

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 18 | Issue 3

Article 6

---

7-1-2001

## A Little Story About Metanarratives: Lyotard, Religion, And Postmodernism Revisited

James K.A. Smith

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Smith, James K.A. (2001) "A Little Story About Metanarratives: Lyotard, Religion, And Postmodernism Revisited," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol18/iss3/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

# A LITTLE STORY ABOUT METANARRATIVES: LYOTARD, RELIGION, AND POSTMODERNISM REVISTED

James K. A. Smith

Christian scholars, when challenged by the pluriform phenomenon of "postmodernism," quickly seized upon Jean-Francois Lyotard's 'definition' in the Introduction to *The Postmodern Condition*: "Simplifying to the extreme," Lyotard begins, "I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward meta-narratives [*grand récits*]." If this is the case, the question is raised: how can Christian faith, grounded in the "metanarrative" of the biblical canon, be viable in postmodernity? But *is* the biblical story or Christian faith a meta-narrative? For Lyotard, the term "metanarrative" does not simply refer to a "grand story" in the sense of stories which have grand or universal pretensions, or even make universal claims. What is at stake is the *nature* of those claims. Given this more precise definition of metanarratives, I will argue that the biblical story is *not* a metanarrative in Lyotard's sense. Having noted this, the final portion of the article turns to a more positive understanding of the relation between biblical faith and Lyotard in particular, and postmodernism in general.

The preoccupation with "the present"—our contemporaneity—which characterizes current philosophical discourse is not particularly new, though it is certainly a modern project whose origin is Kantian. Indeed, the posing of the question, "What is Enlightenment?,"<sup>1</sup> raised the tone of philosophy<sup>2</sup> to reflection on the present as a critical interrogation of "our time" and its significance: the question of what is happening, now. More than just an attempt to situate the present in relation to its past and future, Kant's question probes the meaning of the present and what it means to be "us"—to be here, now, contemporary. Arguing that Kant's essay "introduces a new type of question into the field of philosophical reflection," Foucault remarks that "with this text on the *Aufklärung* we see philosophy—and I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say that it is for the first time—problematizing its own discursive contemporaneity."<sup>3</sup> In modernity, philosophy has redoubled itself insofar as it has put modernity into question; in other words, this critical philosophy could be characterized as "the discourse of modernity on modernity."<sup>4</sup> Originating with modernity, the question of who we are becomes a question of our present, our "now."

While "we postmoderns" may have abandoned any "idea for a universal history from a cosmopolitan point of view," our preoccupation with naming the present betrays our modern filiation and Enlightenment genealogy. While this original philosophical reflection on the present,



encapsulated in the query “What is Enlightenment?” is, in *our* present, formulated as a different query—“What is postmodernism?”<sup>5</sup>—the questioning itself is modern. And so, to “we postmoderns,” I might pronounce: “My fellow postmoderns, there are no postmoderns,” insofar as our penchant to describe our present—even as rupture—is indicative of a modern project.<sup>6</sup>

We might understand Jean-François Lyotard’s own project in his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* within this Kantian tradition of naming the present. Faced with the question, Lyotard picked up the gauntlet and tackled the challenge early on: “Simplifying to the extreme,” he remarks, “I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives [*grand récits*].”<sup>7</sup> And for various reasons,<sup>8</sup> his answer has been quickly adopted as a succinct formulation of our present condition, particularly by scholars operating within the Christian tradition. Christian scholars (particularly those within the evangelical tradition), when challenged by the pluriform phenomenon of postmodernism, quickly seized upon Lyotard’s ‘definition’ and thus consider the challenge of postmodernism in terms of Lyotard’s definition and the viability of metanarratives.<sup>9</sup> Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, for instance, devote two chapters of their important and original book, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used To Be*, to the question of how biblical faith, which they understand to be grounded in a metanarrative, could be viable in postmodernity, which is characterized by an incredulity toward metanarratives.<sup>10</sup> A similar concern is expressed in the work of Catholic theologian Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt who, in contesting Lyotard’s notion of the “end” of metanarratives, seeks to offer “the possibility of a true (or real) metanarrative presentation (or presence) of the sublime” as a viable theological alternative in a postmodern context.<sup>11</sup> For both, the biblical story *is* a metanarrative; however, they argue that it is not implicated in the violence of metanarratives—which they consider to be the concern of the postmodern critique—because it contains within itself an “antitotalizing” and “ethical thrust” which undermines just such totalization and violence.<sup>12</sup>

But *is* the biblical story a “metanarrative?” Is the scriptural narrative a “metanarrative” in the way that Lyotard speaks of the Hegelian system, or Marx’s historical materialism, or the modern scientific narrative of progress? It is here that I think we would profit from carefully reading Lyotard’s analysis. For Lyotard, the term “metanarrative” [*grand récit*] does not simply refer to a “grand story” in the sense of stories that have grand or universal pretensions, or even make universal claims. What is at stake is not the *scope* of these narratives but the *nature* of the claims they make. For Lyotard, metanarratives are a distinctly *modern* phenomenon: they are stories which not only tell a grand story (since even premodern and tribal stories do this), but also claim to be able to *legitimate* the story and its claims *by an appeal to universal Reason*. On Lyotard’s account, the *Enuma Elish*, though telling a story which is universal or grand in scope, is nevertheless not a metanarrative because it does not claim to legitimate itself by an appeal to scientific Reason. On the other hand, Lyotard sees classical Marxism as a metanarrative insofar as it claims to be a system legitimated by Reason, and therefore to be universally accepted on that

basis. What is wrong with this is that such a modern *grand récit* fails to see that it, too, is grounded in a myth and faith-commitments.<sup>13</sup> As a result, postmodernity's "incredulity toward metanarratives" ought to be understood as an *opportunity* for religious thought in a contemporary context—an ally rather than a foe.

