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Religion and the Postmodern in Contemporary North American Fiction

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

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Lewiston, Maine

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## Abstract

Broadly speaking, postmodernist thinking presumes the failure of traditional value systems and epistemologies, reacting to this crisis in truth and knowledge with radical skepticism. This perspective privileges relativity over objective truth, interpretation over meaning, an infinity of multiple perspectives over unified systems of thought and belief, and concrete principles over abstract expressions. As Western religion insists upon exclusive universalized truths and principles, the persistence and even resurgence of religion and religious fundamentalism in a contemporary historical moment otherwise characterized by the pervasive influence of postmodernist tenets in secular life presents a striking paradox. The novels examined in this thesis all variously attempt to explain this apparent contradiction – how postmodern society seems to reject totalizing systems of knowledge and value, but encourages religion and its universalizing conceptions. In different ways, these novels frame religion as a pragmatic reaction to societal anxieties, rather than the result of divine revelation, emphasizing how beliefs morph in response to societal crises. They critique the concept of the religious grand narrative, demonstrating its susceptibility to change and its inability to provide a full story. Finally, these texts address what happens when traditional religious beliefs fail according to postmodern logic, and suggest that people engage the secular to replace the system of belief religion once provided. These novels suggest a human tendency to yearn for systems of belief but simultaneously deny any credibility to an overarching narrative, affirming postmodern society's attraction to multiplicity while still perhaps allowing for the human need for systems of knowledge and value.

## Introduction

Postmodernism is a complex set of ideas, but at its core are several that are in direct opposition with the idea of traditional religion. It would seem that religion would be rendered obsolete in a postmodern society. Yet, religion persists. This thesis examines this apparent contradiction as expressed and negotiated in three works of fiction that in content and/or form address postmodernism: *White Noise* (1985), by Don DeLillo, *God is Dead* (2007), by Ron Currie, Jr., and *The Year of the Flood* (2009), by Margaret Atwood. These novels examine the complex relationship between religion and postmodernism. This thesis focuses on three distinct components of this relationship as it is variously depicted in these fictions. First, I address these novels' characterization of institutional religion and how they account for its persistence. I then look at postmodern criticism of grand narratives; grand narratives are central to religious practice and belief, broadly speaking. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the concept of the postsecular, which involves the interweaving of the religious and secular. In the postmodern societies depicted in these works, traditional religion is unavailable to the characters and their societies, and so seemingly secular outlets take on the meanings and purposes that religion aims to provide.

It is a difficult fact that postmodernism resists definition. To begin, the term is used to describe tendencies in disciplines as diverse as Psychoanalysis, Political Theory, and Literary Criticism, as well as in creative fields such as Literature and Visual Art. To thoroughly define the term as it holds meaning across these fields would be an impossible task (Hassan "Pluralism" 503)<sup>1</sup>. Ihab Hassan also argues that the term "suffers from a certain semantic instability" due to a

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Docherty cites evidence that postmodernism has become influential in less expected fields including zoology, forestry, medicine, law, geography, and sexuality (1, 27).

number of factors including the newness of the term and its broad usage, leading to vague and potentially contradictory definitions (“The Question of Postmodernism” 32). Still, there are generally accepted components of postmodernism, and there are certainly some that are more relevant to this thesis than others, so I will attempt to lay out a working definition for this thesis that describes a set of thoroughly postmodern philosophical and stylistic tendencies.

The etymology of the word “postmodernism” asks us to understand the mode of thought as following from the cultures of modernity, so a brief overview of modernism could be useful to begin discussing postmodernism. The important tendency in modernism that is discussed by postmodern theorists is the modern proclivity towards totalizing narratives. In his lecture “The Entry into Postmodernity,” Jürgen Habermas describes the way conditions of the early modern age led to “emancipation from age-old dependencies,” which weakened the forces of religion as the accepted totalizing “ethical context of life” (Habermas 83). From here, he writes, “[Georg Wilhelm Friedrich] Hegel and his disciples had to place their hope in a dialectic of enlightenment in which reason was validated as an equivalent for the unifying power of religion” (84). Jean-Francois Lyotard also refers to Hegel as an important precursor to postmodernism. In *The Postmodern Condition*, he writes that Hegel, following in the tradition of Kantian-descended German idealists Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, attempted the project of restoring “unity to learning,” which had been “scattered into separate sciences in laboratories and in pre-university education” through his *Encyclopedia* (33-34). Postmodern philosophy perceives this project as a failure, given its reliance upon the idea of the metanarrative.

As Lyotard explains, the fractioning of the sciences is something cultures of postmodernity have accepted. He refers to the different criteria of legitimation across the

different disciplines as “language games,” of which there is simply no metalanguage.

Postmodern society, he says, is saved by the “knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction” (41). Postmodern philosophy, in reaction to the failure of metanarratives to successfully unite systems of knowledge and value in the past, reacts by accepting that different things will require different systems of legitimation. It treats any claim of a grand narrative or totalizing system with radical suspicion. Citing Lyotard, Ihab Hassan writes: “The postmodernist only disconnects; fragments are all he pretends to trust. His ultimate opprobrium is ‘totalization’—any synthesis whatever, social, epistemic, even poetic” (“Pluralism” 505).

The aversion to grand narratives manifests in a number of ways in postmodern thinking. Ihab Hassan cites indeterminacy as an important feature, including “all manner of ambiguities, ruptures, and displacements affecting knowledge and society” (“Pluralism” 504). Postmodernism embraces subjectivity and relativism over objectivity. Also stemming from the decline of grand narratives is decanonization. Because the “mastercodes of society” are delegitimated, and “*les petites histoires*” become preferred as they “preserve the heterogeneity of language games,” the canonical narratives, both literal and figurative, lose credibility. This applies to emphasizing texts from alternate perspectives in academic curriculum – writing by racial minorities and historically oppressed groups, for example – but also decanonization in a grander sense: “from the derision of authority to revision of the curriculum, we decanonize culture, demystify knowledge, deconstruct the languages of power, desire, deceit...” (Hassan “Pluralism” 505).

Frederic Jameson contextualizes postmodernism in contrast to Lyotard, seeing it as evolving out of capitalist society rather than modernist epistemological philosophy. Simplifying to the extreme, Jameson writes, “[p]ostmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification



as a process” (x). His book *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, one of the most influential on the subject, posits that capitalist culture is responsible for the development of postmodernist culture; they are inextricably linked. He argues that late capitalism<sup>2</sup> has dominated our culture and led to obsession with the “free market”—which he argues is not free at all. At the level of culture, this has had multiple effects that characterize postmodernism. Predominately, he describes a “depthlessness” within the arts. Contrasting a Van Gogh painting of shoes to Andy Warhol’s “Diamond Dust Shoes,” he writes that the shoes in the Van Gogh can be interpreted hermeneutically, as a “clue or symptom for some vaster reality which replaces it as its ultimate truth” (8). Meanwhile, Warhol’s shoes offer “no way to complete the hermeneutic gesture” (8). In contrast to Van Gogh’s high modernist work, Warhol’s painting is incomprehensible; it signifies the “emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality” (9).

Commodification plays a huge role in Jameson’s conception of postmodernism, and is linked to a final important aspect of postmodernism I would like to mention: the concept of the simulacrum. Jameson utilizes the concept in his writing, but it is most closely tied to Jean Baudrillard. His book *Simulacra and Simulation* explains this very postmodern idea. Simulacra, according to Baudrillard, describes “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (1). Postmodernity is dominated by simulacra: the “representational imaginary” exists; the referent is unreal (2).

According to Baudrillard, all of America is no longer real, replaced by simulations and images. America is “of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation” (369). Images and signs

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<sup>2</sup> Late capitalism describes the third stage of the development of capitalism as described in Ernest Mandel’s book *Late Capitalism*. The development has to do with the production of energy and the ability to transport goods; late capitalism describes the historical moment where borders are no longer relevant to the capitalist market, and capitalism becomes multinational.

have replaced reality; the world is constructed on ideologies and images that refer to something unreal. In postmodern society, “[t]he real is produced from miniaturized cells, from matrices, and memory banks, models of control—and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these” (2). Of our consumer culture, he writes:

...the characteristic hysteria of our time: that of the production and reproduction of the real. The other production, that of values and commodities, that of the belle époque of political economy, has for a long time had no specific meaning. What society looks for in continuing to produce, and to overproduce, is to restore the real that escapes it. That is why *today this “material” production is that of the hyperreal itself*. It retains all the features, the whole discourse of traditional production, but it is no longer anything but its scaled-down refraction. (23)

The pervasive ethos of consumerism characteristic of the postmodern historical moment represents a panicked attempt at perpetualizing the real in the wake of its evanescence. Jameson confirms this, noting how mass media is an important component of the simulacrum.

In a simple example, Jameson explains the way a “nostalgic” film will attempt to represent “pastness” rather than “some old-fashioned ‘representation’ of historical content;” the film will employ techniques such as a “strategically framed” setting that “eschew[s] most of the signals that normally convey the contemporaneity of the United States,” such as high-rise buildings and contemporary appliances (19-21). This way, “[e]verything in the film...conspires to blur its official contemporaneity and make it possible for the viewer to receive the narrative as though it were set in some eternal [nineteen] thirties, beyond real historical time” (21). In a more complex discussion, Jameson explains how the media employs these same techniques looking at the “real” world (for example, narrative serials):

...a profound modification of the public sphere needs to be theorized: the emergence of a new realm of image reality that is both fictional (narrative) and factual (even the characters in the serials are grasped as real ‘named’ stars with external histories to read about). (277)

The image reality he describes “impacts back on reality in ways that make any independent and, as it were, non- or extracultural form of it problematical...so that finally the theorists unite their voices in the new doxa that the ‘referent’ no longer exists” (277).

The pervasiveness of the simulacrum in postmodern theory can be seen in varying reaches of life. A relatively simple example is given by Jameson as he continues his discussion of Andy Warhol’s art: “...what we have said about the commodification of objects holds as strongly for Warhol’s human subjects: stars—like Marilyn Monroe—are themselves commodified and transformed into their own images” (11). Marilyn Monroe exists in the world as a celebrity, with her platinum locks and signature breathy voice. She was a cultural icon – but that word, “icon,” is so important. The Marilyn Monroe who was known in the world was not her own inner consciousness, nor the way she experienced the world. It was what was portrayed in the outside world, through interview segments and public appearances and scandals. She is a commodification, an icon – an image. Though I use the word simple to describe this example, I hope not to understate its magnitude. To believe that the simulacra works in this way is to reduce the humanity of her person, to view her character and choices as nothing more than a construction, and manipulations.

A more complex example, delivered by Baudrillard, uses Disneyland to explain the unrealness of American culture. Disneyland is obviously a simulation, meant to represent the values of “real America.” But Baudrillard explains that this is not the full extent of it, not the

highest order of simulation occurring at Disneyland. Disneyland, in its obvious falseness, is meant to contrast with the rest of “real America” – but in fact, it does quite a bit more:

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle. (12-13)

The values of the U.S. are meant to be reflected in Disneyland – caricatures, yes, but the park is supposed to have been derived from, a celebration of, America. Baudrillard argues that, in fact, America is imaginary in itself. The whole of the country has succumbed to simulation; in its production and reproduction of itself, it has turned into a representation, and one of something nonexistent. Los Angeles is nothing “but a network of incessant, unreal circulation” (13).<sup>3</sup>

Postmodern culture is dominated by simulacrum. When everything is an image alluding to an imaginary referent, then the images and signs and other manifestations of simulacra become what seems real. This sense of unrealness, from branding to human celebrities to full systems of values, is a major key to understanding postmodernity.

In an attempt to formulate a working definition of postmodernity, I will rely primarily on these qualities. The aversion to grand narratives (and consequently, things like relativity, ambiguity, and decanonization), the controlling influence of late capitalism and consumer culture, and the simulacra are some of the most important aspects of postmodernism. Together, they certainly do not compose a thorough definition of postmodernism, and there are other

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<sup>3</sup> Another far-reaching ideological example of Baudrillard’s: “prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, which is carceral” (12).

aspects that other thinkers certainly find just as important. However, these are three that are generally regarded as influential in postmodern theory, and they relate in particular to the specific subject of religion in postmodern fiction.

The most obvious part of the problem of religion in a postmodern society or in fiction written by a postmodernist is the clash between the rejection of grand narratives in postmodernism, and the centrality of postmodernism in religion. In this thesis, I will be focusing on Western Judeo-Christianity, for a few reasons. First, its traditions predominate the treatment of religion and religiosity in the works of fiction examined in this thesis. Second, while Jameson emphasizes the global nature of postmodern culture, postmodernity originates in and expresses itself most clearly in the societies of the West, where Judeo-Christian ideas have profoundly shaped both culture and dominant ideology. Third, I would argue that Judeo-Christian theologies offer a special philosophical problem for postmodern culture that some other religions do not. To have faith in modern Judaism and Christianity, one must believe that her religion is the only valid religion; some Eastern religious traditions, including Buddhism and Hinduism, provide much more room to be tolerant of other faiths. The Ten Commandments, for example, declare universal principles and truths, and monotheism does not legitimate the value of multiple perspectives the way polytheism does.

Finally, Judaism and Christianity, especially Christianity, have firm canons. The texts accepted as authoritative are meticulously chosen. Hard copies of the Bible are ubiquitous in America – the canon is extremely important. In addition to the textual canon, Judeo-Christian beliefs have been prominent in the abstract canon of Western culture. The “mastercodes of society” are represented in these religions, and they have played a large role in upholding them through Western history. These include notions of good and evil or right and wrong, patriarchy,

and narratives about the purpose of man, among a huge number of other ideologies and authoritative standards. This comes up, of course, against the decanonization principle noted by Hassan (“Pluralism” 505).

The value of subjectivity and relativism in postmodernity poses a big problem for religion. Religion historically has insisted upon a number of hard-and-fast truths. The Ten Commandments, for example, tells us theft is wrong. There are no exceptions. “The Book of Luke” tells that, if the disciples of Jesus do not sing out His praises, “the stones will cry out” (NIV 19:38-40). This is often interpreted as suggesting that the Christian God will make himself available to even those whose society does not practice Christianity – the relative experiences of other cultures are irrelevant to the righteousness of Christianity; the perspective of an individual who is presented no hard reason to become a Christian is not legitimate.

