosing on heroin while facing a murder trial for killing his girlfriend after the Pistols' acrimonious breakup. In punk, the kids with nothing to lose from consistency had pushed '70s me-generation nihilism towards its limit.

But man cannot live by nihilism alone, any more than music can survive on three chords alone. (Though John Lydon – Johnny Rotten – did the best he could. When his next 'anti-rock' band, Public Image Limited, toured America, they deliberately recruited a novice bassist, band members might stop playing after half an hour, and once the whole group played from behind a screen. Lydon taunted the fans for having paid to hear them.) Thus what followed in the 'new wave' included a turning away from 'three chord wonders', and a willingness to concede the meaning of musical values. When ex-Pistol Glen Matlock formed his new band, Rich Kids, his change of direction was signalled in his announcement *'We're here to play music'*. Sting said of the Police, *'We wanted to sing songs that people could remember and that were not necessarily anti-social.'* Along with this, in contrast to punk's logically-consistent ugliness, came a rediscovery of style: Blitz Kids, New Romantics; Adam Ant, Culture Club, Ultravox, Duran Duran, Spandau Ballet. And, in place of the punks' hostility to their audience (spitting on their fans), came the audience-friendly approach of Bruce Springsteen or U2. (*'I don't like music unless it has a healing effect'*, said Bono[50] – not very punk, but in those days most of the band were committed Christians, involved in a Dublin charismatic fellowship and influenced by Chinese Christian writer Watchman Nee.)

Outside U2, however, the swing away from nihilism didn't mean the nihilists' questions had found an answer. Culturally, emphasis on style tends to occur when there is not very much credible to be said. This was certainly the case with, say, Boy George, who deliberately presented himself as a *'man without convictions'*. (*'I don't want people committed to an ideal'*, he told one interviewer, *'coz ideals go out of the window after a while. I could say something to you now and tomorrow something could happen*

that could make me change my mind.[51]) Yet there was at least an opening for something positive. The change of climate was symbolised most strikingly by the Live Aid event of 1985, when most of rock's biggest names joined in a huge concert for the sake of the world's hungry. It would have been impossible to imagine the Sex Pistols, the Stranglers and the Damned arranging such an event in the heyday of punk; but now Santana, Sade, even Elvis Costello sang of brotherhood, love, togetherness. It was gut-reaction altruism, as its organizer Bob Geldof made clear in an interview the following year:

I'm not this completely selfless individual... I'd like to be as selfless as Mother Teresa, but I'm not... I will never stop thinking about those people and wanting to help. But if I were to go on and do that I'd be bored and tired, and upset easily... I don't care what people say or don't say, I just want to be a success.[52]

Altruism as this year's fashion choice, the cynic might say. Yet there was clearly in Geldof a serious desire for the ideals to make sense.

Perhaps this explains the curious resurgence of religious motifs in the next few years.[53] Steve Turner observes that several key figures in early '80s music, like Sting or Simple Minds' Jim Kerr, were

lapsed Roman Catholics who, while not subscribing to the ethics and power structure of the church, nevertheless found themselves using the symbols... These were people often deeply respectful of religious ritual, moved by the language and typology of the Bible but sceptical of church teachings.[54]

Springsteen does the same;[55] these musicians express a sense that there is power associated, somewhere and somehow, with what might be termed 'religion'. Even more fascinating is Madonna. The archetypal 'Material Girl' rode on a wave of religious symbolism ('Like a Virgin', 'Like a Prayer', 'The Immaculate Collection'), notching up en route the astonishing feat of hijacking one of humankind's great religious words and making it refer primarily to herself. Madonna embodied the '80s synthesis; on the one hand, unashamed materialism and quintessentially postmodern manipulation of image without content; yet

drawing on the vestigial power of religious imagery, which – and here is the crucial paradox – she herself partly believed in. (Witness the bizarre fact of her prayer meetings with her dancers during a Canadian tour that was nearly cancelled for obscenity.)[56]

It is in these terms that we can understand the link between what was happening in youth culture and in politics in the '80s. A comparison between Madonna and Margaret Thatcher is oddly illuminating. Both were as far from the un-materialistic idealisms of the '60s as was Johnny Rotten; yet both were comfortable deploying religious symbolism as part of their packaging, and neither apparently lacked some genuine belief in it. But if the dark side of the rejection of '60s utopianism was the naked materialism embodied in punk and then in Madonna, that was the achilles heel of '80s Thatcherism too. Its gods were at war with each other.

Style guru Peter York observed that '80s conservatism embodied a fundamental contradiction. There was an uneasy marriage between the religion-based values it professed, and the radical economic Darwinism it practised. On the one hand, there was a genuine desire to turn the clock back to traditional social values, including (as Thatcher said in 1988) a '*fundamental sense of fairness, integrity, honesty and courtesy for your neighbour*'. Conservative government ministers appealed unashamedly (if selectively) to the churches to reintroduce morality to Britain. But their real devotion lay with the gods of market forces ('*Let the market decide*'); and in practice, the economic individualism outweighed the desire for moral renewal. This led logically to the exaltation of Darwinian competitiveness, rather than neighbourly collaboration, as the route to excellence; and then, equally logically, to the glorification of 'loadsamoney' individualism, with all the designer trappings, for the winners who came out on top.[57] Margaret Thatcher herself embodied this individualism in insisting that '*There is no such thing as society*'; the climate she created was increasingly one where everybody had to compete for themselves,[58] whether the arena was health, schooling, or provision for old age. Whatever the quasi-Christian rhetoric, the results were close to the Darwinian law of the jungle.

The story of '80s conservatism might suggest that attempts to combine devotion to God and Money are as unsuccessful as Christ predicted they would be, two thousand years earlier. It also raises the issue we examined in chapter 3: What is the underpinning necessary for effective moral values? Without a far clearer rediscovery – even 'vision' – of God, were not the conservatives' 'moral values' doomed to be swept aside by the economic forces they emphasised, and the self-orientation that that emphasis engendered? Neo-conservatism can sound religious; but outside the context of direct relationship with God, 'traditional values' become just another god-replacement. And an ill-defined and ineffective one;[59] we remember the '80s not as the 'moral decade' but as the 'designer decade', an era whose gods were money and style, one nearly as short of values as the '70s.

The dominance of that ethos can be illustrated by the completeness with which it took over the pop scene, formerly the bastion of counterculture ideals. Here, yuppie had comprehensively displaced hippie.[60] A 1985 *Radio Times* article wrote of star singer Paul Young,

Like most of his contemporaries he talks about his recordings as "product" and measures his sales in "units"... Somehow, I can't imagine pop stars of the previous generation – Pete Townshend, say – slapping backs and giving handouts at the annual sales beano.