Given this more precise definition of metanarratives, I will argue (contra Middleton and Walsh, and others) that the biblical story is *not* a metanarrative in Lyotard's sense. Yes, it makes grand, even universal claims (e.g., that every person is created in the image of God); but it does not—at least within a broadly conceived "Augustinian" tradition—claim to be legitimated by Reason, but rather trusted in faith. To accomplish this, Part I will catalogue and outline a number of engagements with postmodernism (and Lyotard in particular) by Christian philosophers and theologians, in order to point out a common misreading of Lyotard and hence a prevailing misconstrual of "our present." *viz.*, postmodernity. To attempt to correct this, Part II will offer a close reading of Lyotard's argument in *The Postmodern Condition*. Part III will then offer a re-reading of postmodernism as a unique opportunity for religious thought in "our time."

## I

Like "deconstruction,"<sup>14</sup> the term "metanarrative" has become a word which has never lacked employment, but has unfortunately been put to work doing jobs it never asked for.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the term "metanarrative" has been subject to equivocation and thus displaced from the very specific context of Lyotard's employment of the concept. The result, it seems, is a straw man.

We see this confusion, for instance, in Middleton and Walsh's discussion, where Lyotard's notion of a metanarrative is misconstrued in three ways. First, concerning the very definition of "metanarratives:" after citing Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarratives, they go on to explain what they suggest are, "[f]rom a postmodern perspective, [the] two central problems with metanarratives:" (a) that they are "universal" stories, (b) that they are totalizing or marginalizing.<sup>16</sup> In other words, they argue that the problem with metanarratives is their *scope*: a metanarrative "purports to be not simply a local story (an ad hoc, first-order account of a community's experience) but the universal story of the world from *arche* to *telos*, a grand narrative encompassing world history from beginning to end."<sup>17</sup> They then go on to suggest—even though they concede Lyotard never says this<sup>18</sup>—that incredulity toward metanarratives entails "widespread suspicion of any comprehensive metanarrative of world history that makes 'total' claims" because such claims inevitably lead to violence.<sup>19</sup> The problem with this explanation of metanarratives (and hence postmodernism) is that it lacks any grounding in Lyotard's discussion of metanarratives, and thus seriously misconstrues what "postmodernism" would be. As we will see in Part II, the problem with metanarratives has nothing to do with the *scope* of their claims—that they are "large-scale" stories of "universal scope"<sup>20</sup>—but the nature of their *legitimation*.

Second, in Middleton and Walsh the term “metanarrative” is conflated with other discourses concerning the “social construction” of meaning: “If metanarratives are social constructions, then, like abstract ethical systems, they are simply particular moral visions dressed up in the guise of universality.”<sup>21</sup> So on their accounting, what’s wrong with metanarratives from a postmodern perspective is the fact that they are merely social constructions masquerading as universal truths: local claims with universal pretensions. “To the postmodern mind,” they conclude, “metanarratives are mere human constructs, fictive devices through which we impose an order on history and make it subject to us (hence they may be termed “master” narratives).”<sup>22</sup> However, once again they are importing something into the notion of metanarrative which is absent from Lyotard’s discussion, resulting in more bad press.<sup>23</sup>

Third, as indicated above, Middleton and Walsh consider the second major problem with metanarratives to be an *ethical* one: as universal narratives, metanarratives are hegemonic, violently excluding any who are “different” or reject the dominant story.<sup>24</sup> While concerns with totalizing violence, marginalization, and oppression are certainly important aspects of postmodern critique,<sup>25</sup> it must again be noted that this is *not* something that Lyotard advances with respect to metanarratives. We do well to recall (as we will do below) that the *Postmodern Condition* is *A Report on Knowledge* which thus revolves around the epistemological problem of *legitimation* or justification.

However, given their reading of Lyotard, postmodernism, and metanarratives, Middleton and Walsh pose the problem as follows:

The problem, from a postmodern point of view, is that the Scriptures, in which Christians claim to ground their faith and in which we will seek answers to the worldview questions we have raised, constitute a metanarrative that makes universal claims. [...] So the question we are confronted with ... is whether the Christian faith, rooted as it is in a metanarrative of cosmic proportions, is subject to the postmodern charge of totalizing violence.<sup>26</sup>

As they note, this is to assume that Christian faith *is* grounded in a metanarrative: “The important question, then, would not be *whether* the Christian faith is rooted in a metanarrative, but *what sort of* metanarrative the Scriptures contain.”<sup>27</sup> My goal in this essay is to argue that *whether* Christian faith is rooted in a metanarrative is *precisely* the important question. Because Middleton and Walsh have misunderstood the notion of metanarrative, they end up conceding that the biblical story is a metanarrative, and thus pose the challenge of postmodernism in a way that is misleading, or at least, misguided. When we turn to a close analysis of *The Postmodern Condition*, we must conclude that when we properly understand “metanarratives,” the biblical narrative does not constitute a metanarrative and thus Christian faith is not subject to the postmodern critique in the way that Middleton and Walsh suggest.