John Macquarrie notes that during “the nineteenth century, there was a vigorous attempt to arrive at a picture of Jesus such as we would have seen had we been present in his lifetime.” But postmodernism has realized that “the ‘objective facts’ can never be fully established” (10). This forces us to consider whether there is “anything except interpretation of interpretations,” to consider “Derrida’s claim that ‘there is nothing outside of the text’” (op cit.). Because objectivity in religion escapes us, is it possible to avoid skepticism?

A final important issue of postmodernism and religion is the concept of the “postsecular.” The postsecular relies on the premise that the sacred and the secular are interwoven rather than existing as a binary. Kathryn Ludwig offers John McClure’s definition, saying it describes contemporary texts that “employ ‘a mode of being and seeing that is at once critical of secular constructions of reality and of dogmatic religiosity’” (82 quoting McClure, ix). Ludwig, who examines contemporary American fiction, posits that the postsecular in these works present

religious themes “in such a way that the religious is not reaffirmed so much as it is engaged” (83). The postsecular questions or rejects religious dogma but does not refuse the notion of religion overall. Rather, it is spiritual and illustrates the intertwining between what is traditionally perceived to be secular and that which is perceived as religious. It also tends to be open-ended, with “characters engag[ing] religious possibility without affirming a single system of religious thought” (84). This, of course, is reflective of the postmodern preference for many possible narratives over one metanarrative.<sup>4</sup> The novels discussed in this thesis all engage the problem of the incompatibility of traditional religion and postmodernity. They negotiate the existence of religion in a postmodern world and explain religiousness from a postmodern perspective.

Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* is one of the most significant American works of postmodern fiction. Published in 1985, the novel embraces a number of postmodern styles and ideas. *White Noise* is about Jack Gladney, a professor of Hitler studies – a discipline he pioneered but has which gained recognition. The world portrayed by DeLillo reflects Jameson’s idea of “aesthetic populism”:

the effacement...of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture, and the emergence of new kinds of texts infused with the forms, categories and contents of that very culture industry so passionately denounced by all the ideologues of the modern...The postmodernisms have, in fact, been fascinated precisely by this whole “degraded” landscape of schlock and

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<sup>4</sup> Ihab Hassan credits Charles Jencks’ *The Architecture of the Jumping Universe: A Polemic: How Complexity Science is Changing Architecture and Culture* (1995) with the idea that “metanarratives have not ended but, rather, have become contested, and are now seen in their plurality.” This, he writes, encourages “fullness of different meanings and diverse ways of life” (“Expense of Spirit,” 18).

kitsch, of TV series and *Reader's Digest* culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature...materials they no longer simply “quote,” as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance. (2-3)

Jack's world is over-saturated with consumerism and media. The “degraded” landscape is everywhere. Jack's wife does volunteer work where she reads the tabloids to a blind old man. They consume mass-produced food: “shiny bags of potato chips, flip-top rings and twist ties, individually wrapped slices of orange cheese” (7). A number of important scenes occur in the supermarket, with imagery that both heightens the sense of rampant consumption as well as the grandeur of the place. The climax of the novel is set in a motel. Nearly all the examples Jameson list present in *White Noise*, along with many other things from the “‘degraded’ landscape” Jameson describes. Stylistically, the text uses almost entirely parataxis in its sentence structure.<sup>5</sup> It has been criticized for its lack of a plot, which points towards an aversion to overarching narrative.

Within this representation of the postmodern moment and postmodern sensibility of its characters, the novel wrestles with the idea of religion and faith. Throughout, characters invoke a plurality of religions, without endorsing one faith tradition over others—indeed, without endorsing any faith tradition at all. The characters are entirely areligious according to a traditional understanding of religion: they do not attend church, they do not discuss God, they do

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<sup>5</sup> Parataxis, from the Greek “side by side,” contrasts with hypotaxis, from the Greek “arranging under.” Parataxis refers to rather concise sentences, ones that usually consist of one clause per sentence. Sentences using hypotaxis will contain multiple statements connected by “because,” or an “and” or “but” preceded by a comma. These sentences suggest the relationships between its clauses – cause and effect, for example. Parataxis is a common trend in postmodern literature because it doesn't have that effect, but rather presents the two clauses as level. It does not suggest hierarchy or grand narratives like hypotaxis does. The dialogue in chapter 15 of *White Noise* is a fantastic illustration of this idea.



not pray. Religion finds its way into DeLillo more indirectly. There is a spiritual hum throughout all of these distinctly postmodern moments Jameson characterizes – the time spent in the grocery store, or the reading of the tabloids, carry a sort of transcendent weight. There are rituals performed around entirely secular moments. The novel explicates the way the postsecular manifests in the life of an intensely postmodern character and his society. *White Noise* also engages the idea of the simulacra, using it to explain religious institutions. The deep questions religion answers aren't removed from the postmodern world DeLillo represents; the simulacra of religious institution helps to soothe the anxiety of the characters who, in their postmodernity, are unable to embrace any one religious practice yet still appreciate the possibility of the answers posed by religions.

Ihab Hassan says, on the topic of fragmentation in postmodernism, that the postmodernist has a “preference for montage, collage, the found of cut-up literary object” (“Pluralism” 505). In its privileging of narrative fragments over the unifying form of the novel, Ron Currie Jr.'s *God is Dead* is, in terms of its style, the most postmodern of the three novels I will examine. *God is Dead*, in fact, resists grand narratives to the point that it is debatable whether the book is a novel or a collection of short stories. The first chapter of *God is Dead* describes God taking human form in Sudan to seek forgiveness from a human boy, and being killed as gunfire and bombs rain down on the refugee camp he is in. (Currie does not capitalize “he” and “his” when referring to God, but does treat “God” as a proper noun, capitalizing the “G”.) The chapters that follow each describe a moment in the world that continues on after that. Each chapter could feasibly stand alone as a short story; however, the chapters do follow a chronology and portray the evolution of the world after God's death, so for the purposes of this thesis I find it reasonable to consider it a novel.

Still, the novel's resistance of fitting into a coherent narrative illustrates the very core of postmodern thinking. Additionally, the novel's first chapter completely revokes all conceptions of the God-narrative in Western culture. God is not the end-all and be-all of this world. He is not omnipotent nor is he even fully immortal. He dies, but the world continues. The grand narrative is discarded, and an incohesive narrative follows. It is from this vantage that *God is Dead* also engages the notion of the postsecular. Like DeLillo's, Currie's characters cannot have traditional religious faith. What they do in response is draw in things that aren't related to traditional religion and create rituals, value systems, even figureheads to worship. They tie up the supposedly secular in the religious.

Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* is stylistically the least postmodern of these three. Its characters are more understandable. There isn't a tone of "depthlessness" described by Jameson, which does make its way into the other works at times. The novel has a regular narrative arc (though it is the second in a loose trilogy, so its resolution is only partial). Postmodernism manifests in *The Year of the Flood* through Atwood's approach to portraying this narrative instead. Atwood does, for example, embrace the use of multiple perspectives in the story. The novel is split between two alternating narrators, Toby and Ren. They experience many of the same events, but relay them with different perceptions and meanings. Their experiences also differ in ways, and the effects of their different experiences are powerful in the differentiation of their perceptions of the world and internal consciousnesses. They also relativize social phenomena. Toby, for example, finds herself in an extremely dangerous sexual relationship with a man, and must flee, forever haunted by the very real threat he poses to her life. Ren, on the other hand, works as an erotic dancer, but does not relate any of the objectification and sexualization that occurs to her as particularly negative or harmful. The

dynamic between the women and the patriarchal society they live in simply differs from woman to woman. Atwood highlights the relativity of perception and experience throughout the text.

Atwood also participates in the postmodern practice of decanonization. She does this on two levels. First, she very much deconstructs the canon of the Christian religion, and the Jewish, to an extent, as well. She reconceives the way a religious grand narrative is not as cohesive and all-explaining as it may make itself seem. She also “decanonizes” the social grand narrative, challenging social authority. Her main characters and narrators are females. The text is anti-corporate, criticizing the power of big businesses over society – in *The Year of the Flood*, the government is a corporate conglomerate, and its rule totalitarian and very threatening.

Atwood uses postmodern ideas to question the possibility of the grand narratives of religion, particularly by attacking the religious canon. *The Year of the Flood* also takes up the question of why religion would exist in a postmodern society, considering its lack of credibility as an accurate portrayal of some ultimate truth or correct worldview. The religion portrayed by the novel demonstrates the practical purposes religion serves in guiding its followers in life, regardless of the truth of the theology.

My argument is that these three novels – diverse in their form and plotlines – deal with the clash and interplay between postmodernism and religion in similar terms. I argue that each of these books dissociates institutional religion from spirituality and religiousness. Institutional religion is not treated favorably. Rather, the novels question the credibility of an institution of belief that claims to bear an ultimate truth revealed by God. They suggest that institutional religion serves other purposes in society, providing ways of life, values systems, and coping mechanisms for dealing with concrete problems as well as the anxieties of life. The novels also criticize the grand narratives of religion in general. The way in which religious dogma is

influenced by the society in which it exists is explained, and the notion of grand narratives are deconstructed while a counter-narrative is offered by *God is Dead*, whose form and narrative techniques resist cohesion and hermeneutic availability. Finally, this thesis finds that the postsecular is a major concern in addressing religion in a postmodern society. When faith in an institutional religion is an impossibility, as it is in a postmodern society, people react by imbuing with religious significance and function distinctly non-religious concepts, practices and objects. Late capitalist culture becomes a source of answers to existential questions. Rituals and religious practices are invented surrounding the secular in order to express and soothe anxieties and fears.

Chapter One looks at the way *The Year of the Flood* and *White Noise* try to reconcile the continued existence of institutional religions in a postmodern world. Assuming postmodern philosophies, institutional religions should not make sense. They are characterized by grand narratives, universal principles and truths, and asserted objectivity. All the same, institutional religions *do* exist in the worlds depicted by Delillo and Atwood. This chapter looks at the way these two novels attempt to reconcile that apparent contradiction.

*The Year of the Flood* proposes that institutional religion is not necessarily a celebration of theological grand narratives after all, but rather a pragmatic institution that imbues its followers with a more beneficial way of living. The theology of their religion reinforces the value system that compels behavior that is productive, safe, and works to help the members survive in their world. In particular, the religion portrayed in the novel exists in a society in which environmental threats, societal threats – in the form of a threatening state – and the threat of a catastrophic disaster loom. The members of the religion are taught life skills that allow them to inhabit this seemingly uninhabitable world. In addition to concrete skills, the members of the religious group are enabled with coping mechanisms for dealing with the stressors and tragedies

of life. Both practical life skills and emotional tools exist in the teachings of contemporary religions.

*White Noise* proposes that institutional religion is a simulacrum. A momentous scene occurs towards the end of the novel where Jack Gladney is told by a German nun that she and all the other nuns, along with all others who devote themselves to religious institutions, are faking it. They have no real faith, they just mimic belief and the practices that would accompany it. According to *White Noise*, the big questions of human existence do not disappear just because the grand narratives that answer them no longer make sense. We see this throughout the novel – Jack and his wife are constantly preoccupied with a fear of death. But, as consciously postmodern subjects, neither of them can invest their faith in Christianity. The nuns' fake devotion to the religion legitimates it as a possible reality, allowing Jack and the others to take solace in the possibility of Christian ideas of an afterlife without having to exclusively believe in it. Christianity accounts for the worldview of Western society, the moral codes and values systems that society practices. Without the simulation of real believers, all that stemmed from Christianity would lose any credibility and postmodern society would be utterly drowned in ambiguity.

Chapter Two examines the criticisms of the grand narratives of religions in *God is Dead* and *The Year of the Flood*. It explicates postmodern theory on grand narratives in detail, relying mostly on Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, and a discussion of the consequences of that text for religion.

*God is Dead* criticizes grand narratives primarily through its form and own narrative. There is an utter lack of coherence in the novel. The narrative links between the chapters are incredibly loose. Even the narratives within the chapters lack obvious clearness, as they often

avoid full clarity on the events taking place and divulging the resolution of the story. The different chapters also all highlight a plurality of perspectives. The perspectives of the different chapters illustrate different perceptions of the post-God world, different valuations of what happened, wholly different experiences and stories. *God is Dead* also proposes a counter-narrative to the popular narrative, providing an alternative and weakening the dominance of the traditional God narrative. Finally, the death of God and continuation of society demonstrates an inability to essentialize human nature and purpose, the mechanics of the world, and other large philosophical themes.

*The Year of the Flood* critiques religion's claim to a grand narrative by explicitly portraying the way a religion born from the Judeo-Christian tradition can use the same practices and scriptures of its predecessors and still arrive at a wholly different theology. Atwood focuses on the Bible and the saints tradition and demonstrates the way a given historical moment will inevitably influence the interpretation and understanding of a religion. The religion's narrative and principles are not self-evident, nor grand and universal, as the religion would make it seem.

Chapter Three looks at the manifestation of the postsecular in *White Noise* and *God is Dead*. Both these stories look at societies in which traditional faith is not possible. In *White Noise*, it is due to the philosophical differences between religion and postmodernism. In *God is Dead*, the impossibility of religion is evident. In *White Noise*, Jack Gladney and other characters ascribe a sense of holiness to particularly postmodern aspects of life, such as consumerism and mass media. This makes sense, as these are sources of a postmodern value system, as elaborated by Jameson. These postmodern features of life also allow Jack and the others to answer questions about death, and give them a framework to understand the ways they live their life.

In *God is Dead*, society undergoes a few changes regarding faith. What is demonstrated is that, even without God, society finds ways to reconstitute the formal apparatus of religion even without a deity at its center. For example, one chapter depicts teenagers in an entirely post-religious society engaging in a practice of frequently text messaging other teenagers they idolize. There is no conversation; the individuals never receive a response, they simply express idolatry or else their personal anxieties. This practice very much mimics prayer. The society here simultaneously engages philosophical systems that define their values and social hierarchy in a way similar to religion. Without a religious institution, the secular becomes a way for members of society to express themselves how they would through religion and to understand their world in a way religion would have provided.