Young himself admitted, *'It's more to do with business than it is to do with music in some ways.'* Michael Jackson's 1983 hit album *Thriller* was the biggest seller in the world; but as *Time's* critic commented, it was

not the kind of great album one has come to expect since the tumultuous days of Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band: a record that provokes, challenges, raises questions. Thriller is not Who's Next or The White Album or Blonde on Blonde... records that were argued over or championed like talismans that could change lives. It is like a piece of elegant sportswear; slip right into it, shrug it off.[61]

The change was mirrored in the music press; as William Leith remarked, argumentative tabloids like *New Musical Express* gave way to *'a different type of magazine altogether. It is smaller, less serious, more lurid. It contains more photographs and fewer words. It is celebratory, rather than suspicious, of success, massive sales and media hype.'* And the growing significance of video accelerated these trends: *'Nowadays, the product (the pop group) is tailored to suit the marketing device (the pop video), rather than vice versa.'*[62]

Thus with the eclipse of the intellectual left in the west, and communism heading towards final collapse in the east, neo-conservatism's gods had their chance. But the result was the triumph of naked economics – and widespread destruction in the health service, education system, and many other areas of culture as everything began to be controlled by the bottom line. (*Independent on Sunday* writer Michael Bywater defined *'what being British has become'* as *'an unlovely struggle against the cost-accountants, who believe that money is the only motivation, profit the only measure, and that an enlightened pianist would play all the notes of a Beethoven sonata in one cacophonous crash, in the name of efficiency.'*) The corollary of Thatcher's *'fondness for business and management'*, former Tory MP Sir Christopher Tugendhat remarked, was a *'lack of respect for most non-profitmaking activities. A certain harshness, even brutality, entered the picture.'* That was true both at the affluent end of the social spectrum, with Gordon Gekko's gospel of greed in *Wall Street* – *'Greed is good. Greed is right. Greed works'* – being worn proudly by City stockmarket traders on their softball jerseys; and at the opposite end, where 'in-your-face' self-glorification marked the lyrics of rap, heavy metal, and hardcore house. There was something quite Thatcherite about gangsta-rapper Dr Dre announcing bluntly on MTV, *'I'm just here to make money'*; or the Wu Tang Clan's slogan C.R.E.A.M. – *'Cash Rules Everything Around Me'*.

(One post-'80s trend whose effect we shouldn't underrate is the changing source of new impulses in black music. These now tend to come, not from musicians with roots in the black churches,[63] but rather from the violent and anarchic world of the ghettos. Rap pioneers Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five focused on ugliness such as a teenage mother tipping her newborn child into

the trash ('New York, New York'); respected African-American critic Armond White describes the high-selling gangsta rap as taking a '*capitalist approach to nihilism, finding it marketable. It fills up that moral hollow where Black pop's heart used to be*', with its '*key subjects... sexual power and male competition*' in an '*unabashed celebration of power and greed*'.^[64] '*Nobody cares about me so why should I care about anyone else*', one gangsta rapper told an MTV special. But the music's deliberate violence and misogyny were not a joke; Snoop Doggy Dogg was acquitted on a murder charge after a shoot-out, but Tupac Shakur was convicted of real-life sexual abuse of a female fan and then gunned down, as was Notorious B.I.G., in what seemed a deadly feud between east and west coast rappers; hip-hop turning murderously inwards to consume itself. Meanwhile, the rappers' standard use of 'bitch' or 'ho' to describe women underlined again what logically happens to respect for women once the Christian base is gone; once it is every mutha for himself.)

In search of the 'vision thing'

Of course the '80s gods didn't last. The idolatry of economics exploded; first with the 1987 stockmarket crash, then in a series of court actions demonstrating the dishonesty of one key player after another in the economic free-for-all. In Britain, Robert Maxwell was revealed as a massive fraudster; in Australia, tycoon Alan Bond received a two-year sentence for dishonesty; in America, Michael Milken, once the most powerful player on Wall Street, ended up with a 22-month term. Suddenly, the bottom line and the economic imperative proved untrustworthy deities. As the shock worked through the system there came a sense of need for new vision – made doubly urgent by the desire for vigorous leadership in the deepening environmental crisis. '*One by one our gods fail us*', an *Independent* editorial remarked. '*Paternalistic capitalism, corporatism, communism and, latterly, untrammelled individualism have been advocated, tried, and wholly or largely abandoned. The old isms are in disarray. Yet the Nineties are not characterised by a retreat into pragmatism and materialism. On the contrary, there is a search for meaning...*'

This question-mark hung over the early '90s like a neon sign over a motorway motel. On one side of

the Atlantic, George Bush (senior) hankered after a '*kindlier, gentler*' America, even as he lamented his own lack of the '*vision thing*' that could further that desire. On the other, John Major was voted in as a leader who could temper the more destructive aspects of capitalism. But he too confessed being '*uneasy with big ideas*', and the only '*vision thing*' he could muster was a wistful elegy for old maids cycling through the mist to communion as the true spirit of Britain.^[65] Nor was much guidance to be found among the intelligentsia. Edward Said bemoaned the '*disappearance of the general secular intellectual*'. The deaths of Sartre, Barthes, Foucault, Raymond Williams and others marked, he said, the

passing of an old order: figures of learning and authority, whose general scope over numerous fields gave them much more than professional competence... As opposed to this there are technocrats, whose principal competence is... to solve local problems, not to ask the big questions.

Thus both Bush's demise and Major's signalled a desire for some new framework. Soon after her husband's election Hillary Clinton expressed her desire to find a '*unified field theory of life... a way of looking at the world that would marry conservatism and liberalism, capitalism and statism and tie together practically everything*'. In Britain, the Labour Party had set about a radical change of direction after its old-style leftism was discredited by the downfall of communism; it is interesting that its electoral breakthrough was grounded in a new ideology consciously constructed by John Smith, and then Tony Blair, on the principles of Christian Socialism.^[66]

The same question-marks appeared, thought-provokingly, elsewhere. In fashion, white briefly became the theme-colour, supposedly reflecting the new decade's more 'spiritual' mood. ('*The 1980s was about materialism*', said *Vogue* fashion booking editor Zoe Souter. '*The 1990s is all about individuality, personality and spirit. People are becoming spiritual.*') A major feature of early '90s youth culture was the 'rave' scene, and here there were hints of a rediscovery of community not seen since the '60s. It had its roots in the legendary 'Summers of Love' – Ibiza, house music, smiley faces, Ecstasy, clubs like Shoom and Spectrum. These had been powerful

experiences for those involved: *'Friendships became all-consuming. Suddenly all they could talk about was love, togetherness, sharing, the sheer joy of life... Everyone had a story about spontaneous acts of kindness'*, writes Matthew Collin in his respected survey *Altered State*,^[67] and many others have said the same. Likewise, when the 'raves' began, the *'sheer spontaneity was glorious; it felt like something wonderful could happen anywhere at any time.'*^[68]