Middleton and Walsh are not alone in their rendering of postmodernism in general, or metanarratives in particular. While grounded in a

much closer reading of Lyotard, in his *Primer on Postmodernism* Stanley Grenz also misconstrues Lyotard's discussion by suggesting that postmodernism finds fault with the mere universality of "metanarratives." In other words, Grenz also seems to think that it is the *scope* of metanarratives which is the problem:

What makes our condition "postmodern" is not only that people no longer cling to the myths of modernity. The postmodern outlook entails the end of the appeal to any central legitimating myth whatsoever. Not only have all the reigning master narratives lost their credibility, but the idea of a grand narrative is itself no longer credible. [...] Consequently, the postmodern outlook demands an attack on any claimant to universality—it demands, in fact, a "war on totality."<sup>28</sup>

And if metanarratives are simply orienting stories with universal claims, then it must be the case that the biblical narrative which grounds Christian faith is also a metanarrative. As a result, we are put in a position of choosing between postmodernism—which, of course, is defined by "incredulity toward metanarratives"—and Christian faith. Thus, like Middleton and Walsh, Grenz concludes that Christian scholars must ultimately part ways with the postmodern critique of metanarratives, though they might adopt it to a certain extent:

To put this in another way, we might say that because of our faith in Christ, we cannot totally affirm the central tenet of postmodernism as defined by Lyotard—the rejection of the metanarrative. We may welcome Lyotard's conclusion when applied to the chief concern of his analysis—namely, the scientific enterprise. [...] Contrary to the implications of Lyotard's thesis, we firmly believe that the local narratives of the many human communities do fit together into a single grand narrative, the story of humankind. [...] As Christians, we claim to know what that grand narrative is.<sup>29</sup>

But isn't that trying to have our cake and eat it, too? To arbitrarily say that the postmodern critique applies to Enlightenment or scientific claims but not Christian claims by appealing to the fact that we believe the one and not the other is to beg the question. Further, and more to my point here, Grenz paints himself into a corner by failing to understand what really constitutes a metanarrative.<sup>30</sup> It seems we need to read Lyotard again (for the first time).

By failing to appreciate Lyotard's very specific meaning of "metanarrative," Christian philosophers and theologians have created a phantom problem which ultimately proposes a false dichotomy: *either* postmodernism *or* Christian faith. Invoking Luther's notion of *theologia crucis* (versus *theologia gloriae*) Brian Ingrassia poses this bifurcation in the starkest of terms: "The theology of the cross pronounces an either/or: either biblical revelation or philosophical speculation. The same either/or must be proclaimed to the present age: either biblical theology or postmodern theory."<sup>31</sup> While more nuanced in Grenz, Middleton and Walsh, the proposed

dichotomy remains operative precisely because of a misinterpretation of Lyotard on postmodernism and metanarratives. As a corrective, we will engage in a closer reading of the *The Postmodern Condition* in Part II.

## II

In postmodernity, the rules of the game have changed. In particular, changes have taken place “since the end of the nineteenth century” which “have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts.” In other words, postmodernism is characterized by a shift in the criteria of knowledge; it is an epistemological matter.<sup>32</sup> Lyotard sets the stage for his discussion by chronicling a conflict between “science” and “narratives”: when judged by the criteria of modern science, stories and narratives are little more than “fables.” When pushed, however, science must *legitimate* itself: it must produce a “discourse of legitimation” which Lyotard simply calls “philosophy.” So before determining what “postmodern” would mean, he first defines what he means by “modern”: “I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit [Hegel], the hermeneutics of meaning [Schleiermacher?], the emancipation of the rational [Kant] or working subject [Marx], or the creation of wealth [Smith].”<sup>33</sup> The question of the relation between modernity and postmodernity revolves around this issue of “legitimation.”

The process of legitimation or justification must be thought within the pragmatics of communication: Every discourse of legitimation is “sent” by a “sender” to an “addressee.” In order for there to be legitimation, there must be a *consensus* between sender and addressee. But in order for this to occur, sender and addressee must already agree upon the rules of the game—must already have committed themselves to language and meanings which will be shared and agreed upon. Thus, while purporting to legitimate or justify itself to another who does not agree, a discourse of legitimation must presume an original consensus. So legitimation occurs only for those who agree to play the game by the same rules. While not exactly preaching to the choir, it is a matter of preaching to those who have agreed to come to church. What this means, however, is that the great discourses of legitimation in, say, the Enlightenment, are in fact predicated upon an agreed upon *narrative* which established the rules of the game.