These three novels each decanonize the religious narratives of Western society, offering subversions and attacking the notion of a grand narrative more generally. Through both form and plot they issue criticisms of institutional religions, arguing that in a postmodern society, an institutional religion is a tool used to affect its society in a particular way, either by justifying worldviews and calming anxiety by offering concepts like life after death, or by improving its followers' quality of life, as religious lessons teach life skills ranging from keeping good health to coping with tragedy. These novels find, however, that members of a postmodern society are inclined to use non-religious systems to understand their world and to cope with things like the threat of death. Through their exploration of religion through a postmodern lens, these three novels present explanations of the way religion functions in society, demonstrating what purpose it serves, the way the grand narrative is flawed, and how postmodern society looks in part to secular tools rather than religious to satisfy emotional needs and to construct new systems through which they understand the world.

## Chapter 1: Postmodern Conceptions of Institutional Religion

Postmodernism rejects the idea that we can construct or embrace any sort of grand narrative, which puts religion in a difficult place. Though grand narratives do not make sense in a postmodern society, they still exist, particularly in the form of institutionalized religions. *The Year of the Flood* and *White Noise* both pose answers as to why this is. *The Year of the Flood* proposes that institutional religion's purpose is not necessarily the celebration of a grand narrative. Instead, the novel gives us an example of a religion whose practices serve the very concrete purpose of teaching its followers important life skills, from survival to coping with challenging emotional situations. *White Noise* suggests that religion is a Baudrillardian simulation, real only because it has been brought to life by those who practice it. The religious figures in *White Noise* are not truly religious. Instead, their practice is to provide the ideology of Christianity as a possible truth to those postmoderns who cannot believe in it, or anything else. Just as other image-based components of their society, like television and consumer culture, help mediate a fear of death and other existential questions about human existence, so too does the existence of a religion, whether anyone has actual faith in it or not.

*The Year of the Flood* follows a religious group called "God's Gardeners." The Gardeners live in a time of an intense eco-crisis. They mourn the "Great Dead Zone[s]" in the Gulf of Mexico, Lake Erie, and the Black Sea, in addition to "the desolate Grand Banks of Newfoundland where the Cod once abounded; and the Great Barrier Reef, now dying and bleaching white and breaking apart" (196-197). The "southern shores of the Mediterranean – once a fruitful farmland" is "now a desert." The Amazon River basin has been destroyed (90). Lions, tigers, and beluga whales have all gone extinct (346, 388).



The destruction of the environment has severely impacted the quality of human life. Their world is overrun by people. Sprawl has taken over the country, meaning there is little livable land that isn't overdeveloped and polluted. The people either live in compounds owned by the corporations that govern the country, or in the pleeblands, which are impoverished and dangerous. We get the sense that contagious disease is common, as it is protocol for Ren to be locked up in quarantine for weeks just after the "Biofilm Bodysuit" she wears at work is ripped by a client at the club where she dances (Atwood 7-8). The characters of the novel also often must wear "nose-cone air filters" and "SuperD" for the bugs (22, 17). Natural disaster has also played a large toll on the country. Catastrophic droughts in Texas are followed by hurricanes and flooding that drowns many people. The destruction and subsequent disease wreaks such havoc that a wall is finally built around Texas to keep the many refugees from entering the rest of the country (84-85).

Their society is also under the complete control of corporations and managed by the militant CorpSeCorps, a private security corporation that consolidated power and began to act as government. The corporations are ruthless, taking the lives of those who threaten their power or security, and working with the gangs that are powerful in the pleeblands. Toby's mother is revealed to have died because the pharmaceutical corporation her family worked for used her as a guinea pig; Pilar warns Toby that this is not uncommon, as all the doctors who have not gone underground are owned by the corporations, and the medicine they distribute can never be trusted (105). There is also no privacy in their society for the people; the corporations keep intensive intelligence to maintain their power.

The Gardeners' ideology is a response to some obvious human questions about how humans have radically altered their planet, and, more importantly, it behaves as a mechanism to

train them to live in a way that will help them survive in their broken world. The Gardeners' practices prove to be a very pragmatic response to these crises.

The Gardeners interpret their role on earth as that of any other animal; they do not believe they have special license to subjugate other creatures or take advantage of the earth's resources at the expense of other creatures. But, they see that humans historically have done this, and they recognize the damage it has done. Adam One preaches the Gardeners "can feel the symptoms of coming disaster as a doctor who feels a sick man's pulse. We must be ready for the time when those who have broken trust with the Animals – yes, wiped them from the face of the Earth where God placed them – will be swept away by the Waterless Flood" (91). They believe that there is a coming catastrophe as the result of humans actions – the "Waterless Flood" is a reference to the flood of the Noah's Ark story, where after God swore never to destroy the ground again for the sake of man. The Gardeners believe that the coming catastrophe, then, will be not sent from God but brought upon by man himself (90). Adam One preaches also, "the Waterless Flood is coming, in which all buying and selling will cease, and we will find ourselves thrown back upon our own resources, in the midst of God's bounteous Garden. Which was your Garden also" (126). The notion of the "Flood" is not as far fetched as it may seem: numerous species have already gone extinct, and contagious disease is common. Natural disasters have destroyed the entire Texas area during the Gardeners' brief existence. And, as it happens, a major catastrophe that wipes out most of Earth's human population does occur.

The Gardeners practice veganism, try to live in the most environmentally sound way possible, and believe in a deep connection with nature, which includes respect for and knowledge about the environment. These practices are in accordance with their religious philosophy: they believe that humans are just another part of Earth's ecosystem, and that they have no right to

dominate it or exploit it. Thus, it is in accordance with their belief system that they live in cooperation with the natural world. Still, these practices have a purpose beyond simply emulating what they believe is the right way to live. They are practical. The Gardeners believe a massive environmental disaster is inevitable, and their style of living functions to train them to survive after this occurs. Religion, for them, is not just a belief system, but a very pragmatic way of living.

The idea of a religion being a practical way of life is not new. One well-known example is the existence of certain dietary restrictions in the Old Testament, Hebrew Bible, or Qur'an that are written as mandates by God, but were likely simply the result of what was and was not good to eat in an earlier era. For example, pork is prohibited in Jewish and Islamic scripture. Twelfth-century philosopher Maimonides theorized that pork had a higher incident of causing food-borne illness, an explanation that was scientifically justified in 1859 (Harris 65-68). Marvin Harris proposes an alternate theory, explaining that Leviticus bans pork in a commandment banning animals that do not chew the cud – animals that do not thrive on plants high in cellulose, like grass and straw. The pig's diet was not complimented by the Middle Eastern grasslands, and its body did not thrive in its hot, sunny ecosystem. Unable even to pull plows, produce milk for its owners, or grow hair from which fibers and cloths could be made, the pig was expensive and impractical to raise (Harris 71). Both these popular theories reflect religious mandates being reflections of what was best for the religious group to survive. Maimonides theory would mean the prohibition was aimed at improving the survival rates of the Jewish and Islamic people. Harris' theory explains that it improved their economic situation.

Likewise, the Gardeners' mandates against eating meat and animal product allow them to develop the ability to live off the land in the event of a major catastrophe: farming is a relative

impossibility, as the land is all but destroyed, and there is little open space for raising livestock. Even so, consumption of animal meat would still bear the risk of food-borne illness, especially considering the large number of animals in their world that are genetically-engineered and have unknown effects on the health of those who ate it – a huge risk for a group with an already low population count.

The Gardeners live outside of society, and so they constantly practice living without the aid of components of their culture like grocery stores and advanced medical procedures. The children take classes that train them to be able to sustain themselves without society's aid: holistic healing with plant remedies, emergency medical care, and sewing. They are taught to identify safe versus poisonous plants in wild and garden botanicals class, and are taught the human reproductive system by a midwife. They take a culinary arts class to prepare food, bees and mycology to learn about the production of honey (61). After the catastrophe, Ren knows from her Gardener days not to drink directly from a stream, especially one near a city, but rather to dig a hole near it and drink from the water that has filtered in through the soil (375). These classes all do certainly make sense in the context of the ideology of the Gardeners, but more immediately, they train the children to survive in a natural environment.

This trait in the religion becomes clear in a conversation between Adam One and Toby, when he asks her if she will join the religion's leadership as an Eve. Toby has been living with the Gardeners because they provide refuge from a violent man who would kill her if he found her. She does not, however, see herself as a believer in the religion. She responds to Adam One's offer by telling him it would be hypocritical, as she lives like a Gardener but does not believe all of it. Adam One responds:

In some religions, faith precedes action. In ours, action precedes faith. You've been acting as if you believe, dear Toby. *As if*— those two words are very important to us.

Continue to live according to them, and belief will follow in time. (168)

When Toby responds that that isn't enough, that an Eve should surely believe, he says:

We should not expect too much from faith... Human understanding is fallible, and we see through a glass, darkly. Any religion is a shadow of God. But the shadows of God are not God. (168)

Adam One, speaking as a religious leader, confides in Toby that belief is not necessarily a prerequisite to a Gardener identity, or even to leading the other Gardeners. What is important for the Gardeners, as a group, is action. A Gardener's value comes from their study of plants, their ability to sew clothing without harming animals or the environment, their use of composite toilets rather than plumbing systems.

The best and most important quality a Gardener can have, then, is contributing positively to their world, and helping their group survive in their society, and after the end of their society. The goal isn't exactly that they achieve salvation. It isn't that they have undying faith in God and His will. It's practical.

Moreover, Adam One casts doubt on what actually is theologically correct. He, as the leader of the religion, admits he cannot know what God intends or wants. He says it is impossible. Therefore, we can understand that the theology he preaches isn't, in his mind, necessarily correct. When he teaches that that "God has put a little of Himself into each of His Creatures ... and therefore the Tiger, the Lion, the Wolf... are in their way reflections of the divine," it isn't because this has been revealed to him (346). What he preaches is not what he

knows about God and His will. At its core, what Adam One teaches is a lifestyle, a series of actions that will help his group survive.

J. Brooks Bouson argues that Atwood is “drawing on the idea that environmentalism will not work if it does not become a religion” (18). Formulating a religious tradition that “mixes together science, religion, and environmentalism” produces a catalyst for successful environmentalist practices. Bouson points to Adam One telling the other Adams and Eves that he strives to reconcile “the findings of science” with a “sacramental view of life” (19 quoting Atwood, 240). In addition to suggesting a more intentional construction of the religious tradition, this highlights the way the Gardeners’ ideology is geared towards affecting change in its followers lives for a purpose other than their own salvation.

The Gardeners are also a distinctive group in that they aim to be as removed from the rest of society as possible. They live in a pleeb, a poor, crime-ridden city ruled by the mobs, which are supported by the corporations. They inhabit their own buildings and segments of the society, though they do still walk its streets and interact with its people on occasion. Still, they do not have any major social interactions with non-Gardeners. Their children are all educated within their own system. They spend their days together.

The Gardeners self-segregate and aim to be sufficient without the resources of society at large. They have their own “wellness center” that they use instead of mainstream healthcare and hospitals. This is significant as Pilar explains the dangers of the healthcare controlled by the corporations. She explains that Toby’s mother’s death was almost certainly due to the corporations using her as a guinea pig; when she fell ill, the corporations chose to experiment on her rather than cure her. Pilar says this is not uncommon; the medicine distributed by the corporations is often not what it seems. Because they are so powerful, they have the ability to

distribute unregulated drugs that are unsafe to patients. The Gardeners' practice of holistic healing is a reflection of their faith in the power of the Earth, but it is also a safe way to guarantee their safety in the face of a dangerous situation. The corporations are powerful and not held accountable to any higher governing entity; they have complete control, and abuse it. Through holistic healing, the Gardeners are able to ensure they have thorough knowledge of what they are administering to their ill or wounded. They maintain complete control over their bodies, a rare power in their world.

The Gardeners also have a primarily oral tradition; they refrain from writing anything down. Ren recounts being told from a young age, "*Beware of words. Be careful what you write. Leave no trails...* They told us to depend on memory, because nothing written down could be relied on...books could be burnt, paper crumble away, computers could be destroyed" (6). This piece of wisdom in part reflects a recognition on the Gardeners' part of the fragility of their group. They are small in numbers, and have little in the way of resources. Rather than depend on material methods of communication, like list-keeping and written plans for emergencies, they depend on themselves. In the lessons to the children, memorization is considered very important. When Burt teaches the children to memorize the qualities of wild plants, he has them draw them to memorize how they look, memorize their qualities: "What is this plant? Purslane. What can you do with it? Eat it...Notice the oval shape of those leaves! Notice their shininess! Look at the stem! Memorize it!" (150). In the event of a catastrophe, when the Gardeners were left to their own devices in the wilderness, it would be extremely risky to count on written pages to tell them what was and wasn't okay to eat.

They also note that writing is dangerous "because your enemies could trace you through it, and hunt you down, and use your words to condemn you" (6). In classes, the students write on

slates which have “to be wiped off at the end of each day because the Gardeners said you couldn’t leave words lying around where our enemies might find them. Anyway, paper was sinful because it was made from the flesh of trees” (60). Though not writing things down is made relevant to their ecological ideology, it is more a practice to protect them from the outside world. The corporations are extremely powerful, and for the counter-cultural Gardeners to leave documentation about themselves around would be careless.

A final practice of the Gardeners worth mentioning is their total abstinence from technology. When a young Ren finds a camera phone without a cell-phone signal on the ground and brings it home with her, one of the Eve’s scolds her, saying ““Don’t even look at it: if you can see it, it can see you”” (67). The Adams and Eves have a single laptop, and keep it stored behind a concealed wall compartment in a small room, behind two locked doors (189). The laptop is kept entirely secret from the other Gardeners. Though their society is highly technological and all typical households embrace the use of the internet, cell phones, and other wireless devices for things like communication and record keeping, the Gardeners shun it, seeing these devices as insecure and recognizing that they live in a precarious spot.