But again, the 'vision thing' didn't last. By the time Collin wrote his book in 1997, the joy was long gone; indeed the 'Summer of Love' had proved to be short on the ingredients needed for lasting community within a very few months. Collin tells how the original participants couldn't handle the influx of newcomers wanting what they'd got, and soon *'began to close ranks'* in an attempt to protect their community from interlopers.^[69] But that community was already fracturing internally. *'I made deep friendships around that time'*, says Marc Almond of Soft Cell, *'friendships that I have to say didn't last. With all that group of us who first took Ecstasy, it all turned a bit sour in the end... There was nothing really there to cement the friendship.'*^[70] The same story comes from a key player in the Manchester ('Madchester') scene, of the shift from *'I wish the whole world felt like this'* to *'You were convinced that everybody was going to be your friend for life, and even that went sour.'*^[71] And it wasn't merely the Ecstasy-fuelled dreams of total consciousness change that proved unable to match reality. What is more painful is the story Collin tells of rave culture's powerlessness to resist infiltration by organized crime, resulting in its eventual suppression by the authorities. In the clubs, meanwhile, the scene splintered into consciously estranged subcultures; and the emergence of 'hardcore' and 'jungle' marked a deliberate rejection of acid house and all that went with it. (*'That false high, that false hope. That false love.'*^[72])

'False love'? But Marc Almond's comment had already raised the question: acid house offered little to underpin the community that sprung up in the first golden idealism. Collin quotes remarks from the early participants that show how the exuberance felt 'religious' but lacked the underpinning any real-world religion needs to keep going: *'It was almost like a religious experience; a combination of taking Ecstasy and*

going to a warm, open-air club full of beautiful people'; 'We all had the same mentality, which was to have a really good time and try as far as possible not to think about anything else... It felt like a religion.'^[73] *'Have a good time and try not to think'*; I remember watching John Lydon – né Johnny Rotten, Sex Pistol – blasting house music on MTV as a music of *'no content – "Don't worry, be happy, get on the floor and shut your mouth." "Saturday night fever, or a new way of life?"'*, asks Collin, and the answer was obvious all too soon.^[74] Ecstasy culture, he adds, *'was a culture with options in place of rules'*; there was no robust base of convictions for the hoped-for sense of community, but rather a space for a pluralistic potpourri: *'Its definition was subject to individual interpretation.'*^[75] It looked back to the '60s, but history had moved on; it lacked ideologies – 'gods' – such as those that (despite their weaknesses) underpinned the '60s counter-culture and gave it the ability to reshape the face of the west. *'In some ways it was a throwback to the sixties but it was very much something else – it was totally non-political'*, says leading rave promoter Tony Colston-Hayter. *'It was the ultimate hedonistic leisure activity. It was about going out and having a good time.'*^[76]

To all this there were surely exceptions, most notably associated with groups like Spiral Tribe, drawing often on a serious commitment to 'New Age' spiritualities such as Paganism, shamanism or witchcraft.^[77] Unfortunately, all too much of what the New Agers verbalized would, in another climate, have been discarded instantly as crackpot. Their very success showed the hunger existing for some rediscovered framework of meaning; but too often there was no claim to any truth that could be discussed sensibly with an adherent of a different worldview. The gods were becoming tribal, closed-off; there was just a set of experiences to be shared, or not. Still, it was among these parts of the scene that the 'direct action' movements arose, most often with regard to 'green' issues, that had significant impact during the '90s. But the mainstream became increasingly hedonistic; it was often commented that club atmospheres had become much more sexualised, much more a matter of being 'on the pull'. Where the mainstream had any interest in social issues, it was largely selfish – *'You've got to fight for your right to party'*.

(*'Club culture promotes a very hedonistic lifestyle, and its followers are often accused of being self-centred', said the Independent in a feature on club events sponsored by Amnesty International to focus on worldwide human rights issues. 'Yet, far from being apathetic, clubbers traditionally respond well to a wide range of charities.'* The feature was titled 'Charity begins in clubland'. But in fact it showed all too clearly how apparent 'worldwide'-oriented altruism can actually be about rather more self-centred concerns. *'Alisha's Attic's motivation for performing is typical of the artists on show. "This is a unique opportunity to reclaim our rights, to learn what they are and to tell the world's governments that we know our rights and will keep on shouting until they listen and respect them."* 'I have never heard of it', another rapper said about Amnesty, *'but we are glad to be part of it if it's helping human rights, you know. Everybody wants to have the right to do what they wanna do.'*)

Collin observes that although acid house began as a rejection of the '80s style-hierarchy and designer ethos, in fact it reflected the same issues: *'Ecstasy culture seemed to ghost the Thatcher narrative – echoing its ethos of choice and market freedom, yet expressing desires for a collective experience that Thatcherism rejected and consumerism could not provide.'*[78] Ultimately it was an *'uneasy synthesis of individualistic [that is, self-oriented, hedonistic] and collective [that is, community-oriented] impulses.'*[79] The failure of '90s rave culture, then, was a very '90s failure. And by the mid-'90s, Collin argues, mainstream club culture was *'hedonism distilled to its purest essence', lacking 'any ideology bar the ceaseless pursuit of sheer pleasure.'*[80] *'The dream was finally over';* the revolution had turned into style again, and rave culture into something formulaic and corporate.[81]

After the gods have gone

By 1996 Oliver Bennett could write in the *Independent on Sunday*, *'The Nineties were forecast to become a soft, warm era; a time for caring and sharing, nurturing and spiritual... In the event, we work harder, have less faith and are more nihilistic, pessimistic and downright anxious than before.'* One way or other the hopes of the

early '90s had given way to something more depressing; a self-centred hedonism largely under the domination of contentless corporate commercialism; or, at best, alternative spiritualities whose truth could not be set out and debated in any really meaningful terms. And this collapse of confidence in the proclamation or discussion of truth is a discouraging hallmark of contemporary pluralism in general. There is no longer much faith that issues of value, belief or meaning can be settled by factual discussion.

This has a serious consequence. All we can then have is a plethora of competing lifestyles and worldviews – competing, not on the grounds of truth, but on the grounds of power. And the '90s have indeed been distinguished by the steady balkanization of society, at least in America. Palestinian Edward Said has castigated the current fragmentation into a collection of competing ghettos, based on gender and ethnicity.[82] Postmodernism's disbelief in truth means that the liberal ideal of modernism – let our different beliefs be restricted to the private world, let's all work together for the common good – has increasingly been replaced by a 'tribal' climate[83] where different interest groups – gays, feminists, traditionalists, ethnic groups – compete in a naked struggle for influence. The process is even legitimated by contemporary gurus such as Foucault who see the *'play of dominations'* as the only fundamental reality.[84] But it runs counter to any hope of overall 'community'[85]; and it often comes close to fascism. *'Our own folk first'*, the slogan of the Dutch far right, might be a motto for many more politically correct but equally demanding groups. *Newsweek* viewed the '90s as the *'decade of anger: angry women, angry African-Americans, angry gays, angry taxpayers.'* It's a recipe for an unattractive future; but isn't it made almost inevitable by the death of truth since the death of God?