In order to appreciate this infiltration of narrative into science, we need to consider more closely Lyotard’s account of what he describes as “narrative knowledge” and “scientific knowledge.” As we have already noted, this unfolds within a framework of language theory and an analysis of the pragmatics of discourse.<sup>34</sup> Unpacking the triad of sender, message, and addressee, and noting the consensus which is required for such communication to take place, Lyotard (*pace* Wittgenstein) refers to such shared pragmatics as “language games” in which the rules of the game are agreed upon by those who choose to play. Of each game he notes: “their rules do not carry within themselves their own legitimation, but are the object of a contract, explicit or not, between players.”<sup>35</sup> Further, these shared rules

both require and produce a social bond; this is why "the question of the social bond, insofar as it is a question, is itself a language game."<sup>36</sup>

With this methodological framework of language game pragmatics in place, we can now consider the pragmatics of "narrative" knowledge as distinguished from the pragmatics of "scientific" knowledge—a distinction between "myth" and "science"<sup>37</sup> (or, I would suggest, "faith" and "reason"). "Narrative" knowledge (which Lyotard also refers to as "traditional" knowledge, or what we might describe, given his categories, as *premodern* knowledge) is grounded in the "custom" of a culture and, as such, does not require legitimation. Lyotard links this to a kind of "tribal" paradigm in which the homogeneity of "a people" (*Volk*), coupled with the "authority" of a narrator, produces a kind of immediate auto-legitimation. "The narratives themselves have this authority," he notes. In a sense, "the people are only that which actualizes the narratives."<sup>38</sup> Legitimation is not demanded but rather is implicit in the narrative itself as a story of the people.

In contrast to this auto-legitimation, modern scientific culture externalizes the problem of legitimation. The two pragmatic poles of sender and addressee are distinguished, and the addressee demands of the sender justification for messages sent her way. I must now provide "proof."<sup>39</sup> However, the homogeneity of the premodern *Volk* has dissolved; therefore, we have no immediate or previously agreed upon consensus; we do not all share the same language game. As such, modern legitimation has recourse to a *universal* criterion: Reason. It is this move which generates what Lyotard famously describes as "metanarratives": appeals to criteria of legitimation which are understood as standing outside any particular language game and thus guarantee "universal" truth.

And it is precisely here that we locate postmodernity's incredulity toward metanarratives: they are just another language game, albeit masquerading as the game above all games. Or as Lyotard puts it, scientific knowledge, which considered itself to be a triumph over narrative knowledge, covertly *grounds itself in a narrative* (i.e., an originary myth).<sup>40</sup> In particular, Lyotard analyzes two modern "narratives of legitimation": first, the humanistic metanarrative of emancipation (as found in Kant and Marx), and second, the metanarrative concerning the life of the Spirit in German Idealism.<sup>41</sup> But we can see this infusing of myth in knowledge as far back as Plato, where "the new language game of science posed the problem of its own legitimation at the very beginning."<sup>42</sup> In Books VI and VII of the *Republic*, for instance, the answer to the question of legitimation (here both epistemological and sociopolitical) "comes in the form of a narrative—the allegory of the cave, which recounts how and why men yearn for narratives and fail to recognize knowledge. Knowledge is thus founded on the narrative of its own martyrdom."<sup>43</sup> In a similar way, Lyotard argues, modern scientific knowledge, when called upon (by itself) to legitimate itself, cannot help but appeal to narrative—this "return of the narrative in the non-narrative" is "inevitable."<sup>44</sup> Whenever science attempts to legitimate itself, it is no longer scientific but narrative, appealing to an orienting myth which is not susceptible to scientific legitimation.<sup>45</sup> Science demands of itself the impossible: "the language game of science desires its statements to be true but does not have the resources to legitimate their truth on its

own."<sup>46</sup> The appeal to "Reason" as the criterion for what constitutes knowledge is but one more language game among many, shaped by founding beliefs or commitments which determine what constitutes "knowledge" within the game; reason is grounded in myth. "Metanarratives," then, are the term Lyotard ascribes to these false appeals to universal, rational, scientific criteria—as though they were divorced from any particular game and transcend all language games.

Here we must return to the question posed at the close of Part I: If postmodernity is "incredulity towards metanarratives," then would postmodernism signal a rejection of Christian faith insofar as it is based on the "grand story" of the Scriptures? I think the answer is clearly negative, since the biblical narrative and Christian faith does not claim to be legitimated by an appeal to a universal, autonomous Reason, but rather by an appeal to *faith* (or, to translate, "myth" or "narrative").<sup>47</sup> Lyotard very specifically defines metanarratives as universal discourses of legitimation which mask their own particularity; or to put it another way, metanarratives deny their narrative ground even as they proceed upon it as a basis. In particular, we must note that the postmodern critique is not aimed at metanarratives because they are really grounded in narratives; on the contrary, the problem with metanarratives is that they do not own up to their own mythic ground.<sup>48</sup> Postmodernism is not incredulity toward narrative or myth; on the contrary, it unveils that all knowledge is grounded in such. Once we appreciate this, the (false) dichotomy which Middleton and Walsh, Grenz, Ingraffia, and others propose is dissolved insofar as the biblical narrative is not properly a "metanarrative." As a result, new space is opened for a Christian appropriation of the postmodern critique of Enlightenment rationality.<sup>49</sup>