The Gardeners’ measures to ensure their security proves to be wise, rather than paranoid. In the sermon preceding chapter 49, Adam One explains that the Gardeners have had to flee because the CorpSeCorps came after them. He says the reasons for this were two pronged – the first, that the Gardeners were growing in strength as well as numbers, and “those in power could no longer dismiss us as ineffectual faddists.” The growing influence of their way of life “threatened their prophet margins” (375). The second reason was that the CorpSeCorps linked them to a series of bio-attacks. Adam One denies involvement, but the book later reveals that members of the Gardeners were, in fact, involved. However the CorpSeCorps managed to link



the Gardeners, it proves that they did take an interest in them and act to interfere with their activity. There is a real need for the Gardeners to keep themselves under the radar of the outside world and maintain their security, and their teachings reflect this habit.

Examining themes related to ecocriticism and sustainability in *The Year of the Flood*, Hannes Bergthaller argues that the Gardeners' doctrine is

...designed to achieve...a reconciliation of the nature of human beings as evolved biological creatures, with all the frailties and flaws it entails, with their need for an imaginary order that transcends and, as it were, extenuates these biological givens. (741)

I would argue that, rather than represent a pure "need for an imaginary order," the Gardeners' doctrine represents a need for an imaginary order *in order to* motivate a group of people to behave in accordance with the ecological values and practices Adam One preaches. The doctrine of the Gardeners, which teaches that the Gardeners must live this radically counter-cultural lifestyle, uses the transcendent "imaginary order" to motivate adherence to these practices.

Along with teaching their followers how to survive in the natural world, and how to keep safe from the threats of their society, the Gardeners also teach their followers how to cope with the emotional toll life takes on a person. After the Flood, when Ren and Toby are alone in the wild, on their way to the gatehouse, they find Oates, hanged from a tree. Ren goes into shock, and falls to the ground crying – but Toby recognizes they don't have time to mourn right now, they have to make it to the house before a storm starts. She tells Ren that they can bury him later, that it's okay because "he's not in his body any more. He's in Spirit now" (376). She is able to comfort Ren through the trauma of seeing her friend murdered by telling her he is okay, and that the terrible sight hanging from the tree is not Oates anymore. She is able to use their religion to help her gather herself together enough to continue moving towards shelter.

Toby also evokes Gardener beliefs at the end of the novel. She and Ren have been following two men, ex-convicts, who raped Ren and kidnapped Amanda. They track them down and finally subdue the men by tying them up. Amanda is in shock, and physically, in terrible shape. They are also joined by Jimmy, Ren's first love, who is very ill, and may not survive. He hardly recognizes her, due to his high fever. The entire situation is incredibly difficult, but as they sit around the fire and share what little food they have, Toby falls back on her identity as a religious leader and sermonizes to the others:

“This is not the time,” says Toby in her old Eve voice, “for dwelling on ultimate purposes. I would like us all to forget the past, the worst parts of it. Let us be grateful for this food that has been given to us. Amanda. Ren, Jimmy...And I would like us to remember those who are gone, throughout the world but most especially our absent friends. Dear Adams, dear Eves, dear Fellow Mammals and Fellow Creatures, all those now in Spirit – keep us in your view and lend us your strength, because we are surely going to need it.” (430-431)

As they all sit together, having just been through an incredible number of traumatic ordeals, Toby uses the teachings of the Gardeners to comfort them and help them make meaning of what has happened. She tells them not to occupy their minds searching for the “ultimate purposes” of all that has happened. They are in a dangerous situation and must focus their energy on staying alive, much like it would have been impossible for Ren to grieve about Oates upon finding his body, because the impending storm would have killed them or made them very ill if they did not focus on their flight to the gatehouse. The Gardener teaching here prevents them from searching for meaning in such a terrible time, as they will probably be unable to explain it themselves, especially now.

Toby focuses their thought on the food they have, the small blessing, reminding them that there are good things left in the world, and that even in the most miserable of circumstances they have something to be grateful for. In the tiniest way, she is able to provide something to lift their spirits. She also gives them a helpful way to process the deaths of those they knew. She acknowledges them, but reminds Ren and Amanda that they are “now in Spirit.” They have not been destroyed entirely, they simply continue on in a different way. Further, she tells them that their dead friends are watching over them. As they themselves are in such perilous circumstances, Ren gives them a reassurance that they are not alone. They have those in Spirit to watch over them and give them strength to help them through what is to come.

Atwood’s conception of religion in *The Year of the Flood* maps out the way religion is, first and foremost, a service to its followers. The Gardeners do not survive in the aftermath of the catastrophe because God keeps them alive, but because they have spent their lives learning how to survive off the land. Their practices before the Flood ensured their survival as a religious group in addition to adhering with their ideology. And, it is their ideology that trains them to cope with the troubling things that happen in their lifetime. These components of religion mimic aspects of religion in the contemporary world. Most obviously, religion serves to help its followers cope with things that happen in their lifetime. Atwood really highlights the extent to which this defines religion. She also points out that religion gives its followers a very particular way of life. Religion has the practical purpose of regulating their lifestyle for their own goods and the good of their communities.

In *White Noise*, institutionalized religion serves a much more existential role. A scene at the end of the novel describes a group of nuns telling Jack that religion is a myth; none of the figures who dedicate their lives to the Church or any other institution truly believe but rather are

there to simulate belief, which gives stability and emotional comfort to the rest of society. Whether or not religion exists to answer life's questions and fears, those questions and fears remain. Death continues to loom and frighten humans, and questions about the logic of the world and reasons for events continue to exist. The simulation of religion is important because it allows the comforting answers offered by religion to retain some legitimacy and possibility. This scene highlights the intense role simulation plays in the postmodern world, where the real is indiscernible from the simulated, which can be both a source of disconcertion and comfort.

Baudrillard's "Simulacra and Simulations" explains that part of the postmodern era is the exchange of the simulation for the real. Using the metaphor of the map and a territory, he writes that the "sovereign difference between them" has disappeared – the concept and the real are no longer separate. Rather,

[t]his imaginary of representation, which simultaneously culminates in and is engulfed by the cartographer's mad project of the ideal coextensivity between the map and the territory, disappears in the simulation whose operation is nuclear and genetic, no longer at all specular and discursive. (2)

To illustrate the weight of a simulation, Baudrillard compares one feigning an illness with one simulating it. When one simulates an illness, they must actually produce some of the symptoms. Thus, "simulation threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary'" (3). Simulation is productive; it creates something in the world. It is not just a symbol for the "real;" it is itself real. This challenges the notion of realness entirely – Baudrillard writes that "the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials" (2).

It is such that one crisis of postmodern society is of the simulacra replacing the referent. In one scene of *White Noise*, Jack's town runs a simulated evacuation drill, for an "all-purpose

leak or spill,” organized by a company called SIMUVAC (204-206). While standing in the street, Jack is told he is in the exposure swath. When he asks what this means, he is told, “It means you’re dead” (204). The simulation is taken to an unnerving level of “realness.” Volunteers, Jack’s nine year old daughter included, act as victims, “prone, supine, draped over curbstones, sitting in the street with woozy looks” (204). An organizer of the simulation instructs,

there is no substitute for a planned simulation. If reality intrudes in the form of a car crash or a victim falling off a stretcher, it is important to remember that we are not here to mend broken bones or put out real fires. We are here to simulate...If we learn to work around interruptions now, we’ll be able to work around them when it counts. (206)

The simulation has taken precedence over reality. The imaginary spill is more important to be tended to than an actual fire, an actual car crash. The actual becomes relevant to the imaginary; the simulation must be so realistic that the car crash becomes a part of the simulation rather than an event belonging to the real.

After the airborne toxic event in *White Noise*, Jack is told his health is threatened. When a technician at the refugee site runs the information about his exposure to the cloud, he tells Jack he’s “generating big numbers,” and that the computer is showing “bracketed numbers with pulsing stars” (140). Beyond that, he cannot or will not tell Jack what this means for his health. He says they cannot know definitively what the exposure means, or whether it will kill Jack. He gives Jack nothing concrete about his health – just the computer symbol of “bracketed numbers with pulsing stars.” This sparks in Jack an extreme alertness to his impending death, which is suggested, but not confirmed, by the technician. He visits a medical center where technicians runs tests on him, and one of whom asks if he has been exposed to the chemical in the airborne toxic event, because the printout is showing “bracketed numbers with little stars” (279). The technician tells him about how they use top-of-the-line magnetic scanners and imaging

machines, and gives him an envelope to take back to his doctor full of symbols that his doctor will be able to explain. Jack's health is, at this point, images, numbers, and symbols. The magnetic scanners give the technicians bracketed numbers and stars – this is Jack's health. No one is able to give him definitive answers about his life or his health, or whether he is dying. They simply explain the results of imaging machines and data analysis, unable to connect these back to his own life. The technician tells Jack that they have “conflicting data that says exposure to this substance can definitely lead to a mass,” which can be clearly pictured by an imaging block, but has “no definite shape, form or limits.” Worst case scenario, it can cause a person to die (280). This is all they can tell him – what is happening in his body is vague at best. Yet, these simulations – simulation to practice what to do in an emergency, and simulations of Jack's body – are all that are available to explore how emergency situations, or illness and death, may play out. Unnerving though the lack of reality may be, the simulations are still crucial to the postmodern society.

On the flipside, the characters in *White Noise* rely on images to navigate their worlds. John M. Duvall writes about the way the television functions in the novel, and highlights a scene during the Airborne Toxic Event. As the Gladneys and other victims of the disaster are quarantined, a man “carrying a tiny TV set” delivers a speech about how the media has failed to capture their suffering. Duvall writes,

[j]ust as the Puritans sought affirmation of their position through a sign from God (his chastisement) that would stabilize their sense of themselves...so do DeLillo's postmoderns seek affirmation through television, the GRID who/that really cares and affirms the legitimacy of their terror. Those who encountered the airborne toxic event

intuitively know that television is not a mediation; it is the immediate. Television, the intertextual grid of electronic images, creates the Real. (436)

Without the news explaining what kind of suffering they have been through, these people feel lost, unsure of whether they are even victims. Their understanding of what they have been through is wholly contingent upon the image of it they receive from the media; the referent is irrelevant. They can only relate to their fear, have their “awe and terror...validated” through the media (436).

A final byproduct of this age of simulation is, according to Baudrillard, the characteristic hysteria of our time: the hysteria of production and the reproduction of the real. The other production, that of goods and commodities...no longer makes any sense of its own, and has not for some time. What society seeks through production, and overproduction, is the restoration of the real which escapes it. (374)

This explains the consumer culture of *White Noise*, which reflects the postmodern obsession with consumption. The first scene in the novel is of Jack describing watching the start of the academic year, when the college students arrive on campus with their station wagons full of the same possessions:

the stereo sets, radios, personal computers...tennis rackets, soccer balls, hockey and lacrosse sticks...the junk food still in shopping bags—onion-and-garlic chips, nacho thins, peanut crème patties, Waffelos and Kabooms...the Dum-Dum pops, the Mystic mints. (3)

Their possessions define them as a cultural group. As Jack lists what they possess, the items become more and more specific; the brand names are listed, and they are important.

Consumption is their end of seeking the real through overproduction.

It is in this vein that shopping plays a fundamental role for the postmodern psyche. Jack's role as a consumer is explained when, "[w]ithout his academic robe and dark glasses, [a] colleague notes that Jack is just 'a big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy' (83). This deflation of self puts Jack 'in the mood to shop,' and the ensuing sense of power and control is immense" (441). The "inauthentic aura of shopping" lends him a feeling of power and value that he'd lost when he was told he looked "harmless" and "aging" – consumption is a comfort and a distraction. Baudrillard claims overproduction is "seeking the real" which escapes society; engagement in this culture of production and overproduction serves as a way to reach for that real and affirm a worldview, in this case, Jack's sense of self.

The simulacra is how postmodern society experiences and understands the world. In *White Noise*, it is a method of mediating with death. It is a way to interpret death, through the symbols of the medical world, or a way to understand death and disaster, through the images on the news or the simulations Jack's city practices. Through all of this, however, the threat of death does loom, and it is extremely frightening. Babbette is so fearful of dying that she acquires the experimental drug Dylar by having sex with the doctor producing it. Jack has his death looming over his head after the airborne toxic event and it is ever-present on his mind. Though the simulations and image culture serve as an outlet for understanding death, it fails to wholly comfort the inevitability of an end, or answer other important existential questions. At the end of the novel, Jack encounters a group of German nuns and discovers their faith is an act; this experience is extremely disturbing to him. His encounter with the nuns, and their existence as a simulation rather than a real, explains the necessity of institutional religion in a specifically postmodern world.



At the end of the novel, Jack has shot Willie Mink, and has been shot in the arm himself by Mink. He arrives at a hospital that he discovers is run by German nuns. He has a kind of affection for the nuns: “More nuns walked by, heavy rosaries swinging from their belts. I found them a merry sight, the kind of homogeneous presence that makes people smile at airports” (316). Jack tells the nun tending to him that he speaks some German, and recites some of the words he knows for her. He counts for her, and names objects around the room; a few more nuns arrive and they continue the game, “charmingly engaged in a childlike dialogue” (317).

A picture on the wall of Jack Kennedy and Pope John XXIII in a cloudy heaven in the sky prompts Jack to ask the nun about how the church views heaven. Her response is harsh and forceful as she condemns the idea of believing in heaven as stupid. She does not herself believe, and thinks Jack is dumb to think she would believe in the ridiculous ideas of Christianity, like saints, and angels, and the six-day creation of the world (317-318).

Jack is deeply upset by this revelation. He insists she must: “But you’re a nun. Nuns believe in these things. When we see a nun, it cheers us up, it’s cute and amusing, being reminded that someone still believes in angels, in saints, all the traditional things” (317). When he asks what she believes happens after death, she asks if he wants to know what she really believes, implying she believes in nothing after death. His response is, “I don’t want to hear this. This is terrible” (319). That the nuns do not really believe in all the ideas of Christianity is devastating to Jack. He is disturbed, unable to sleep that night when he gets home.