These aspects of postmodernity have been mirrored in the development of pop. First, the fragmentation: *'The mainstream',* wrote Andy Gill in 1994, *'as signified by the old Radio One/Top of the Pops consensus, all but dissolved a couple of years ago, leaving a plethora of sub-genres – rap, indie, metal, swingbeat, jungle, Britpop, and any number of house/techno variations.'* More serious, however, is the issue of whether there is anything left to sing about. Music depends on a choice of

what is worth singing, what is worthy of celebration; and postmodernism denies that anything is of absolute value or significance. There was an uneasy appropriateness when the early '90s saw music stores reducing their music displays to make room for computer and video games. (There were suggestions – maybe justified? – that these would take the place in the new generation's lives that music had had for their parents.)

Somehow the fire had gone out of pop; sales became dominated by 'back catalogue' (compilations of past material), and the big events were the reunions of ancient groups – Velvet Underground, Sex Pistols, the Eagles, Television.[86] Subsequently the climate changed somewhat for the better. Yet even bands like Oasis were heavily 'retro', recreating old Beatles-style melodies in '90s terms.[87] *'People are now into old bands because the old bands are better than the new bands. It's just as simple as that'*, said Noel Gallagher. *'Future historians may regard rock's first four post-Presley decades as its best'*, admitted the *Virgin Encyclopaedia of Rock* uneasily.[88] The nearest thing to a global superstar thrown up by early '90s rock was Kurt Cobain of Nirvana. And in his words – and suicide – the sense of self-destructive cul-de-sac, of the postmodern inaccessibility of meaning, became enormously tangible: *'I hate myself and want to die.'*

But perhaps Cobain's life showed that our 'godlessness', our lack of any *'vision thing'*, has its causes inside us, as well as in external factors. We are *'incredulous towards meta-narratives'*, say the postmodernists; the dialogue is over, there are no more 'god-substitutes' to believe in. But maybe we are the reason; maybe – even at a moment of deep environmental crisis – we've been losing the capacity for belief and for passion, even if there were things to believe and be passionate about.[89] Many observers sensed the shift in the '90s ethos. In America especially, grunge became the soundtrack of Generation X: a generation self-distrustful, marked by passivity, avoiding vulnerability, reluctant to step out or lead, staying within the 'comfort zones'. New York Governor Mario Cuomo charged that America was producing unmotivated young adults averse to taking the risks required for endeavour. There are, of course, a high percentage of exceptions –

but anyone in the student world has probably noticed something of what he meant.

Doesn't a sense of *déjà vu*, of exhaustion, hang over the whole contemporary scene? Underachievement seems a mark of postmodernity (with ironical appropriateness, given its rejection of the whole concept of greatness); Bart Simpson ('Underachiever and Proud of It') is its archetype. Baudrillard seems shallow beside Sartre or Camus, whatever the rights and wrongs of either; Eminem or Radiohead feel minor besides the Beatles or the Stones[90], Damien Hirst trivial besides Picasso, the succession of Booker winners transient compared to Lawrence, Joyce, Conrad. There are no new dreams to match the gigantic, even idolatrous, reach of Marxism or Freudianism. Of course such intuitions are subjective, and just three years could see them falsified. Yet there is a sense at present of something that is very *post-*. Modernity failed our deepest human needs, and comprehensively fouled our physical and spiritual environment in the process; yet the liberalism of modernity, and those other modernists who reacted against it, seem to have exhausted most of what can be said or achieved. There is a sense now of lack of vision, of aftermath, of epilogue.

Douglas Coupland's classic depiction in *Generation X* presented the *'slacker culture'*, opting out into 'McJobs'. 'Slackers' are the children of postmodernism, for whom there is simply nothing worth doing, hence little sense of vocation. (*'Nobody believes in anything any more'*, reflected Neil Ascherson in a 1994 column on the death of activism.) Generation Xers and the generations since have been shaped by a postmodern culture dominated by the switchback of fashion, in which value judgments really don't apply. Longterm, nothing is much more important than anything else; today's hit will be in the garbage tomorrow. Andy Warhol, painter of soup cans and sculptor of Brillo pads, is our patron saint. To be interested in value – to be interested whether, say, *Citizen Kane* or *Casablanca* are among the ten greatest films of all time – is to reveal yourself as a 'cinema buff', something slightly abnormal. For the normal person, fashion, or the market, are the only determinants of value left; as Jeanette Winterson put it, *'Where there are no standards the market-place obtains'*, that is all.[91] *'Nothing really matters, anyone can see'*,

sings the hero of Freddy Mercury's 'Bohemian Rhapsody' on his way to hell; *'Nothing really matters to me.'*

So here we are: cool, ironical, unimpressed; detached (at least in the long term) from commitment, achievement, idealism. But this fear of openness and involvement has its reasons; it is linked closely to the issues we considered in earlier chapters. First, there often seems to be a deep doubt of self-worth that seems connected to the issues of identity after the loss of God which we considered in chapter 1.[92] Obviously, if you doubt your own value, you may well doubt the value of your commitments. Second, social psychologists might see a link between our fears of risk, openness and commitment, and the collapse of (Christian) marriage as a lifelong loving commitment that we examined in chapter 5. I recall an Atlanta youth worker saying of the teenagers he knew, *'These kids know nothing about commitment. How can they? They've never seen it at home: there's just been a succession of "uncles".'* London church planter Roger Mitchell has invoked Jesus' story of the Lost Son in describing Generation X and their successors as the *'children of the prodigal'* ('60s) *'generation – the ones who no longer know there's any home left to come back to'*, and are deeply doubtful that they either are loved or can be.

And thirdly, our detachment can express also a deep sense of fear – of commitments that may lead to date rape or AIDS; of risks that may lead to street violence; of a future shadowed by joblessness or environmental breakdown. Again, we examined in our second chapter how this relates to our loss of God. Often beneath the X exterior (and picked up by thriller-writers like John Grisham, and equally by *The X-Files*) is something of a nervy paranoia. The continuous need to perform in a management culture of audit and evaluation deepens that paranoia further. And all of this wearisome effort becomes doubly paradoxical when nothing is worth doing anyway.

'It doesn't matter whether there's a God or not.' But isn't the God-question fundamental to the *'understanding'* of our time? Douglas Coupland, whose novel first defined Generation X, answered with a resounding 'Yes' when he published *Life After God*. **'YOU ARE THE FIRST GENERATION RAISED WITHOUT RELIGION'**, it said on the

jacket; and two pages from the end came this:

Now – here is my secret:

I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.