What characterizes the postmodern condition, then, is not a rejection of grand stories in terms of *scope* or the sense of epic claims, but rather an unveiling of the fact that all knowledge is rooted in *some* narrative or myth. The result, of course (and here I note one of the genuine problems of postmodernity), is what Lyotard describes as a "problem of legitimation"<sup>50</sup> (or what Habermas describes as a "legitimation crisis") since what we *thought* were universal criteria have been unveiled as just one game among many.<sup>51</sup> If we consider, for instance, the reality of deep *moral* diversity and competing visions of the Good, postmodern society is at a loss to adjudicate the competing claims. There can be no appeal to a higher court that would transcend a historical context or language game, no neutral observer nor 'God's-eye-view' which can *legitimate* or *justify* one paradigm or moral language game above another. If all moral claims are conditioned by paradigms of historical commitment, then they cannot transcend those conditions; thus, every moral claim operates within a 'logic' that is conditioned by the paradigm. Or, in other words, every language game has its own set of rules. As a result, *criteria* which determine what constitutes 'evidence' or 'proof' must be *game-relative*: they will function as rules only for those who share the same paradigm or participate in the same language game. Arguments or defenses of moral claims operate on the basis of *intra*-paradigm or *intra*-game criteria; as such, the arguments carry force only insofar as the addressee shares the same paradigm; in this case there would be a

consensus between the sender and addressee of a statement. If, however, the sender of the argument and the addressee live in different language games, then the argument is bound to be lost in the mail.<sup>52</sup> The incommensurability of language games means that there is a plurality of logics which precludes any demonstrative appeal to a "common reason." Or again, in the model of language games, the rules for distinct games are not proportional.<sup>53</sup> The pragmatics of justification, which requires a reversibility (i.e., consensus) between the sender and addressees, is precisely that which is denied *between* language games. "[T]he problem," Lyotard notes, "is indeed one of translation and translatability. It so happens that languages are translatable, otherwise they are not languages; but language games are not translatable, because if they were, they would not be language games" (p. 53).<sup>54</sup> Recognition of the incommensurability of language games means that there is no consensus, no *sensus communis*.<sup>55</sup>

In the face of this problem, we must not lose sight of the fact that what constitutes the postmodern condition is precisely a *plurality* of language games—a condition in which no *one* story can claim either auto-legitimation (because of the plurality of "the people") nor appeal to a phantom universal "Reason" (because Reason is just one game among others, which is itself rooted in a narrative).<sup>56</sup> And this plurality is based on the fact that each game is grounded in different "narratives" or myths (i.e., founding *beliefs*). Whether we understand this as a new Babel or a new Pentecost, I shall argue in the final section that this situation—though posing a challenge—also presents a unique opportunity for religious thought.

### III

At root, I would argue that what is at stake in postmodernism is *the relationship between faith and reason*. When Lyotard describes postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives," he indicates a suspicion and critique of the very idea of an autonomous Reason—a universal rationality without commitments. Modernity's metanarratives cannot disengage themselves from narratives as their ultimate ground, and thus cannot divorce themselves from "myth"—orienting beliefs which themselves are not subject to rational legitimation. In this light, consider, for instance, Kuhn's analyses concerning the role of paradigms in scientific research. Dominated by the language of faith,<sup>57</sup> Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* points out the role of paradigms, as "constellations of belief,"<sup>58</sup> in orienting how we perceive our world and what we consider knowledge and truth. In other words, science finds itself grounded in prior beliefs which do not admit of legitimation, but rather function as the basis for further legitimation. The paradigm itself is a "belief"—a matter of faith. It is also at this level that Wittgenstein notes: "If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do.'"<sup>59</sup> To this list we could add Gadamer, Polanyi, Derrida, and others,<sup>60</sup> common to all of them is a delimitation of rationality, particularly Enlightenment ideals of scientific, objective rationality.

In this sense, the postmodern critique described by Lyotard as "incredulity toward metanarratives" represents a displacement of the

notion of autonomous reason as itself a myth.<sup>61</sup> And that, it seems to me, is a project with which Christian scholars ought to ally themselves, particularly once we have clarified that such an alliance does not require jettisoning the biblical narrative. By calling into question the idea of an autonomous, objective, neutral rationality, I have argued that postmodernity represents the retrieval of a fundamentally Augustinian epistemology which is attentive to the structural necessity of faith preceding reason, believing in order to understand.<sup>62</sup> While this Augustinian structure is formalized—in the sense that there are a plurality of faiths, as many as there are language games—the structure (of faith preceding reason) remains in place, in contrast to modern (and perhaps even Thomistic<sup>63</sup>) epistemologies. The incredulity of postmodernity toward metanarratives is due to the fact that modernity denies its own commitments, renounces its faith, while at the same time never escaping it. Postmodernism refuses to believe the Enlightenment is without a creed. But note: the postmodern critique does not demand that modern thought relinquish its faith (a modern gesture to be sure), but to own up to it—to openly confess its *credo*. Thus we might consider the postmodern critique as a revaluing of myth, of orienting faith, providing new spaces for religious discourse—and in particular, an integrally Christian philosophy—in a climate where it has been demonstrated that everyone’s “got religion.”