The nun explains to Jack that she and the other nuns are not nuns for their own sakes. She says:

It is for others. Not for us...All the others. The others who spend their lives believing that *we* still believe. It is our task in the world to believe such things that no one else takes

seriously. To abandon such beliefs completely, the human race would die. This is why we are here... To embody old things, old beliefs. The devil, the angels, heaven, hell. If we did not pretend to believe in these things, the world would collapse. (318)

The nun's role is to propagate the idea that religion is still powerful enough to make others believe. The "others" of her world don't need to believe in angels, or devils, or God, but they do need to know other people do. She continues to explain:

Our pretense is a dedication. Someone must appear to believe. Our lives are no less serious than if we professed real faith, real belief. As belief shrinks from the world, people find it more necessary than ever that *someone* believe... Those who have abandoned belief must still believe in us. They are sure that they are right not to believe but they know belief must not fade completely. Hell is when no one believes. (319)

There is something fundamental about faith existing in the world, whether people buy into it or not. The nuns are an image, even faith is an image. The nuns simulate religiousness. They practice "rising at dawn to pray, lighting candles, asking statues for good health" (319). But in their practice of Catholicism, they actually bring the religion into realness. Like the simulator of an illness, the nuns actually produce the symptoms of faith. It is in their actions that the line between false and true is blurred, and the image of true faith is created in society. The nun recognizes that it is crucial that everyone else believes they believe; their lives are dedicated to the simulation. Their acting is as productive as the "cartographer's mad project" Baudrillard describes. The result is that their alleged faith becomes real enough to have its own role in the world. Whether they believe or not, their simulation of Christianity brings Christianity into the fabric of Jack's culture.

When Jack first arrives at the hospital, he is delighted to learn the nuns speak German, because he has studied some German himself. It is notable, of course, that as the pioneering academic of Hitler Studies, the German language is obviously important. Murray tells Jack that Hitler is so important to him because he takes refuge in Hitler's image:

Helpless and fearful people are drawn to magical figures, mythic figures, epic men who intimidate and darkly loom...Some people are larger than life. Hitler is larger than death. You thought he would protect you...The overwhelming horror [of Hitler and his works] would leave no room for your own death. (287)

Jack takes refuge in the power suggested by Hitler in order to cope with his intense fear of his own death. The nuns' German is evocative of this coping mechanism.

Jack shows the nurse how he can say "*Gut, besser, best*" (317). He points to objects in the room with them and names them. He counts. After, "[t]wo more nuns appeared, wizened and creaky...soon all four of us were charmingly engaged in a childlike dialogue. We did colors, items of clothing, parts of the body" (317). After this, he says:

From my chair I had a clear view of the picture of Kennedy and the Pope in heaven. I had a sneaking admiration for the picture. It made me feel good, sentimentally refreshed. The president still vigorous after death. The Pope's homeliness a kind of radiance. Why shouldn't it be true? Why shouldn't they meet somewhere, advanced in time, against a layer of fluffy cumulus, to clasp hands? Why shouldn't we all meet, as in some epic of protean gods and ordinary people, aloft, well-formed, shining? (317)

What happens in this scene is a construction of a worldview. First, Jack recites the very building blocks of his world. He names the objects around him, says the colors, counts numbers. He knows good, better, and best – a fundamental valuation system. These words are the words by

which he understands his world. They define his perceptions. The nuns help him through the process, like teachers. He takes comfort in the system of the world the nuns help to provide. First, it provides a logic for perceiving and interpreting what is around him. Second, the German language touches on one of his methods for coping with fear of death, linking the nuns to this coping mechanism.

Jack feels good looking at the picture of heaven, still believing that the nuns believe in it. He muses about its possibility, this basic, cartoonish version of an afterlife where dead people live in the clouds. First, he and the nuns go over the physical world around him, and then, he looks at the religious. He puts a little bit of faith in the idea of heaven – “Why shouldn’t it be true?” It is a comforting idea. Moreover, the idea of heaven serves to define that which he cannot name around him. What follows death is unknown, he can’t point to it like he can the objects in the room with the nuns, and describe it. But the picture of a cloudy heaven with dead people in corporeal form is concrete and easy to understand. He can fit it, at least tentatively, into his worldview.

The nuns’ alleged belief in heaven validates it as an idea worth believing in. The nun explains that she and the others must dedicate themselves to acting as though they believe in heaven for everyone else’s well-being. Without their simulation of their religion, the ideas of the religion lose any validity; they cease to exist as possibilities. Christianity provides a possible answer for what will happen after death. The cartoonish heaven pictured in the hospital is not something that Jack needs to wholeheartedly believe in, but if the nuns don’t behave as they do, then the picture loses all meaning. It is the potential it holds that is important.

Images as a method of mediating fear of death is not a new idea in *White Noise*. When Jack finds Willie Mink overdosed on Dylar, a major symptom of his is constant mimicry of what

he has heard on television. According to Duvall, Mink's "subjectivity has been voided almost entirely and replaced by the signifying chain of television's language" (448). His entire identity has transformed into an imitation of the television. Mink's life is images and audio from the TV. This is the effect of Dylar. Though the drug has failed to create a functioning human with a fear of death, it has attempted to do so by countering fear of death with consumption of images. This is like the comfort one may find in religion. Though religion is, according to DeLillo's nuns, simply an image, it still can be consumed in order to mediate the terror of death.

In the final scene of the novel, shortly after the encounter with the nuns, Jack notes a radical change that has happened in his world: the products sold in the supermarket have changed. The scene follows the revelation about the nuns, and seems to hint at why people need the nuns, and what happens when the service the nuns provide disappears.

The supermarket shelves have been rearranged. It happened one day without warning. There is agitation and panic in the aisles, dismay in the faces of older shoppers. They walk in a fragmented trance, stop and go, clusters of well-dressed figures frozen in the aisles, trying to figure out the pattern, discern the underlying logic, trying to remember where they'd seen the Cream of Wheat. They see no reason for it, find no sense in it.  
(325-326)

The rearranging of the products in the supermarket brings on a kind of existential crisis for the consumers. There had been a specific order to the supermarket before, and it had guided them in navigating the supermarket, understanding how to find things they didn't know the specific location of. Now, with everything changed, they are "trying to figure out the pattern, discern the underlying logic." The narration highlights a desire amongst the shoppers, and amongst society

at large, to understand *why* things are as they are. There must be some underlying reason to the way the supermarket is.

This seems to compliment the nun's explanation that the world needs believers. The nun essentially tells Jack that society at large needs there to be believers, in order to make their nonbelief possible. The majority of society doesn't need to follow the rituals of a religion, or subscribe to its beliefs. They just need to know that the structure is there. They need to know that it is well thought-out, that the nuns are following its many traditions. There is a religion, with a precise cosmology, and there are people who are committed to living their life in its cause. The structure exists. People do not need to study it themselves; it is simply necessary to know that it is out there.

Part of the reason for this is the influence religion has had on their society. Whether or not these people consider themselves Christians or Jewish, their own worldview has been intensely constructed based upon Biblical teachings. They likely do not believe that God delivered the Ten Commandments unto Moses on Mount Sinai, but they have taken for granted their whole lives that murder and theft are wrong. Their understandings of morality are very much based on religious roots. Similarly, they have the option to take solace in religious concepts like life after death in the event of a death of a loved one. If something terrible happens, they can make meaning of the situation by believing a higher power caused it, or by believing a tyrant will be punished one day, whether through karma or in hell.

When everything in the supermarket changes, "[t]here is agitation and panic in the aisles." The change causes an intense reaction. The people "see no reason for it, find no sense in it." This again highlights the way people need a reason for things to happen. The arbitrary change is disturbing to them – arbitrariness is disconcerting. They appreciate the potential

religious ideas have to explain the world. Even if they themselves do not believe, the fact that others have committed themselves to it tells them that there is something to the belief, that it isn't impossible. Though they never particularly evaluated the way the supermarket was organized and put much of their own life towards it, they still relied on its structure. Likewise, the people may not care much for religion, but they still depend on the structure of morality it has established in society, still find solace in the idea that their loved ones live on in heaven, and that things happen because God knows they should.

Of course, it is also crucial that the supermarket is the scene of this upending of social comfort. The act of production in the postmodern era is itself "hyperreal" – "it retains all the features, the whole discourse of traditional production, but it is nothing more than its scaled-down refraction" (374). Production of consumer goods is an expression of the hyperreal that is the result of a society dominated by simulations. The consumption of these goods is a mode of participation in the simulation-world. The supermarket, then, is a symbol for this world at large. The amount of agitation its change causes demonstrates how integral simulacrum and images are in the lives of these people. The upset of the order of the supermarket is not only explanatory about the role of religion, but also serves to show how the consumer culture is really the most central construct in the lives of *White Noise's* postmoderns.

Religious institutions in *White Noise* do not play a major apparent world. Jack is a man of his time, and like other postmodernists he simply cannot believe one certain grand narrative about the cosmos, about human nature, and about right and wrong, over another. He and his peers indulge many different stories: Murray contrasts the Tibetan idea that death is "the end of attachment to things," leading to "uterine re-birth," with the Judeo-Christian afterlife and other esoteric ideas like an "out-of-body experience or a trip on a UFO" (38). Heinrich's friend, who

will attempt to break a world record involved with spending time with snakes, is being “trained to breathe...the Sunny Moslem way” (268). Despite not being a Muslim himself, he and his trainer think one aspect of Islam is more valuable than others; they cherry-pick this one part to practice.

The characters do not practice religions themselves, but they still rely on their images. They may be unable to believe in a single cosmological story, but they do still live under the conditions of any age and time, with fears and anxieties. Jack and Babette are incredibly fearful of death, with Jack’s hovering over his head at all times. Having the idea that maybe after death, “we all meet, as in some epic of protean gods and ordinary people, aloft, well-formed, shining” gives comfort to Jack (317). Likewise, the people in the supermarket require some sort of underlying logic to their world. They don’t need to believe in its origins or its rightfulness; they don’t need the most expertly designed supermarket. They just need to know that there is an order, that their worldview comes from somewhere. If there is no order to the supermarket, they are fearful. Similarly, if no one believes anymore that God declared murder to be wrong, adultery to be wrong, are they still wrong? Does their world have any order or meaning anymore? Institutional religion serves to reinforce these potentially arbitrary matters to lend order and understanding to the world. That this religion is only a simulation proves to be irrelevant. The simulation of faith in an ideology causes the simulation to pass from symbolic to real; the ideology exists, despite a lack of honest believers. As simulation blurs the difference between false and true, it is impossible to understand anything one can simulate as objectively true. Because of the nuns, the ideology exists, and this is what Jack, Babette, and the rest of their society needs to live with the intense fear of death and other existential questions that persist with or without “real” religion.



## Chapter 2: Critiques of the Religious Grand Narrative

An important tenant of postmodernism is a distrust and rejection of grand narratives or metanarratives. This begins with doubt in the truth one can derive from a narrative. Jean-Francois Lyotard introduced this concept in depth in *The Postmodern Condition*. In section 6, “The Pragmatics of Narrative Knowledge,” he sketches out how “[n]arration is the quintessential form of customary knowledge” (19). Knowledge is, of course, a complex term. Lyotard describes it as such:

Knowledge, then, is a question of competence that goes beyond the simple determination and application of the criterion of truth, extending to the determination and application of criteria of efficiency (technical qualification), of justice and/or happiness (ethical wisdom), of the beauty of a sound or color (auditory and visual sensibility), etc.

Understood this way, knowledge is what makes someone capable of forming “good” denotative utterances, but also “good” prescriptive and “good” evaluative utterances. (19)

In this regard, this kind of knowledge denotes “the culture of a people” (19).

This kind of knowledge is built by narrative. First, he writes:

the successes or failures greeting the hero’s undertakings...either bestow legitimacy upon social institutions...or represent positive or negative models...of integration into established institutions. Thus, the narratives allow the society in which they are told, on the one hand, to define its criteria of competence and, on the other, to evaluate according to those criteria what is performed or can be performed therein. (20)

Second, “the narrative form, unlike the developed forms of the discourse of knowledge, lends itself to a great variety of language games” (20). By “language games,” Lyotard is referring to denotative statements (e.g. “the state of the sky and the flora and fauna”), deontic statements

(“prescribing what should be done with respect to these same referents”), and evaluative statements (20). Third, he writes:

a narrative tradition is also the tradition of the criteria defining a threefold competence – “know-how,” “knowing how to speak,” and “knowing how to hear” – through which the community’s relationship to itself and its environment is played out. What is transmitted through these narratives is the set of pragmatic rules that constitutes the social bond. (21)

Fourth, Lyotard claims that “[t]he narratives’ reference may seem to belong to the past, but in reality it is always contemporaneous with the act of recitation” (22). The final proclamation Lyotard makes is that “the people are only that which actualizes the narratives” (23).

The narrative form, Lyotard argues, possesses far more than the surface narrative. Through narrative form, the ideas and behaviors that are accepted in a culture manifest – the many narratives of a culture each in part determine the bounds and character of a cultural knowledge.

What is crucial to Lyotard’s argument is that narratives self-legitimate. He writes:

Narratives, as we have seen, determine criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied. They thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do. (23)

If the goal of knowledge is to establish what is true and false, correct and incorrect, then this is hugely problematic: because narratives establish their own “criteria of competence,” then they are not objective nor subject to external standards. That which “has the right to be said and done” is determined within this very subjective, self-propagating context. The myriad implications of the narrative form to what is considered knowledge within a culture force us to recognize the

weight that the narrative form has in constructing our worldviews and evaluating what is true and what is not. A single narrative has the power to demonstrate what constitutes success or failure, and to evaluate aspects of our world or society. Taken together, narratives teach an extraordinary amount. Moreover, the narrative tradition transmits the “pragmatic rules that constitutes the social bond” (21). It itself dictates how we operate as a society, how we define competence. Yet the authority of narrative to do so is questionable. The right to determine “criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied” is a heavy one, but narratives bear it because they are components of a culture, and the components of that culture construct the way the culture is defined.