Coupland's perceptions don't stand alone. *'It is countries where faith is weak and dwindling, like ours, that are full of fear and emptiness'*, remarked a 1994 editorial in the liberal *Independent*. Courtney Love, Kurt Cobain's widow, yelled at one New York audience, *'I'm really sick of this f***ing agnostic decade. Find something to believe in!'* – adding to an interviewer that she hoped by the time her daughter grew up *'drugs are not going to be chic any more. I pray religion, discipline, certain traditions will be cool.'*[93] Possibly Coupland and Love point to the future; perhaps we are at the end of the secular century.[94]

Yet it is hard to believe today. The whole development of postmodernity – its denial of our identity and purpose, its doubts about love and truth and ethics – makes it psychologically difficult for us to think of commitments – to faiths, to relationships, to causes. *'Don't Worry, Be Happy'*; postmodernism denies any real seriousness. There is no God now, so all that exists is image upon image, surface upon surface. There are no truths worth choosing, no passions uncorroded by irony, no causes worth stepping out of line for.[95]

Does it matter? It may; all this may turn out to be tragic beyond words. It may be catastrophic beyond words that this paralysis occurs just when a last effort needs to be made to turn the west away from collective selfishness, and into a seriously sacrificial concern for others and for the environment.[96]

But we seem unable to come up with any meaningful response. Are we now almost incapable of belief, purpose, commitment and self-sacrifice? Are we unable to believe anything intensely enough to make a difference, even as

our McWorld slithers visibly towards disaster? Have we in the west made our fateful choice, one generation after another, during these successive decades?

Have our repeated choices against the biblical God, followed by the collapse of each of our god-substitutes, drawn us inexorably into the new dark ages?[97]

A good guide to the contemporary mood (depressing and entertaining in roughly equal quantities) is *Mostly Harmless*, the finale of Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide* "trilogy". It's depressing because Adams uses it to re-enact for the worse the events of his first, much funnier book, and in the process to kill off all his main characters. It features the hippyish Ford Prefect finding that his hang-loose world has been taken over by faceless corporate bureaucrats – very much a '60s character's response to the postmodern dominance of the bottom line.

Prefect reflects on the collapse of the original dreams of the Guide's founders: *'All that had come when some of the original team had started to settle down and get greedy, while he and others had stayed out in the field, researching and hitch hiking, and gradually becoming more and more isolated from the corporate nightmare the Guide had inexorably turned into'* (p.95). Meanwhile Arthur Dent (who loses his lover suddenly and completely meaninglessly on p.56) discovers he has arbitrarily acquired a daughter, named Random. Random is very much the passive, media-saturated Generation Xer coping with the results of the lifestyle of her parents' generation (pp.126-34). Generally her conclusion is, *'Stupid! Stupid!'*

Adams gives Random an enormous sense of homelessness. At the end she screams, *"I want a home! I want to fit somewhere!" "This is not your home," said Trillian' (her mother), 'still keeping her voice calm. "You don't have one. We none of us have one. Hardly anybody has one anymore."* Random then completes a quite meaningless

historical pattern, and precipitates the world's destruction, by accidentally shooting a bystander. As she collapses in guilt, Arthur *'wondered what he should do, but he only wondered it idly... It was suddenly very clear to him that there was nothing to be done, not now or ever'* (p.218).

So the book ends, with everybody dead and the world destroyed. Its only hints of positives have to do with Elvis Presley and a casual concern for ecology (pp.202, 206).

[Go to Chapter 7]

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References:

[1] Cf. *In the Twilight of Western Thought* (Nutley, 1960), pp.35-36. I am not following Dooyeweerd's historical analysis here.

[2] According to Dooyeweerd, *'Every idol gives rise to a counter-idol'* (p.166). We may restate that part of his argument like this: The principle that is absolutized or 'deified' is not broad enough to hold together all the other particulars; consequently it inevitably 'calls forth' its opposites, those other aspects or particulars that have been marginalized, which in turn then *'begin to claim an absoluteness opposite to that of the deified ones'* (p.36). Thus one 'god-substitute' succeeds another; ultimately, nothing but God is big enough to be God.

[3] Obviously our history is an interplay of many types of processes – economic history, with the development of capitalism; political history, with the rise and fall of competing nation-states and political parties; and numerous others. But this approach has the merit of focusing on the things by which we ultimately live; and in practice it certainly offers a less soulless way of thinking about the past than, say, Marx's insistence that

the key factor dominating any era is its 'means of production'.

[4] There are constraints on this: what the artist perceives as acceptable or possible, and what patrons or audiences will tolerate or pay for. Also, to some extent what the artist is choosing to 'celebrate' is the act of artistic creation itself. But usually that is not all. (Or, if it is all – as has happened increasingly in modernity – then that itself becomes a statement about what (how little) is worth celebrating outside the work of art.)

[5] Kenneth Clark observes that Rembrandt's mind 'was steeped in the Bible – he knew every story down to the minutest detail... [His art] is an emotional response based on the truth of revealed religion.' (*Civilisation* (1982 edition), pp.143-44.)

[6] Cf. H.R. Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (1970), chapter 1.

[7] Cf. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957).

[8] See the Sermon on the Mount (eg. Matthew 5:38-48.)

[9] Vinoth Ramachandra argues this point cogently in *Faiths in Conflict?* (1999), pp.149-51, which draws on William T. Cavanaugh, "A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House": The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State', *Modern Theology* 11.4 (1995).

[10] There is still a God in the Enlightenment picture, but he tends to be pushed to the periphery – a distant divinity who created a perfect nature and perfect human reason, and then conveniently retired. Most expressions of Enlightenment thought tend towards deism.

[11] An over-confidence that has been challenged by late-modernist thinkers. Docherty summarizes the position of Adorno and Horkheimer thus: 'Enlightenment itself is not the great demystifying force which will reveal and unmask ideology; rather, it is precisely the locus of ideology, thoroughly contaminated internally by the assumption that the world can match – indeed, can be encompassed by – our reasoning about it.' (Introduction to *Postmodernism: a Reader* (1993), p.8.)

[12] The result was that 'progress' became central to the Enlightenment's ideology (or mythology). At the same time, the Enlightenment looked back to the earlier triumphs of reason; there is a strong emphasis on the neo-classical in this period, often displacing the more relational, less abstract Judaeo-Christian vision.

[13] As Karl Barth comments, in *Protestant*

Theology in the Nineteenth Century (1972), pp.49-50.

[14] At least until his more Christian *Amelia*.

[15] In politics, too, perceptive observers recognized that 'Whatever is, is right' was not the whole story, that the apparently 'natural' political order was not the embodiment of reasonable perfection – insights leading in time to the French revolution and, in England, the great Reform Bills of the following century.

[16] Of course there is no clean division between such periods as the 'Enlightenment' and 'Romanticism'; and any particular work contains a mixture of 'gods' that may or may not fit well together. Rousseau, for example, puts his faith in reason as he thinks about religion in a way that makes him clearly an Enlightenment figure, and is applauded as such by Kant. Yet in his championing of the unsullied child and of the individual over against the corruption of society, he is the first prophet of the gods of the Romantics. Thus to speak of, say, the Enlightenment, is to speak of the dominance of a particular synthesis of 'god-substitutes' that gradually gave way in influence, among more and more key figures, to a different synthesis.

[17] Indeed, Edmund Burke remarked in 1790 that 'atheists and infidels' had now slipped into 'lasting oblivion' ('Who now reads Bolingbroke? Who ever read him through?'); while at the popular level, the blossoming of the Evangelical wing of the church led to a considerable re-Christianizing of a great deal of British culture (and the abolition of slavery). Nineteenth-century Evangelicalism owed a good deal to Romanticism, as is obvious from the passionate style of a C.T. Studd (see, for example, *Fool and Fanatic*, ed. Jean Walker (1980)); or, more destructively, in the attitude represented by Shaftesbury's bizarre comment that 'Satan reigns in the intellect, God in the heart of man.'