How will this insight be helpful to Christian philosophers? My point is not to suggest that Lyotard’s analysis concretely helps us to understand Christian faith; in other words, I am not arguing that we look to Lyotard for assistance in helping us to understand Christian faith commitments. Rather, I think that “Christian philosophers”—whose faith is an integral aspect of their philosophy and their philosophizing<sup>64</sup>—should find in Lyotard’s critique of metanarratives and autonomous Reason an ally which opens up the space for a radically Christian philosophy. By calling into question the very ideal of a universal, autonomous Reason (which was, in the Enlightenment, the basis for rejecting ‘religious thought’), and further demonstrating that all knowledge is grounded in “narrative” or “myth,” Lyotard relativizes (secular) philosophy’s claim to autonomy, and so grants the legitimacy of a philosophy which grounds itself in Christian faith. Previously, such a distinctly “Christian philosophy” would have been exiled from the “pure” arena of philosophy because of its “infection” with bias and prejudice. Lyotard’s critique, however, demonstrates that no philosophy—indeed, no knowledge—is untainted by prejudice or faith-commitments. In this way the playing field is leveled and new opportunities to voice a Christian philosophy are created. So Lyotard’s postmodern critique of metanarratives, rather than being a formidable foe of Christian faith and thought, can in fact be enlisted as an ally in the construction of a Christian philosophy.<sup>65</sup>

Loyola Marymount University

#### NOTES

1. Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” in *On History*, ed. Lewis

White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 3-10.

2. This is the focus of Derrida's gloss on Kant's "On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy." See Jacques Derrida, "On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy," in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant, Transformative Critique by Jacques Derrida*, ed. Peter Fenves (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

3. Michel Foucault, "The Art of the Telling the Truth," found in a helpful context in *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. Michael Kelly (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 139-140.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 141. In his own reflection on Foucault's reflection on Kant, Habermas offers the same evaluation: "Foucault discovers in Kant the first philosopher to take aim like an archer at the heart of a present that is concentrated in the significance of the contemporary moment, and thereby to inaugurate the discourse of modernity." Habermas, "Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present: On Foucault's Lecture on Kant's *What is Enlightenment?*," in *ibid.*, p. 151. See also Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 1-22. One of the implications of my argument in this paper is to open a space for a renewed dialogue between contemporary French philosophy's understanding of "postmodernism" and Habermas' discussion of the "unfinished project of modernity."

5. Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?," trans. Regis Durand as an Appendix to *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 71-82.

6. Lyotard is attentive to this, later posing the question: "Are 'we' not telling, whether bitterly or gladly, the great narrative of the end of great narratives? For thought to remain modern, doesn't it suffice that it think in terms of the end of some history?" See Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 135-136.

7. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiv.

8. Among which I would include its early appearance in both French (1979) and English (1984), its deceiving simplicity, its appearance in the Preface, and its largely epistemological definition of postmodernism. All of these factors make it prime real estate for academic squatters who get there first, don't have to read much, and find it "easy."

9. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard himself did not generate a critique of Christianity as a metanarrative. Nor does he do so in his recent engagement with Christianity in Jean-François Lyotard and Eberhard Gruber, *The Hyphen: Between Judaism and Christianity*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999).

10. J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), chs. 4 and 5. In the structure of the book, these two chapters form the fulcrum of the text (see the Table of Contents for a visual aid on this point). We should note a careful distinction here: their contention is that the "the Scriptures...constitute metanarratives that makes universal claims;" and Christian faith "is undeniably rooted in [this] metanarrative" (p. 83). I will not contest that Christian faith is grounded in the Scriptures; the question is whether the Scriptures really constitute a "metanarrative" in Lyotard's sense. If not, then the so-called "problem" of "biblical faith in a postmodern age" [Middleton and Walsh's subtitle] will not revolve around its alleged complicity with metanarratives.

11. Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, "Aesthetics: The Theological Sublime," in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, eds. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 204.

12. Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger*, pp. 87-107. This will be engaged more extensively below.

13. In other words, I would suggest that Lyotard's specific critique of meta-narratives in *The Postmodern Condition* is analogous to Gadamer's unveiling of the Enlightenment *prejudice* against prejudice: "The fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself." See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), p. 273. For a further discussion of postmodernism within the context of hermeneutics, see my *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

14. Derrida discusses the fact that the word "deconstruction" is "already attached to very different connotations, inflections, and emotional or affective values" in his "Letter to a Japanese Friend," trans. David Wood and Andrew Benjamin in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 270. "This word," he continues, "at least on its own, has never appeared satisfactory to me (but what word is), and must always be girded by an entire discourse" (p. 272).

15. Again, since such misunderstandings are so common with respect to contemporary French philosophy, which *we* call "postmodern" (they do not), I would again refer to Derrida's reception in the United States. Concerning the caricature of his work in North America, at Villanova University (in 1994), Derrida took the opportunity "to reject a commonplace, a prejudice, that is widely circulated about deconstruction. That is, not only among bad journalists, and there are many of them, but among people in the academy who behave not like good journalists—I have the deepest respect for good journalists—but like bad journalists, repeating stereotypes without reading the text." See "The Villanova Roundtable: A Conversation With Jacques Derrida," in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. John D. Caputo (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 1997), pp. 8-9. In a similar way, I think Lyotard has gotten "bad press;" the goal of my paper is to push us beyond the stereotype of postmodernism by actually reading the text of *The Postmodern Condition*.

16. Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, pp. 70-71.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 214n.32.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 70. They, of course, are not endorsing this position; this is their summary of postmodernism, to which they respond in chapter 5.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 71. Their favorite authority in this regard (indicated even in the title of their book) seems to be Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990). I have reservations about Anderson functioning as an authority on contemporary French philosophy. If Middleton and Walsh were to reply that their concern is in fact not postmodernism as an intellectual movement but post-modernity as a pop cultural phenomenon (in which case Anderson would seem an appropriate adjudicator of evidence), then it is hard to understand why Lyotard's definition would function as the fulcrum of their book.

23. Let us recall the relative humility of my thesis, here: my primary objec-

tive is to clarify a misreading of Lyotard and thus a common misunderstanding of postmodernism and its relationship to narratives. However, "postmodernism" is by no means a monolithic phenomenon. As such, I can't fairly grapple with its many aspects in space provided here, but do hope to take up this question elsewhere. Suffice it to say that Christians would have legitimate concerns about more "Nietzschean" strains (as in the work of Deleuze).

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 71-73.

25. As evidenced, for instance, in the work of Levinas and Derrida's later work. For a discussion of these matters, see my "Determined Violence: Derrida's Structural Religion," *Journal of Religion* 78 (1998), pp. 197-212 and "Alterity, Transcendence, and the Violence of the Concept," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 38 (1998), pp. 369-381.

26. Middleton and Walsh, p. 83. My goal here is not to engage their response in chapter five (pp. 87-107) since, on my account, it is a misguided response at best, and at worst, responding to a straw man because of their misconstrual of Lyotard's discussion of metanarratives.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

28. Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 45.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 164. Of particular concern here is Grenz's use of the word "know" in the final sentence. How that is defined would be the crux of whether the Christian narrative really is a metanarrative in Lyotard's sense.

30. Henry Knight also misunderstands Lyotard on this point, defining a "metanarrative" as simply an "overarching explanatory story." See Henry H. Knight III, *A Future for Truth: Evangelical Theology in a Postmodern World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), p. 58.

31. Brian Ingraffia, *Postmodern Theory and [it seems to me this conjunction should be a disjunction: or] Biblical Theology: Vanquishing God's Shadow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 241 (cp. p. 14). While space does not here permit a full critique, the naivete of Ingraffia's thesis and argument is frustrating. His book begins with a protest against the "synthesis" of biblical theology and philosophy, which he traces to "the early Church fathers" who "often used Greek conceptuality and philosophy to articulate their faith," and thus diluted biblical truths (p. 14)—as though Greek conceptuality was not the framework for articulating biblical ideas in the New Testament itself! Describing this synthesis as "ontotheology," Ingraffia (echoing Barth) proposes to separate the two, distilling a purely biblical theology (is the New Testament "theology"?). And lest we ignore Ingraffia's claims in this regard as uncommon or insignificant in contemporary discourse, I would note that similar appeals to "revelation" are heard in the work of Jean-Luc Marion. I hope to take this up in another context, however.

32. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiii. He goes on to consider the "computerization" of knowledge, indicating a condition wherein any knowledge which cannot be translated into "code" or reduced to "data" will be abandoned (p. 4). His analysis (in 1979, it should be noted) of the way in which knowledge is transformed into "information" and commodified is both insightful and instructive.

33. *Ibid.*

34. See especially *ibid.*, pp. 9-11. Here Lyotard places his work within the tradition of Wittgenstein, Peirce, and Morris.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

37. We must note that when Lyotard speaks of "science" it must be understood in the broad sense of a "theoretical" discourse (*Wissenschaft*) not the nar-

row North American sense of the natural sciences.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.
40. "The state spends large amounts of money to enable science to pass itself off as epic" (*Ibid.*, p. 28).
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 31-37.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29. Following Lyotard's lead, from the *Republic* alone we could multiply *ad infinitum* examples of the way in which knowledge is grounded in myth, or how the discourse of reality is presented in images, or the way in which philosophy is grounded in religion (since the battle of philosophy and poetry, staged in the *Republic*, is really a battle between philosophy and religion—or better, one religion and another).
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.
45. One can see, then, how logical positivism constituted the final naïveté of modernity: rejecting all that could not be legitimated until it recognized its own collapse. (Incidentally, Lyotard applauds Wittgenstein for not falling into this positivist trap [*Ibid.*, p. 41].)
46. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
47. That said, I would however concede that some might argue that the Christian faith *can* be legitimated by reason. In evangelical apologetic discussions, for instance, "classical" or "evidential" apologists (versus "presuppositionalists") might perhaps argue that Christian faith is grounded in reason, and thus constitutes a metanarrative. Without rehearsing the history of debates regarding apologetic method, I would argue that classical or evidential apologetics would fall prey to Lyotard's critique of metanarratives (since it consorts with a notion of universal Reason), and that such a critique would be welcomed by presuppositionalists. One of the constructive engagements with Lyotard would be to consider his discussion of language games and critique of metanarratives and its correlation with presuppositional discourses on "world-views" and critique of "autonomous Reason." For a nuanced discussion of the latter, see Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought: Studies in the Pretended Autonomy of Philosophical Thought*, ed. James K.A. Smith, Collected Works, B/4 (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999).
48. Again, as I noted earlier, I am using "myth" here in a benign way as "orienting commitments" or "fundamental beliefs." It makes no evaluation regarding the "truth" or "falsity" of such beliefs (which would be to understand such narratives precisely on a "scientific" register where "myth" is opposed to "fact").
49. Grenz and Middleton and Walsh both note that Christian scholars can participate in the postmodern critique of modernity, but then always add the proviso that we can't go "all the way" with postmodernism because that would entail critique of the biblical (meta)narrative. My point is to show that such provisos are unnecessary because the biblical narrative is *not* a metanarrative. (That is not to say, of course, that the biblical narrative is immune from critique, even postmodern critique. But the criterion will be ethical, not epistemological.)
50. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
51. There is also a second sense in which "legitimation" is at issue here: not only with respect to *how* metanarratives are legitimated, but also *what* is legitimated—which, all too often, is an oppressive status quo. Thus metanarratives not only appeal to a universal Reason to legitimate themselves, they do so in order to legitimate a present order. While this "ethical" concern is more developed by Lyotard elsewhere (in *Just Gaming* and *The Differend*), it is not unrelat-