Brought further, this means that the narratives do not necessarily have any intrinsic goodness in determining a cultures’ conception of competence or its knowledge. A narrative is formed within the context of a culture, and what it says bears the power to assert truths back to that culture. But what a narrative claims can be anything. Their conceptions of success or failure, their evaluative statements, and all the other ways they denote truths and knowledge are subjective – Lyotard facetiously states that the “early philosophers called this mode of legitimating statements opinion” (19). But it is the power of a narrative to take an opinion and affirm it, and alongside the other narratives of its culture, construct a hegemony out of these ideas. Their themes and ideas are transformed into seeming objectivity.

The postmodern culture is defined in part, according to Lyotard, by its recognition of a lack of legitimacy to narratives. Lyotard highlights the Enlightenment drive to create grand narratives and systems of totalization to explain knowledge, in the broad sense defined by Lyotard at the start of this section. He lists German idealism as one example, which “has recourse to a metaprinciple that simultaneously grounds the development of learning, of society,

and of the State in the realization of the ‘life’ of a subject...knowledge first finds legitimacy within itself” (34). He also cites a recent political history embracing metanarratives, such as Marxism and general Kantian theory about the relationship between legislators and the citizens at large (35-37). In addition to these, society has grown aware of the way science cannot prove itself to be true, nor can any other field of study, as they all rely upon their own “language games” or unique sets of principles or rules.

The result of this is, as Lyotard declares, that “[t]he grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses” (37). The crisis of scientific knowledge in particular, he says, represents “an internal erosion of the legitimacy principle of knowledge” (39). The grand narrative is terribly problematic in postmodern society, as postmodern society recognizes that each discipline, each culture and each narrative relies on its own set of principles that cannot be verified or proven by another. A socially relevant example is debate over stories of creation according to science versus fundamentalist Christianity. A scientific argument would point to amassed evidence that indicates evolution caused life as we know it to exist. But no matter how much evidence scientists accumulate, fundamentalist Christians are able to argue that it is not proof, because the standards science uses to determine what is true are established within its own system. No matter how well evolutionary theory satisfies scientific methodology and “criteria of competence,” it still exists only according to scientific claims. Detractors are able to argue that Biblical creationism has equal validity under this logic.

Though the rejection of metanarratives does allow religion to participate in the pluralistic collection of ideas, it does also make religious ideology itself a problem. Religions preach ideologies that explain the systems of society and the universe under one totalizing code. For example, Christianity teaches that the cosmos came into existence because God willed it. It

teaches that humans are sinners but, if they adhere to a specific moral code through their lives, they can gain salvation and upon death their souls will go to heaven. It sets out the Ten Commandments as fundamental principles, and explains other aspects of a code of living throughout the text, especially in the New Testament. The religion explains why we exist, what our purpose is, the difference between right and wrong and the reasons we must adhere to what is designated right. It teaches of the greatest power in the universe, and the duty of humans in light of this. In short, Christianity, like other religious traditions, gives answers to questions of huge scope about human existence.

But, it fails to meet any legitimacy criteria, other than proffering divine revelation as evidence – something obviously problematic to an increasingly skeptical society. Moreover, the attempt to totalize all aspects of human existence into a black and white, simple, essentialized set of doctrine and code doesn't compensate for the postmodern understanding that different sets of ideas belong to different modes of thinking. The crisis of knowledge in postmodern society as Lyotard explains it calls for adaptations of narratives for specific contexts. It calls for subjectivity, and for the validity of multiple perspectives. His writing in "The Pragmatics of Narrative Knowledge" demonstrates an acute awareness to the way knowledge offered by a narrative lacks inherent truthfulness and is rather the result of the cultural narrative that has preceded it.

One of the most striking characteristics of *God is Dead* is also a response to the postmodern rejection of grand narratives: its form. *God is Dead* resists characterization as a narrative. I argue it is useful to consider it as a novel, because its chapters describe the events that pass after the death of God. Three of its nine chapters clearly refer to the same family. All the same, the narrative is not clear. The chapters seem chronological, but the timeline is very

fuzzy in places. Even the reviewers whose praise is quoted in the opening pages of the book are unsure of what to characterize the work as, with some calling it a novel, some referring to the book's stories. *Publishers Weekly* compromises and calls it a "novel-in-stories"; *BookPage* refers to the "chapter-length stories," embracing that it is a cohesive work but still not willing to embrace the term novel. The cover of the book announces itself only as "fiction by Ron Currie, Jr."

A brief summary of the book's contents, by chapter, ought to help elucidate its incoherent nature and its reflection of Currie's postmodern themes, particularly its critique of grand narrative. The first chapter features God, who has taken the form of a Dinka woman and is now fully mortal, in a refugee camp in Darfur. The second chapter is about a freshly-graduated college senior, eager to leave her hometown and move to college, when her world is darkened by witnessing a priest commit suicide. The next chapter, "Indian Summer," tells about a group of college-aged boys who witness the world around them fall to pieces and their futures disappear, and partially execute a suicide pact. The fourth, "False Idols," is about a man living in the aftermath of all this, when society realizes the world has not ended, and begin to worship dogs or children. The fifth chapter is a brief three pages, where a father and son keep an eye on a passed-out drunk. The son is a relapsed alcoholic, whose mental anguish stems from the death of God. The sixth is in interview form, sort of: the subject is "the Last Remaining Member of the Feral Dog Pack Which Fed on God's Corpse," and the interviewer's questions are left blank, because, as he explains, he communicated with the dog through "extrasensory means...without...actually speaking" (89). Following are chapters about the society that follows, that has accepted God's death and continued on. Two philosophical factions go to war, and a teenage son of the fourth chapter's central character obsesses over a female classmate and is drawn to the military. A first-

person narrator's brother commits violent murder and makes headlines because he is a believer in a god. The boy from two chapters prior flees the opposing army, which is indiscriminately destroying everything in its path. This is the final chapter.

The chapters seem to follow chronologically, with some referencing others and thus contextualizing themselves, but the reader is hard-pressed to have confidence in the timeline. There are often too few names to know whether the characters featured in one chapter appear in another. The narration changes from chapter to chapter, some third-person, some first-person from the perspective of the chapter's central character. The tone of the third-person-narrated chapters vary, not extremely, but enough that one wouldn't be comfortable asserting the narrator is the same in each one. And, of course, there is the chapter titled "An Interview with the Last Remaining Member of the Feral Dog Pack Which Fed on God's Corpse," which is an interview with an "author's note" to introduce it (89).

This book is formally postmodern, sharing in many of the aesthetic conventions of postmodern literature. It showcases a "desuetude of the metanarratives, favoring instead '*les petites histoires*'" (Hassan, "Pluralism," 505). According to Charles Russell, a key characteristic of postmodern literature "on both the formal and thematic levels is the problematic nature of subjective presence—whether conceived in terms of character, writer, or the speaking voice of the text—a subjectivity which rarely achieves clear definition or stable identity," something *God is Dead* actively enforces, through its contrasting narratives and incomplete characters and plots (33). It embraces multiple styles of narration from chapter to chapter, including first-person narratives, a chapter in the form of an interview, and a chapter jumping between a first-person emotionally-driven narrative and excerpts from news articles on the political climate. Its chapters demonstrate diversity of subject matter and of perspective; it understands that no one mythology

would be sufficient for explaining the events that occur after the death of God, the event that kicks off the revolutionary changes the world undergoes. Lyotard writes that the postmodern consciousness includes no “nostalgia for the lost narrative”; rather, there is the “knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction” (41). What he is referring to is the way the different disciplines of knowledge have their own languages, from “machine languages” to “graphs of phonological structures” (41). There is an inability to use the same “language games” to give life to all different schools of knowledge.

Simplified, or perhaps extrapolated, is the concept that different ideas need different language and exist within different systems. Currie presents us with a way to deal with this. The chapters are different stories, for one thing. On top of this, they are really reflections of different disciplines. The first chapter, also titled “God is Dead,” is theological and is a personal telling of an (invented) historical moment. The chapter “Grace” is a very personal rumination on one character’s life and his or her personal anguish. The interview is about the historical political events after God’s death, the exact way God’s powers were transferred to this dog and his pack, and the emotional struggle the dog has experienced. “The Helmet of Salvation...” deals with political issues. These different chapters do different kinds of work. For that, they cannot all be told by the same narrative style. A single perspective could not capture all the things that need to be captured.

Because the book focuses on religious topics, the parsed style of the book acts as a demonstration of an interaction between religion and postmodernism. The big question of the book is, what happens when God dies? The answer resonates through all parts of society. It is political, it is theological, it has to do with culture and with human behavior and psychology. The book’s structure says that things to do with God cannot be forced into a metanarrative. It takes



something theological and breaks it up into different pieces, different perspectives. The evaluative statements Lyotard describes as the second property of narrative knowledge do not arrive at a consensus. This big, religious question has many answers. For the central character of “False Idols,” the death of God has concrete consequences on his life – his profession and his family are affected – but there is no existential crisis. The world around him is still familiar. But for the central character of “Grace,” there is deep torment. That there could be no God is not a fact he can live with. So – the evaluation of life after the death of God is mixed.

Currie also avoids plot resolution in many of the book’s chapters. That is to say, he implies what is likely to happen, but the chapter ends before its execution. For example, the first chapter, about the death of God, ends with gunfire and bombs whistling down around God, but before his actual death. The final sentence is, “God closed his eyes and wished for someone he could pray to” – at the conclusion of the chapter, God is alive (22). “Grace” ends with the father and adult son walking away from the unconscious drunk man when a cop arrives to take care of the scene. The son is a recently relapsed alcoholic. The final lines of the chapter take a tone and address a subject completely untouched in the rest of the chapter:

I keep walking and don’t look back.

I haven’t thought of you in what seems like a long time, but for some reason I do now. I see you knocking bottles off the coffee table with an angry sweep of your arm. I hear your voice from behind a locked door, screaming there’s no God, why can’t I just accept it like everyone else? I picture you crying so hard and so long your eyes swell shut. I wonder where you are, who you’re with, if you flinch every time he moves his hands, like you did with me.

The ending is suggestive but at the same time offers no resolution; in fact, it obscures the story more. The person the son is speaking to was not mentioned prior to this final chapter. The story is entirely unresolved; it ends instead by adding a dimension to the problem. The final chapter, "Retreat," ends with the opposing army bombing their conquered land. The last line describes the central character driving through bombs and fire amidst a world being destroyed. The book ends without giving any indication of how far this destruction will go, or what will come of the world.

This avoidance of endings plays into the first way narration is a form of knowledge, described by Lyotard. This property, described in detail at the start of this chapter, is the presentation of stories as "successes or failures greeting the hero's undertakings," which "either bestow legitimacy upon social institutions...or represent positive or negative models...of integration into established institutions" (20). Without giving exacting endings to his stories, Currie does not allow us to see the successes or failures, the positive or negatives. A suggested happy ending is unconfirmed, as is a devastating one. These stories refrain from making any definitions of "criteria of competence" (Lyotard 20). Even more, they lack the evaluative narrative that would follow the final acts of a story. The chapter "My Brother the Murderer" ends with the central character killing his brother – probably. All the text strictly says is that he pulls out a baton, and the guards move to bang on the door (156). But assuming that the next minute of the story plays out as expected, there is still no narrative to explain this murder. Is it a mercy kill, that we can if not justify, at least understand? Is it a vicious act of hate? Is it sad, or is it angering? The narrative does not allow these stories to entirely join a collaborative web of narrative knowledge, because these stories lack the deontic and evaluative statements about the implied climactic moments.

Currie responds to the issue of a grand religious narrative through his plot as well. First, he offers a provocative counter-narrative. The God of the first chapter is not the God of the Western world, who is omnipotent and omnibenevolent. In the first few lines of the book, Currie says that God has to manifest a painful and apparently dangerous wound to blend in at the refugee camp in North Darfur, where he is on a mission to locate a boy he feels he needs to apologize for. God, then, is not omnibenevolent, for he has wronged this boy. His need to manifest a painful wound, and suffer under the hot sun, questions his power. One of the early sentences of the chapter goes even further, saying God felt guilty being around the suffering refugees, “over [whom] he was, due to an implacable polytheistic bureaucracy, completely powerless” (3). God is not omnipotent. He is not the only God. He can even die.

This counter-narrative undermines the authority of the original narrative, of the Judeo-Christian God. This conception of God is obvious; the characteristics of omnipotence and immortality seem implied just at the name God. Currie’s God is not like this. He is one of many others, and he is not the most powerful. He makes a mistake regarding this little boy and wrongs him – he is not infallible. He is an entirely different character than he is traditionally understood to be. And, of course, he dies a literal death. God is not a metaphor whose death signifies something about humanity’s development, as the saying “God is dead” often implies. God isn’t metaphorically killed by growing numbers of atheists. God is killed by guns and bombs – weapons of war defeat God.

The counter-narrative adds something to the narrative knowledge of our culture. Lyotard explains that narratives have the power to legitimate themselves, and determine components of the knowledge of a culture. The narratives about God in Western culture have for the most part been about a traditional Judeo-Christian God. In creating this new narrative, Currie gives some

legitimacy to the ideas it sets forth, undermining the power of the grand God narrative that dominates Western culture.

Finally, *God is Dead* insists that we cannot essentialize our culture to be dependent upon the role of God. In chapter four, “False Idols,” the narrator recounts the events since God’s death is discovered (revealed by the dogs who consume his corpse):

Naturally, the news of God’s death hit the world like a sledgehammer. An initial wave of panic, civil unrest, and general bad behavior swept the globe. Martial law was declared, and the National Guard took up residence in every American city. Suicide among nuns and clergy reached epidemic proportions, as did the looting of stores for comfort foods such as Little Debbie snack cakes. Most, myself included, believed the end was nigh, and for a while we hid in our homes, hunched over and wincing, convinced that at any moment we would explode, or simply blip out of existence.