[18] Although Wordsworth and Coleridge both moved back to Christian commitment in later life.

[19] An example of how the change of 'god-substitutes' is embodied in general culture would be their effect on landscape gardening; from the rational, wide-open, geometrical arrangements of neo-classicism to the more unpredictable 'Romantic' arrangements popular a few decades later. Jane Austen (whose novels struggle with the advent of the Romantic mindset – see *Sense and Sensibility* in particular) presents attitude to garden design as a key mark of personality in

Mansfield Park.

[20] The Romantic idolizing of the individual consciousness, as set over against society, is a key area in which it reacts against the Enlightenment synthesis. (This is a logical move onward from Kant's absolutizing of human autonomy: the Ego as God.) The figure of the Romantic Ego became embodied particularly in Napoleon. Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment* questions how far this 'god-substitute' of the Napoleonic individual, free from all external constraints, can 'work', and how far it destroys those who put their trust in it.

[21] There was also the 'satanist' end of Romanticism: Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Byron's *Lara*, de Sade, the teenage Marx's *Oulanem*.

[22] And at greater length in the *Fall of Hyperion*, where Keats agonizes over the value of what the poet does as against those who make a tangible improvement to human existence – the choice he made in real life, as a former medical student. Imagination alone was not enough; what Keats lacked, compared to his Reformation predecessors, was a framework that could have underpinned the value of both, and a relationship with a 'nearby God' that could have made clear which of the two was his personal 'calling'.

[23] Politically, the daydream-question arose with the disillusionment at the French Revolution (and its bloody aftermath), originally hymned with enthusiasm by Schiller, Beethoven (the *Eroica* Symphony dedicated originally to Napoleon), and Wordsworth.

[24] Interestingly, this had far less impact in the USA, where many Christian thinkers adopted evolutionary theory into their worldview without obvious discomfort. B.B. Warfield would be an obvious example. But it is also clear that the broader worldview of *evolutionism* was a picture whose time had come. The Christian view of humanity as created perfect, then desperately marred, was already being challenged by a picture of our moving from primitive barbarism to ever-higher development. Lewis notes tellingly that the two key artistic embodiments of *evolutionism* (in Keats and Wagner) came before, not after, Darwin. Europe wanted to believe that we were automatically getting better and better, rather than needing supernatural redemption; now the scientific theory seemed to give an excuse. (*Christian Reflections* (1981 edition), pp.111-12.)

[25] Darwin was bad for the 'gods' of

Romanticism too. The Nature that was so inspirational to Wordsworth becomes, for Tennyson, savage – '*red in tooth and claw*'.

[26] In Dickens' later work, his early optimism about the generosity of the human spirit slips into a far bleaker vision. Impersonal, dehumanizing forces are at work (reflecting the ongoing industrial revolution) against which Dickens' small '*alternative communities*' (see for example *Dombey and Son*) seem nonplussed, eccentric and powerless.

[27] Quoted in Charles I. Glicksberg, *Literature and Religion* (Dallas, 1960), pp.221-22.

[28] The great turn-of-the-century novelists James and Conrad can be read especially fruitfully in the light of this question; as Conrad puts it, '*how to be*'. James (like Scott Fitzgerald) is very interested in what you can do with life if everything is possible; hence his interest in what the rich do (eg. the wonderful *Portrait of a Lady*).

[29] Space doesn't permit adequate exploration of where the aesthetic 'god' failed, but we may point to some further questions: the pervasive elitism, even hatred, directed against those who couldn't share the artist's intuitive values (extending often into crypto-fascism; see John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1996)); the egoism implicit in the wilful obscurity of the '*separate artistic universes*' of, say, Pound's *Cantos* or Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*; the sense of dilettantism, of failure to engage with the issues of the real world (if the 1920s saw the triumph of modernism, the '30s saw a reaction back to political (communist, Stalinist) commitment in writers like Auden); and the deep sense of horror and futility that recurs throughout much modernist writing – eg. in most of early Eliot (before he became a Christian), or in Yeats' 'Why Should Not Old Men Be Mad?' or his end-point in the '*foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart*' in 'The Circus Animals' Desertion'.

[30] Quoted in Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death* (1973), p.10.

[31] It should be added that in religion these years also saw an increasingly confident recovery of biblically-oriented faith after its inter-war marginalization; for example in the rapid growth of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship (later UCCF). Sociologically, this can be seen as an example of new energies breaking through the logjam of humanistic complacency that is described in the following paragraph.

[32] Quoted in Malcolm Doney, *Summer in the*

City (1978), p.104.

[33] Quoted in Doney, p.66.

[34] Quoted in Steve Turner's superb survey of rock and belief, *Hungry for Heaven* (1995 edition), p.60. Turner's wide knowledge of the rock scene, and his personal acquaintance with a vast number of its key figures, make this book essential reading for anyone interested in music.

[35] Quoted in Turner, p.47.

[36] Quoted in Tony Jasper, *Jesus and the Christian in a Pop Culture* (1984), p.34.

[37] An outstanding assessment of the '60s, drawing out the underlying issues in a manner that is still deeply relevant, is Os Guinness' *The Dust of Death*. Guinness' work is crammed with perceptive insights and remains, I believe, one of the most brilliant pieces of culture criticism of recent decades.

[38] Quoted in Turner, p.61.

[39] Quoted in Turner, p.106.

[40] Cf. the bitter opening of Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons, *The Boy Looked At Johnny: the obituary of rock and roll* (1978).

[41] Quoted in Dan Peters and Steve Peters, *Why Knock Rock?* (Minneapolis, 1984), p.180.

[42] Quoted in Turner, pp.107, 109.

[43] *'After the political turmoil of the sixties, Americans have retreated to purely personal preoccupations. Having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating health food, taking lessons in ballet or belly-dancing... overcoming the "fear of pleasure"... Self-absorption defines the moral climate of contemporary society.'* (Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), pp.29, 61.)

[44] Quoted in Peters, p.30.

[45] Also relevant here is an equally contentless style from later in the decade, disco – increasingly important from 1978 onwards. Unlike heavy metal, disco had a positive ambience, but a 1978 commentator (in *Newsweek* of all places) pointed out that it was equally meaningless, diluting the 'outlaw tradition' into 'outrageous chic': *'Ten years ago, amidst war protests, Woodstock and the Democratic convention in Chicago, the Hollywood-rock connection would have been culturally unimaginable'*; but now *Grease* and *Saturday Night Fever* offered a *'Dionysian celebration of middle-class values. The movies have a surface rebelliousness and danger, typified by Travolta's*

mesmerizing screen presence, that give way to a sweet, romantic heart.' It is perhaps significant that disco culture arose in the context of the newly-emergent gay community; George Steiner has pointed out that an emphasis on self-referential style, devoid of other content, has tended to be a mark of European art where it has arisen within the homosexual context.