ed to the epistemological critique of metanarratives in *The Postmodern Condition*. In this respect, I think Middleton and Walsh are suggestive insofar as they argue that the biblical story carries within itself an “antitotalizing thrust” and an inherent “counterideological dimension” by which the biblical story comes as a challenge and disruption to every society—“de-legitimizing” our social practices. For a careful exposition of these elements within the biblical canon, see Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, pp. 87-107. My thanks to an anonymous referee for recalling this element of the question.

52. Cp. Derrida’s analysis of these problematics in “Envois” in *La carte postale*.

53. See Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 22.

54. This point is contested by Rorty, who claims that while language games are incommensurate, they are not “unlearnable”; or, in other words, Rorty’s position (and hope) is that no *differend* is a priori untranslatable—that every *differend* could be turned into a litigation (see Rorty, “Cosmopolitanism without emancipation: A response to Jean-François Lyotard,” in *Essays on Heidegger and Others* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], pp. 215-217). Apart from an interpretive disagreement regarding Wittgenstein, I think Rorty also misses Lyotard’s careful distinction between “languages” and “language games;” throughout this discussion, Rorty uses the two interchangeably. Lyotard is emphasizing (in a better reading of Wittgenstein, I think) that to change games is to change rules, and hence change criteria for evidence, etc.

55. Lyotard and Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, p. 14. In this context, I can only outline this ethico-political problem posed by postmodernity, since it is not central to the argument of this paper. I have formulated a response to it in my “The Limits of Paralogsitics: Yahweh’s Paganism and Lyotard’s Body” [forthcoming]. For an instructive discussion of plurality and the challenge of pluralism, see Richard J. Mouw and Sander Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons: An Essay in Christian Public Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

56. For Lyotard, justice is precisely recognizing and creating space for this plurality, though not without limits. He describes this postmodern sense of justice as “paganism,” in contrast to the “piety” of those who think their (language) game is the only game in town, which usually results in “terror.” These themes are most systematically explored in *Just Gaming*. On the limits to this paganism, on Lyotard’s own register, see my “The Limits of Paralogsitics.”

57. For just a selective example of such passages from Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), on “belief,” see pp. 2, 4, 17, 43, 113; on “commitments,” see 4-5, 7, 11, 40-43; on “tradition,” see pp. 6, 10, 39, 43.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

59. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: MacMillan, 1959), § 217.

60. For a discussion, see James K.A. Smith and Shane R. Cudney, “Postmodern Freedom and the Growth of Fundamentalism: Was the Grand Inquisitor Right?,” *Studies in Religion/Science Religieuses* 25 (1996), pp. 41-44.

61. For an earlier Christian critique in this vein, see Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought: Studies in the Pretended Autonomy of Philosophical Thought*, Collected Works B/4, Ed. James K.A. Smith (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999). For a discussion, see my introduction, “Dooyeweerd’s Critique of ‘Pure’ Reason,” pp. v-xiii.

62. See my “The Art of Christian Atheism: Faith and Philosophy in Early Heidegger,” *Faith and Philosophy* 14 (1997): 71-81, and “Is Deconstruction an Augustinian Science?: Augustine, Derrida, and Caputo on the Commitments

of Philosophy," in James H. Olthuis, ed., *Religion Without Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2002), ch. 7.

63. That is, it seems to me that the notion of an autonomous reason is not unique to the Enlightenment, but already can be located in Thomas' understanding of "natural reason." Thomas and Augustine disagree on this point, as seen in Aquinas' commentary on Boethius' *De trinitate*, Q. 1, art. 1. My goal here is not to mediate that debate, but to raise a question that demands further consideration.

64. Not all that goes under the rubric of "Christian philosophy" operates on the basis of an integral understanding of the relationship between faith and philosophy wherein all philosophy proceeds from *some* faith commitments. As I have argued in "The Art of Christian Atheism," much "Christian" philosophy accepts the dogma regarding the autonomy of philosophical thought. It is the rejection of such a dogma that characterizes what I am describing as an "Augustinian" understanding of the relationship between faith and reason, which concludes that there is no reason which is not grounded in at least *a* faith. Permit me to again refer to Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought*, chs. 1 and 2.

65. My thanks to Christopher Kaczor and an anonymous referee for their helpful comments, and Bil Van Otterloo for his assistance.