And then a strange thing happened: nothing. Gradually we came to realize that the sun still rose in the morning and set at night, the tide still came in and went out on schedule, and we and everyone we knew (for the most part) were still alive and breathing. Talking heads and self-declared experts offered any number of theories, but the gist of it, intuited by most people, was this: God had created the universe and set it spinning, but it would continue chugging along despite the fact that he was no longer around to keep things tidy. (61)

This account of the time following God’s death shows a societal inclination to reduce all of existence to a single defining factor. When God dies, the world jumps to attach humanity’s existence, the planet’s existence, and all else to him, as though it must all be part of one narrative. Yet, the story reveals that existence is not dependent upon God – remove one link from

the narrative and the chain does not fall apart. God existed in this story, but he existed alongside all the other forces that drive the universe. There are multiple factors defining existence; there is the theistic narrative alongside the scientific narrative. Currie subverts this notion that God is central to existence, that we can essentialize our cosmos and humankind to God.

God as a metanarrative, according to this story, does not work. This story presents a situation where God exists, and is a participant in the Earth's history. But, God is not the power behind everything or the reason for everything. Humans apparently have free will and are responsible for their own actions, though God's work presumably helped to shape them. The story takes one of the most powerful and called-upon metanarratives in history and takes away its power. It posits that reducing the world to a single, overarching source of power and knowledge is unreasonable and faulty. The society in Currie's fiction believes the world will come to an end because the subject of their metanarrative comes to an end, but Currie shows that the subject of the metanarrative is inconsequential on the actual events that happen. The world spins on, humans retain the ability to live and behave as members of a society. The world was not reducible to the alleged metanarrative after all.

Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* responds to the problem of grand narratives in postmodernism through the religious group called "God's Gardeners" featured in the book. In addition to the general problem of grand narratives being untrustworthy, the novel responds to the problem of canon, which develops from the rejection of narratives. Postmodernism emphasizes decanonization, a tearing down of the "mastercodes of society" and of metanarratives (Hassan, "Pluralism," 505). Decanonization prompts the uplifting of subversions of culture, which can include revising cultural modes of thought towards gender equality or uplifting minority groups, as well as simply allowing for diverse perspectives.

Religious traditions are the pinnacle of canon. Even from a narrow definition of canon, religions tend to have a canonized set of texts that define the religion. This is certainly true for Christianity, which is most pervasive in North American culture. Moreover, Hassan explains that in the context of postmodern philosophy, “all canons, all conventions of authority” are under suspicion and to be subverted (505). Physical text or no text, the principles that rule Christian thought and the dogma of its followers come from a historically powerful line of authority. Therefore, religions like Christianity are prime targets to be “delegitimized” as a “mastercode in society” (505).

Margaret Atwood’s conception of religion set forth in *Year of the Flood* answers this problem by depicting religion as a fundamentally different thing than religions depict themselves as. It is something central about religions that they understand themselves as the truth; that is why they are able to claim legitimacy. According to the Christian tradition, we have received the religion via revelation by God. The stories that give us the principles of the faith are examples of God’s dealings with people. The Ten Commandments were revealed directly by God; the scripture is at least “divinely inspired” and at most the exact word of God. Some of the most important lessons of the faith were given directly to the people by Jesus Christ himself. Traditionally, we understand that a religion’s teachings have authority because they are allegedly timeless, unequivocal truths, known by humans through divine revelation.

*Year of the Flood* responds to this idea about religion by describing religion as not God-sent, but rather a human creation that is a specific reaction to the needs of a society and a functional and practical tool. The religious group that the novel follows is called God’s Gardeners. The Gardeners’ ideology is descended from the Abrahamic tradition. It follows the scripture of the Old Testament and of Psalms, and its God is a omniscient and omnipotent God

who created the universe and who loves all his creatures. Unlike any major contemporary incarnation of Christianity, however, the Gardeners' ideology is extremely focused on the natural world. Sermons preach that animals have souls and are close to humans. The dogma includes absolute veganism and detachment from technology. The products they use are entirely handmade – they wear hand-sewn caftans and grow their own food from their secret rooftop garden (39). The children's only toys are haggard-looking dolls sewn from leftover materials (65).

The environmental issues that plague their world have been discussed in depth in the chapter prior, but are of extreme importance to this chapter and worth mentioning again: overpopulation, overproduction, pollution, and a number of other human practices have had devastating impact on the world (388). Populations of animals are extinct, and huge areas of land are uninhabitable to people and animals. Much of ocean life has been absolutely destroyed.

The ideology of the Gardeners, then, is a very specific response to the problems of the world they live in. The world they live in is unstable and scary, particularly because of things humans have done to it. For this reason, they have adapted the mainstream religion of the United States to meet a demand for eco-centrism.

Each chapter opens with a sermon given on a religiously-significant day – an important Saint day, a festival, a feast – and explains not just a tenant of the Gardeners' religion but also where it came from. The sermons demonstrate clear linkage to Christianity, talking about precise moments out of the Old and New Testaments, even St. Francis of Assisi who lived in the thirteenth century. But, the sermons take otherwise familiar stories, quotes, and lessons from the scripture and explain them as speaking to the nature of God's and humans' relationship with the natural world, and humans' duty towards it.

One particularly interesting sermon delivered is on the day of the Feast of Adam and All Primates, delivered on “God’s methodology in creating man” (51). The day is meant, according to Adam One, to “affirm our Primate ancestry...[and] affirm, also, the Divine agency that has caused us to be created in the way that we were” (51). Adam One elaborates. He cites the statement in the Bible that says God created man from the dust of the Earth (Genesis 2:7), and explains that further: “He could also have formed him from the dust of the Earth, which in a sense, He did, for what else can be signified by “dust” but atoms and molecules, the building blocks of all material entities?” (52). The attention to atoms and molecules is a reinforcement of the evolution of men from other primates. In reading the word “dust” in the scripture through a different lens, Adam One is able to affirm mankind’s biological connection with other animals.

Adam One goes on to discuss the original man’s fall from grace. According to the Genesis story, Adam and Eve’s original state was in the Garden of Eden, unshamefully naked (Gen. 2:25). Their fall occurs when they eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and learn right from wrong. The result is that they “realized they were naked” and felt shame, and covered up. A component of their punishment is that man will now have to toil for his food; God describes him laboring over a farm.

Looking at this story, Adam One preaches:

Our appetites, our desires, our more uncontrollable emotions – are all Primate! Our Fall from the original Garden was a Fall from the innocent acting-out of such patterns and impulses to a conscious and shamed awareness of them...What commandment did we disobey? The commandment to live the Animal life in all simplicity – without clothing, so to speak. (52)



The fall from grace, according to Adam One, was a fall from our animalistic nature. The knowledge of good and evil wasn't knowledge we were meant to have; basing our behavior on thought-out plans about right and wrong is not what humans were intended to do. Rather, appetite, desire, emotion was meant to lead – we were supposed to work based upon our instinct, our animalistic nature. Man's punishment is, in part, that he will need to work the land for his food – man being, of course, the only animal that farms. The fall from grace represents man moving in the wrong direction, away from nature.

The sermon also gives attention to the commandment by God that men and women take care of the earth, raise plants and nurture its life: "God's commandment to 'replenish the Earth' did not mean we should fill it to overflowing with ourselves, thus wiping out everything else," Adam One says. "We have betrayed the trust of the Animals, and defiled our sacred task of stewardship" (53). The sermon here works from the same story in Genesis, the same words that have been trusted as the words of God for centuries, and reads those words to an entirely new understanding.

Later in the novel is a sermon delivered on "April Fish Day." Adam One explains that the holiday called April Fool's day in English speaking countries is the English name for the French holiday "Poisson d'Avril" – April Fish. The origins of the French holiday are unknown, but Adam One proposes that it was originally a Christian festival, drawn from the fish symbol early Christians used as "secret signals of their faith in times of oppression" (195). The sermon continues to explain, "the Fish was an apt symbol, for Jesus first called as his Apostles two fishermen, surely chosen by him to help conserve the Fish population. They were told to be fishers of men *instead of* being fishers of Fish" (196).

The sermon does not necessarily profess that the preservation of fish is one of the major principles being laid out throughout the Bible. At the same time, however, it recognizes that there must be meaning to the metaphor. The sermon also discusses the alternate idea that a fish may represent “silliness,” which Adam One preaches is possible, as well, and may mean that Christians are April Fish and must “wear the label of God’s Fools gladly...no matter how wise we may think we are” (196). Recognizing the multiplicity of meanings to the metaphor is itself particularly postmodern, but also means that one cannot strictly believe the fish must mean something *other* than attention to nature. It recognizes that there are multiple ways to believe it, and that his is perfectly reasonable, certainly less outlandish than other possibilities.

The sermon says that the “fishers of men” moment is another scriptural example of how Jesus Christ was attune to the importance of animals and plants, alongside “his remarks on Sparrows, Hens, Lambs, and Lilies,” claiming it demonstrates an understanding on Jesus’ part “that most of God’s Garden was under water and that it, too, needed tending” (196). Here again, Adam One returns to the text of the Bible, and provides a reasonable interpretation based upon the text. Though some of the claims made by the Gardeners do seem fairly outlandish – that Jesus was concerned about the fish population, and so had two fishermen choose a new job – they are thematically consistent. Noticing that fish play a role throughout the Christian tradition (the sermon goes on to talk about St. Francis Assisi and his relationship with fish), and noticing that Jesus had a pattern of paying attention to the natural world does suggest license to pay special attention to relevant moments. Adam One simply notices that the Christian tradition does include the natural world, something that is in crisis in his contemporary time, and pays special attention to the insight the scripture and the tradition itself may provide.

In looking at St. Francis of Assisi, who lived in the thirteenth century C.E., Adam One says he “preached a sermon to the Fish, not realizing that the Fish commune directly with God. Still, the Saint was affirming the respect due to them. How prophetic does this appear, now that the world’s Oceans are being laid waste!” (196). This statement is twofold, first acknowledging again the standard that attention to fish in the Christian tradition is significant. Despite St. Francis’ intentions – he was not preaching to the fish because he knew (as the Gardeners claim) the fish are in close communication with God – his actions were holy (he is a canonical saint not only in the Gardener’s theology but in contemporary Christianity). If he is recognized as a saint, then we can consider all his actions saintly, his attention to the natural world no less.

The reinterpretation of the Biblical text and of institutions of the Christian tradition, such as sainthood, is important because both shed light on the extent to which religion is and can be manipulated by people, contradicting its role as a grand narrative. The scripture is meant to represent the word of God. Fundamentalist religions believe it is infallible, that the word of the text is precisely accurate and truthful. By referring so often to the scripture, *The Year of the Flood* affirms that the Gardeners are in fact following the word of the Bible. The sermons do not contradict the word of the text. But still, their form of Christianity is very much unlike any major form practiced now. This highlights how impossible it is to assume a text, and especially a narrative like the Bible, has precise meaning. Though the text itself purports to be the word of God, Atwood highlights how the values and narratives within the text are not self-evident; the narrative a religious sect constructs based upon scripture cannot be assumed to be an objective and correct interpretation of the text. Even for non-Fundamentalist Christian sects, a certain interpretation of the Bible is still assumed. Adam One’s interpretation is very far from any contemporary one, but is still drawn from the text. It provides perspective about how we take the

words on the page and make them fit a certain philosophy, when really the people who preach on the text give a religion its principles, not necessarily the text itself.

An important thing that occurs in these sermons is an interpretation of what is described in the Bible in light of what the Gardeners consider irrefutable scientific evidence that at least on the surface contradicts what is written in the Bible. Lyotard cites a number of causes for the grand narratives' loss of credibility. Along with the surge in capitalism and the failure of modernist attempts at epistemological systems, he lists the "disorienting" effect of technological growth as an important cause (37-39). The Gardener's theology is in part an attempt to reconcile this with a pre-existing narrative. Technological growth allows for more precise scientific study, much of which upsets pre-existing conceptions. The Gardeners are left with conflicting information and work to develop a narrative which reconciles them. A notable example in *The Year of the Flood* has to do with creation: Adam One preaches, "The Human Words of God speak of the Creation in terms that could be understood by the men of old. There is no talk of galaxies or genes, for such terms would have confused them greatly!" (11). Still, he insists that the "days" in the Bible are not 24-hour days, but days on God's infinitely long timeline; God's days are eons, reconciling the seven days of creation with the billions of years of evolution they acknowledge happened. In describing the events that took place during this slow creationary process, Adam One preaches:

We are told that, on the fifth day of God's Creating activities, the waters brought forth Creatures, and on the sixth day the dry land was populated with Animals, and with Plants and Trees; and all were blessed, and told to multiply; and finally Adam – that is to say, Mankind – was created. According to Science, this is the same order in which the species

did in fact appear on the Planet, Man last of all. Or more or less the same order. Or close enough. (12)

The attempt is to understand the word of the scripture through the lens of science, which has proven in the Gardeners' time to be a powerful source of information (amongst other things, the widespreadness and success of genetic engineering makes it hard to not believe in evolution). Still, the Gardeners cannot only trust the scientific narrative, nor can they only trust the religious; they fuse them in an attempt to keep one from disproving the other, though the final sentences of the passage suggests it is not entirely successful.

Emily McAvan discusses the loss of metaphorical thinking in postmodern art and its influence on the sacred (31-42). The beliefs of the Gardeners illustrate this; other than God and a vague notion of the afterlife, most of their ideology is derived from a literal understanding of their world. They have no angels, no demons, no invisible forces. Rather, their doctrine employs the literal, the concrete: it deals with DNA and RNA, other animals, the predator-prey relationship. The allegorical stories of scripture are interpreted by taking the metaphorical language to exemplify something concrete about the natural world, such as reveal God's intended diet for humans or to lend scriptural support to evolutionary theory, rather than to explain abstract concepts such as right and wrong. This characteristic of the Gardeners demonstrates a more postmodern attitude towards scripture. In doing so, we see that *The Year of the Flood* imagines religion morphing based on the philosophical perspective that dominates a time period.

The Gardeners also follow Christianity in the tradition of praising saints. The term "saint" has layered meanings. As a title, it can refer to those officially recognized by the church as being believed to be in heaven. It can also be used to generally refer to all believers of Christianity.

Often, the term is used to identify people seen as having lead an exceptionally holy life, who have set an example with their lives as someone who is active in the faith and commits personal sacrifices to foster its principles.