[46] *New Musical Express*, 8 October 1977.

[47] The aftermath of the Beatles might offer a useful example: Lennon following his logic out onto the nihilistic frontier in tuneless albums strongly influenced by John Cage (the creator of the *4'33"*; piece of silent piano music), while McCartney declined into sugar-sweet commercialism?

[48] Quoted in Turner, p.146.

[49] Quoted in Peters, p.104.

[50] Quoted in *Virgin Encyclopaedia of Rock*, ed. Michael Heatley (1993), p.242.

[51] Quoted in Peters, p.105.

[52] *TV Times*, 25 October 1986.

[53] One could cite other parallels. Looking back to Christian sources became a possible action again in the '80s. Julia Kristeva, one of the groundbreaking structuralist '60s radicals, now discovered a convergence between her concerns and those of *'St Bernard and St Thomas... For me, in a very Christian fashion, ethics merges with love'* (cf. *The Kristeva Reader*, tr. Toril Moi (1986), pp.8, 21). Or we might cite the 1983 *Standard* interview where John Cleese expressed a new interest to *'know if there is something going on'* in religion: *'I feel some of the extraordinary achievements of the Victorians came out of a faith that sustained them through tough times, and so much has now been thrown out, particularly in the field of religion, because of the advance of science.'* From a rather different perspective, the supernatural came back to life in the arts in a manner that would have seemed highly improper to '50s humanism, through the impact of 'magic realism': primarily from Latin American writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, but finding echoes in Salman Rushdie or Ben Okri – or Britain's 'senior' poet, Ted Hughes, in his shamanistic or occultistic moods.

[54] Turner, p.154. Even in a secular society, the God-words – 'God', 'Christ', 'Jesus' – seem linked (along with sexual and scatological terms) to some awareness so fundamental that we are forced to turn to them when we need words to express deep anger, amazement, or grief.

[55] Turner, p.159. The Beatles had done something similar in 'Let It Be'.

[56] A similar bizarre combination was evident in Prince's mixing of flaunted sexuality with demands to his audience of 'Do you love God?'

[57] A 1987 youth study by McCann Erickson showed that, compared with the generation ten years earlier, '80s youth were sceptical and hedonistic yet also conservative; doubting idealism and valuing health and money more highly than love, in striking contrast to their predecessors.

[58] 'At no point', wrote Ian Aitken of star Conservative Chancellor Nigel Lawson's pamphlet *The New Conservatism*, 'does Mr Lawson touch upon those principles of compassion, charity or even "noblesse oblige" which once formed part of the Tory ethos' (*Guardian*, 6 August 1980).

[59] The weakness of 'traditional values' was demonstrated again in the early '90s by John Major's well-meaning challenge to the Conservative party conference to get 'back to basics'. It was unfortunate that the prurience of the tabloid media reduced his concerns immediately to sex ethics; and a series of Tory financial and sexual improprieties in the following months torpedoed the entire project. In themselves, 'traditional values' were shown to offer neither a robustly coherent programme, nor the internal power to live them out without double standards. The sad thing was that there was something good and significant about what Major was trying, in a well-intentioned if ultimately inadequate manner, to define and promote.

[60] In the hippie '60s, it was said, students studied sociology in order to change the world; in the '70s, they studied psychology to change themselves; in the yuppie '80s they studied business administration to survive.

[61] *Time*, 19 March 1984.

[62] *Guardian*, 3 December 1984.

[63] Marvin Gaye, Otis Redding, Ray Charles, Wilson Pickett, Curtis Mayfield, Randy Crawford, Gladys Knight, Dionne Warwick, Barry White, Aretha Franklin, Whitney Houston and Al Green all came from this background – and in many cases continued to seem proud of it.

[64] Armond White, *Rebel for the Hell of It: the life of Tupac Shakur* (1997), pp.168, 161, 167.

[65] The sense of disappointment was expressed by Hugo Young in the *Guardian*: 'At the end of 1991, this image of political leadership lies

shattered. It is the most telling change not just of this year but of several... What can now hardly be disputed is that wherever you look... a generation of self-confident conviction politicians has been replaced by leaders hopelessly engulfed in events bigger than they are.'

[66] Smith's Christian faith was 'central to what he was and stood for', says Blair in his book *New Britain* (1996), p.58. Blair's book contains a whole chapter titled 'Why I Am A Christian'. But although Christian Socialism supplied the original basis for a coherent 'New Labour' ideology, the party remains a slightly bizarre coalition of not very compatible elements.

[67] Matthew Collin, *Altered State: the story of Ecstasy culture and acid house* (1998 edition), pp.60, 62.

[68] Collin, p.95.

[69] Collin, pp.86, 82. 'All the early stuff you used to read about the London acid house scene was love and peace, but then they had the most strict door policy', complained a Manchester DJ (p.146). 'We didn't want to go and mix with these people', says one of those involved from the beginning about her reaction to newcomers (p.69).

[70] Collin, p.38.

[71] Collin, pp.159, 172.

[72] Collin, pp.255-60.

[73] Collin, pp.52, 53.

[74] Collin, p.65.

[75] Collin, p.5.

[76] Collin, p.196. Collin quotes a comment that whereas the '60s counterculture gave rise to an articulate underground press, all the Ecstasy culture had was music magazines (p.70).

[77] Collin, pp.197-206. Note too the religious imagery used by DJs: 'the Shaman', 'the Prophet', 'the High Priest', 'Zen Inspired Pagan Professionals'. 'Along with the techno scene has come a lot of exploration in new spirituality', said Phil Hartnoll of Orbital: 'It seems as though everyone has got crystals hanging around their necks' (quoted in Turner, p.228).

[78] Collin, p.7. An interesting moment was when Colston Hayter presented his projects to the Tory conference (p.111).

[79] Collin, p.313. Collin argues that the same 'uneasy synthesis' has marked Blair's 'New Labour' ethos.

[80] Collin, p.271.

[81] Collin, p.275. This was the summary of a 1999 *Independent on Sunday* writer, Oliver Stanton: "'Peace, love and unity" may have been

the constant Acid House refrain 10 years ago but, looking back now, we know it didn't mean much at all... The "peace" mantra slowly became an advertising strapline at the bottom of increasingly glossy flyers for increasingly expensive raves. Then it was replaced by corporate sponsorship logos – beer, spirits, jeans, even cigarettes. No one noticed, no one cared.'

[82] Noticeably, President Clinton's inauguration speech at the start of his second term took up this theme: *'Will we be one nation, one people with one common destiny? Will we come together or come apart?'*

[83] Postmodernists might defend this situation on the grounds that *'little, "local" narratives'* do less damage than overarching *'master narratives'*. But one only needs to think of the mass killings in the Balkan conflicts to see the horror that *'little, "local" narratives'* can cause.

[84] And again by the postmodern 'pragmatist' Rorty's argument (in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*) that *'There is... this much truth in ethnocentrism: we cannot justify our beliefs... to everybody, but only to those whose beliefs overlap ours to some appropriate extent... The pragmatist... can only be criticised for taking his own community too seriously. He can only be criticised for ethnocentrism, not relativism. To be ethnocentric is to divide the human race into the people to whom one must justify one's beliefs and the others. The first group – one's ethnos – comprises those who share enough of one's beliefs to make fruitful conversation possible.'*

[85] Kevin Ford asserts the distrust of America's Generation X for the structures of the broader business, political, and religious worlds and their loyalty to more 'local' groupings, but then concludes, *'So they feel no connection, no loyalty, no responsibility toward the outside world... The only world my generation feels any allegiance to or affection for is the closer, more intimate world of our friends. We desire friends who will be loyal to us. At the same time we're afraid of commitment. We're afraid of vulnerability. We want to communicate but we don't know how. So we surround ourselves with other people just like us.'* (*Jesus for a New Generation* (Downers Grove, 1995), p.49.)

[86] *'Pop music in the Nineties will be remembered primarily for the reunions'*: Nicholas Barber, *Independent on Sunday*, 15 November 1998.

[87] *'The whole Beatles message was Be Here*

Now', said John Lennon on one occasion, and of course 'Be Here Now' became an Oasis album title. Even Oasis' name came from the club where the Beatles did their first gig.

[88] *Virgin Encyclopaedia of Rock*, p.7. Interestingly, as rock seemingly lost its way, various classical composers started to sell heavily – and these often drew strongly on the Christian framework in one way or another: John Tavener, Henryk Gorecki, Arvo Part, James MacMillan, Gavin Bryars' curiously cleansing *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet*, Gregorian chant.

[89] Richard Hoggart has spoken of the rise of a generation of 'moral cretins' afraid to make judgments about anything. Ultimately, of course, relativism erodes passion.

[90] Ian Macdonald's superb *Revolution in the Head* (hailed in Q as the *'most sustainedly brilliant piece of pop criticism for years'*) concludes that pop music is in *'catastrophic decline'*, and that anyone looking at '60s music must be *'aware that they are looking at something on a higher scale of achievement than today's... That the same can be said of other musical forms – most obviously classical and jazz – confirms that something in the soul of Western culture began to die during the late Sixties'* (1995 edition, p.299). That may seem highly oversimplified, but the underlying question is an essential one.

[91] The fact that amid the valuelessness of postmodernism only money is left to call the shots means that power moves to the class with the most disposable income. Hence single adults are now the key group at the core of cultural development, whereas in, say, 1968 it was students.

[92] As so often, Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* remains remarkably accurate in catching the postmodern mood (p.174): *'Escape through irony and self-awareness is in any case itself an illusion; at best it provides only momentary relief. Distancing soon becomes a routine in its own right. Awareness commenting on awareness creates an escalating cycle of self-consciousness that inhibits spontaneity. It intensifies the feeling of inauthenticity... We long for the suspension of self-consciousness, of the pseudo-analytic attitude that has become second nature; but neither art nor religion, historically the great emancipators from the prison of the self, retain the power to discourage disbelief.'*

[93] I owe this quotation to Jock McGregor of L'Abri.

[94] After all, Lyotard's classic description of the postmodern era as *'incredulous towards meta-narratives'* referred not so much to Christianity as to the death of the liberal dream. It may be humanism that has crumpled most in the advent of postmodernism.

[95] Rock critic Nicholas Barber, writing in the *Independent on Sunday* about nu-metal bands such as Limp Bizkit, Papa Roach and Slipknot, complains of their lack of any message except self-pity, and concludes that in most cases they merely *'greet everything... with a raised middle finger'*. (Although that form of communication has some logic in a postmodernity which denies the feasibility of saying anything true?)

[96] *'The global meltdown has begun'*, wrote George Monbiot (*Guardian*, 2 July 1999). *'The effects of climate change are arriving faster than even the gloomiest prophets expected. This week we learnt that the Arctic ecosystem is collapsing. Polar bear and seal populations appear to have halved. Three weeks ago, marine biologists reported that almost all the world's coral reefs could be dead by the end of the coming century... Climate change is perhaps the gravest calamity our species has ever encountered... One month ago, the Red Cross reported that natural disasters uprooted more people in 1998 than all the wars and conflicts on earth combined. Climate change, it warned, is about to precipitate a series of "super-disasters"'*. These may in fact have begun; already the last year was the worst ever recorded for floods; plus it saw the western hemisphere's worst-ever hurricane, and three thousand dying as India was hit by the biggest heatwave in half a century. Almost all scientists expect the pace of these changes to accelerate. (*'If you have some massive insight that the world is going to end, and end quickly, how on earth are you going to get this over to people?'*, asked Joseph Harman, discoverer of the ozone hole over Antarctica.) Meanwhile, the world has now for the first time begun to eat more food than it grows; yet still each year there are 93 million more people being added to its population. The World Commission on Water reported that within 25 years we will need 56% more water than is currently available, leading perhaps to water wars. *'We are sawing through the branch that is holding us,'* said a UN report on world population, *'and if we carry on as before, it may break and bring us crashing down with it... We are not talking about the interests of distant descendants. It is our own children.'* (The

maddening thing is that so many of these problems are directly traceable to our own, still-continuing, avarice, our own carelessness about global warming, fossil-fuel overuse and rainforest destruction; our own demotivation to think beyond *'money, sex and status'*.)

[97] I'm quoting this phrase from renowned culture critic George Steiner, who has written of the *'feeling of disarray, of a regress into violence, into moral obtuseness; our ready impression of a central failure of values in the arts, in the comeliness of personal and social modes; our fears of a "new dark age" in which civilization itself, as we have known it, may disappear'* (*In Bluebeard's Castle* (1971), p.46). Robert Kaplan's controversial *Atlantic Monthly* article 'The Coming Anarchy' presented a similar view of post-postmodernity, where 'criminal anarchy' was *'the real "strategic" danger: "Disease, overpopulation, unprovoked crime, scarcity of resources, refugee migrations... and the empowerment of private armies, security firms and international drug cartels.'* The horrendous brutality raging at that point in west Africa provided, he suggested, *'an appropriate introduction to the issues... that will soon confront our civilization.'* But then might not *Mad Max*-style external anarchy be matched by internal anarchy in a culture where the average person believes, 'post-God', that the individual has no value, life no meaning, right and wrong – and love – no reality; that it really is every man for himself, a Nietzschean world where the strong survive and the weak go to the wall? (Gangsta rap already presents music from such a world.) We recall how quickly (fifteen years?) Germany slid down the slope into killer-Nazism, once things went badly wrong economically. The generation now adult still believes, intuitively, in many things for which postmodernism, devoid of God, gives no foundation. But as Os Guinness says, the real test of a cultural shift is not its effects on the first generation, but on the third. These will shape the world we grow old in; the world our children will have built on the disbeliefs we gave them.

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