The Gardeners' calendar names each day for at least one saint, often more. They recognize as saints a long list of non-fictional people who have been activists for the environment or scientists who have studied it. There is Saint Bridget Stutchbury, an ecologist and businesswoman behind the current coffee company "Birds & Beans," which works to produce coffee that does not interfere with the migratory patterns of songbirds. There is Saint Yossi Leshem of Barn Owls, who is currently a researcher at Tel Aviv University and responsible for a national program using barn owls and kestrel falcons to control pests in lieu of chemical pesticides. Saint Dian's Day celebrates Dian Fossey, who is perhaps the most important gorilla researcher and conservationist. Her holiday celebrates "interspecies empathy." She is considered a martyr by the Gardeners.

The work done by the many men and woman recognized as saints by the Gardeners is truly important, but it is far from what most would consider relevant to sainthood. Even more, some of them, Dian Fossey and Steven Jay Gould are well-known in contemporary America, but many of the others are much more obscure (e.g. Saint Gilberto Silva of Bats). By elevating these lesser-known scientists and activists to the level of 'Saint' Rachel Carson is to suggest that all who do important work related to the natural world are fulfilling the characteristics of a saint. Their examples are to be recognized as great; the men and women themselves, especially holy individuals. The Gardeners' saints send the message that to make ones purpose the betterment of the natural world is to be a holier person.

Like with the sermons, this reinterpretation of a traditionally Christian concept suggests that perspective plays a role in determining the rules of a religion. Canonical saints become a part of the rich story of their religion. In some denominations, they can be prayed to in addition to God. Saint, as a title, is an acknowledgment of belief: it acknowledges belief that the person being praised is in heaven, is holy, and was above average in their exercise of religion on earth. In doing this, it strengthens the values that person practiced within the religion's tenants. So, to name any individual a saint within any religion contributes to the beliefs of that religion – but it is also an arbitrary practice. Saints are not chosen by the divine, they are chosen by humans, and are a reflection of what strikes them as worthy; what is striking in one particular time and place is likely different from another. Moreover, the perception of these men and women about those they name saints is perfectly fallible; the bureaucracy of a church is not and does not claim to be omniscient, like they believe God is. Assuming a heaven does exist and is reserved for those who have earned salvation, they still cannot know whether those they declare saint to be in heaven in the afterlife. Therefore, humans and their perceptions of their world have real effect on the values systems of their religions. According to *The Year of the Flood*, these values are not unchanging and pure. The saint system in this novel instead reflects the way religions can adapt based upon what humans believe to be true. *The Year of the Flood* subverts the grand narrative of Christianity without breaking any of its rules. It engages Christianity's own "language game" to construct a different narrative, thus drawing attention to the way the religious grand narratives self-legitimate in the same way that Lyotard explains is problematic.

### Chapter 3: Visions of the Postsecular in a Post-religious Society

The main characters in *White Noise* are not religious people. They do not attend church, identify with any religious tradition in particular, or take God into account when considering their lives – which they are constantly doing. Similarly, for the characters of *God is Dead*, once society has accepted the absence of God, traditional religious practices lose their value. Both novels depict lives in the context of what seem to be post-religious societies. However, as these two novels indicate, religion provides an outlet for certain components of life that continue to exist regardless of the existence of religion, including the fear that accompanies the threat of death, questions about one's purpose and value in life, and the organization of a value system and worldview. In these two novels, the characters who do not have faith in a traditional religious system find other ways to fulfill these needs by engaging the secular as a source of spiritual experience in the secular.

In *White Noise*, Jack and other characters ascribe meaning typically associated with religion to the secular, and end up having meaningful and transcendent experiences through them. Primarily, they use popular culture and commodity consumption to anesthetize their fear of death. This aspect of the novel can be understood in terms of Frederic Jameson's notion of "late capitalism"; this is the major construct that defines their world. In *God is Dead*, characters seek to fulfill a spiritual yearning through the secular, or find themselves having spiritual emotions while seeking to fulfill some of these needs religion would otherwise take care of (again, needs such as an emotional outlet or a method of organizing a worldview).

This concept is tied up with the notion of the postsecular. Kathryn Ludwig describes the postsecular as a perspective that criticizes both secular and religious, dogmatic constructions of reality (82). The postsecular lingers somewhere between, rejecting traditional religious



narratives, but still maintaining the experience of spirituality that cannot be strictly secular. In this definition, the postsecular is a strikingly postmodern concept. It participates in the decanonization tradition of postmodernism, as something postsecular would have no need to posit any grand truth or overarching narrative. The postsecular encourages finding meaning and spirituality outside of traditional religion. Ludwig, writing on another of DeLillo's novels, explains:

In postsecular fiction, as we have seen in *Underworld*, the secular often substitutes for or displaces religion. Instead of the security of religious tradition, people in *Underworld* cling to paranoia as a way of ordering chaos. An historic baseball becomes an unlikely sacred object....the real sources of the religious in the novel are not traditionally holy sources but the material world, and especially people. (86)

In *White Noise*, the postsecular tends to manifest not through other people but through things that capture the systems that frame the characters existences. Often, this ends up being linked to late capitalism, and so characters like Jack will find meaning in facets of late capitalistic society, like the supermarket. The elderly man Babbalanza reads to weekly for volunteer work experiences the tabloids to be a postsecular object.

A moment in *White Noise* that easily illustrates this principle is Jack's German tutor's expounding his interest in meteorology. The man, Howard Dunlop, explains that he lost faith in God after his mother's death. As a result, he "was inconsolable, withdrew completely" (55). Dunlop reassembles himself after he discovers weather and meteorology can serve as a replacement for God. He explains that, watching the weather report on the television, he was struck by the self-assurance of the weatherman: "It was as though a message was being transmitted from the weather satellite through that young man and then to me in my canvas

chair” (55). Dunlop interprets the weatherman as a kind of prophet: he receives this information about an inescapable higher power, the weather, and relays it to the rest of the people. Following this revelation, Dunlop studies meteorology, and tells Jack, “weather was something I’d been looking for all my life. It brought me a sense of peace and security I’d never experienced” (55).

Weather is an interesting replacement for religion, as on the surface it bears many real similarities. It evokes more ancient images of the powers of the Gods—Zeus’s expression of power through thunder, or an angry God sending 40 days and 40 nights of rain to Earth. Evidentially, weather has long struck humanity as one of the purer forms of power. But in a modern society, one can only explain extreme weather phenomena through the science that underlies it. By fanatically studying meteorology, Dunlop satisfies the urge to understand what drives occurrences in the world while reconciling that curiosity with a scientifically appropriate perspective.

Yet, it is important to note that Dunlop’s interest is not a purely scientific one. Weather and meteorology are not a purely secular pursuit for him. He tells Jack that understanding the weather brought him profound “peace and security.” His knowledge about weather was something that was able to explain his environment and the way it worked. Dunlop’s attitude towards meteorology transcends scientific inquiry; it is not an intellectual interest but an emotional one. He says to Jack, “I turned to it for comfort: I read weather maps, collected books on weather, attended launchings of weather balloons. I realized weather was something I’d been looking for all my life” (55). For Dunlop, faith in God is not a viable option after the death of his mother. But the loss of faith destroys him – his interest in meteorology highlights the ways loss of faith affected him, and helps to fill this loss. Through meteorology, he can understand this

powerful force in his world. In attending balloon launches, he can take part in a ritual experience that reinforces the system of knowledge he now prizes.

DeLillo illustrates the need for a system to frame the way postmodern characters view the world through the classes Babette teaches weekly. They are “life-skills” classes: she teaches a class called “Eating and Drinking: Basic Parameters,” and a class on proper standing, sitting, and walking (171, 27). These classes address very basic concerns of day-to-day life – they provide rules for her students that underlie the way they conduct these most fundamental tasks. The classes are taught in the basement of a Congregational church (27). The image of Babette, teacher, instructing a roomful of students to stand and sit, in a church, no less, evokes a priestly image. Standing and sitting, as well as the consumption of food and drink, play a fundamental role in religious practices. For example, in a Christian mass, churchgoers are instructed to consume a cracker and drink wine for the Eucharist. “Basic Parameters” of eating and drinking also alludes to the dietary restrictions religious traditions impose, as well as proper ways to consume their food – saying a prayer beforehand, keeping kosher, or separating a piece of challah dough before baking it. These classes suggest that the students who attend Babette’s class are still interested in the practices of religion, without the theism. They do not have an interest in the grand narrative or superstition, but are still drawn to these guidelines on the fundamentals of living as well as the reductionist practices of religion.

Explaining the purpose of her classes, Babette says, “[k]nowledge changes every day. People like to have their beliefs reinforced...people need to be reassured by someone in a position of authority that a certain way to do something is the right way or the wrong way” (171-172). Here, Babette captures one of the problems of a post-religious society that the postsecular works to counter. In a religious society, the church accounted for so much of the way people

understood their worlds; it provided a basic orientation towards the rest of the world and guidelines for the proper way to conduct one's self. The classes Babette teaches are indicative of the post-religious society in that a society without religion necessarily loses some of these side effects of religion; Babette's classes are a creation that accounts for this loss.

Babette also contributes to the postsecular as a volunteer to read to the blind. Weekly, Babette reads to an elderly man called Treadwell from supermarket tabloids:

She reads to him from the *National Enquirer*, the *National Examiner*, the *National Express*, the *Globe*, the *World*, the *Star*. The old fellow demands his weekly dose of cult mysteries. Why deny him? (5)

Being read to, weekly, from these same texts, resembles the practice of weekly being read scripture to. For Treadwell, Babette helps him perform this practice of religiousness without engaging in an actual religious tradition. She brings him "cult mysteries" without the religion.

These connections become even clearer when Babette reads to a bigger group of people in the refugee camp after the airborne toxic event. The contents of the tabloids focus on life after death, a main preoccupation of religions and of the characters throughout *White Noise*. It is especially relevant after the airborne toxic event, where all had feared for their lives. One of the headlines Babette reads is "Life After Death Guaranteed with Bonus Coupons" (142). She reads about proof of reincarnation, ghosts of American icons like Elvis Presley and Lyndon B. Johnson, predictions for the future (142-144). The claims do not make much sense together; we hear about reincarnation alongside the corporeal ghost of Elvis and a vision of Howard Hughes in the sky. There is no sort of narrative one could piece together from the stories in the tabloids. The tabloids are unlike a religious narrative in that way. They instead offer multiple promising possibilities about what comes after death. It tells stories of evil conquered by good, such as the

President and First Lady miraculously surviving a plane hijacking with only “minor cuts” (144). There is a story of a KGB assassin being reincarnated as an innocent young girl, described as “a tale of the good that can come from evil” (143). These stories have the reassuring aspect of religious tales, and Babette’s reading to a group under duress demonstrates a moment of the secular satisfying a role that religion once would have.

The most recurrent structure that defines the way the postsecular manifests in *White Noise* is late capitalism. Late capitalism is a concept set forth by economist Ernest Mendel, but expounded upon in relation to postmodernism by Frederic Jameson. Late capitalism describes the historic moment where capitalism emphasizes multi- and transnational business, where capitalism on a global scale is no longer about imperialism and “rivalry between the various colonial powers,” but rather reflects a production and economic model that is international (xviii-xix). Accompanying the international production and economy comes “new forms of media interrelationship (very much including transportation systems such as containerization), computers and automation” (xix). The social consequences of late capitalism are how we perceive the hold late capitalism has on Jack Gladney’s world. These include “the crisis of traditional labor, the emergence of yuppies, and gentrification on a now-global scale” (xix).

In the form of consumer culture, late capitalism proves to be the most powerful influence in Jack’s life, and it is the one he most often experiences as not entirely secular.<sup>6</sup> Early in the novel he states, “When times are bad, people feel compelled to overeat” (14). Though addressing

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that, though late capitalism is the way a postsecular sensibility most often manifests in Jack’s life, it is not by any means the only one. Like a true postmodernist, Jack experiences feelings of intense meaning and takes refuge from personal crises in other outlets. Hitler is an important example; sections IV and V of Cornel Bonca’s essay “Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*: The Natural Language of the Species” have a good discussion of the relationship between Hitler and Jack’s fear of death.

a different mode of consumption, he captures this idea that consumption, a method of engaging in late capitalism, is a method of coping with the stresses and anxieties of life.

As has been demonstrated, in the world of *White Noise*, religion no longer has the power to define social meaning. Jack doesn't understand his life under the narrative of Christianity, for example. A moment in Jack's life following a troubling conversation with his son illustrates this. His son, Heindrich, has a generally postmodern outlook on life, often questioning whether what we believe we know can be true. When Jack asks him whether he would like to visit his mother, Jack's ex-wife, in Montana, Heindrich responds:

Who knows what I want to do?...How can you be sure of something like that? Isn't it all a question of brain chemistry, signals going back and forth, electrical energy in the cortex? How do you know whether something is really what you want to do or just some kind of nerve impulse in the brain? Some minor little activity takes place somewhere in this unimportant place in one of the brain hemispheres and suddenly I want to go to Montana or I don't want to go to Montana. How do I know I really want to go and it isn't just some neurons firing or something? (45)

This mini-speech spells out the postmodern crisis of knowledge and truth on a most unsettling scale – not only can one not know right from wrong, or whether scientific claims are really true, one cannot, according to Heindrich, even know their own thoughts and desires. Even one's self is unknowable.

Jack does not meaningfully respond to what Heindrich says. He goes to the bank the next day, still, presumably, under the influence of his son's unsettling idea:

I inserted my card, entered my secret code, tapped out my request. The figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate, feebly arrived at after long

searches through documents, tormented arithmetic. Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval. The system hardware, the mainframe sitting in a locked room in some distant city. What a pleasing interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed. (46)

Heindrich had troubled the system of knowledge that is one's own mind. Jack, under stress from this revelation, arrives at the bank to see how this other system is relating to him. The bank represents the system that allows Jack to participate in the late capitalistic culture. It is the system that links him to consumption. The detail about the system hardware "sitting in a locked room in some distant city" brings to mind the international aspect of late capitalism, where borders no longer matter because technology allows for things like the bank to exist in many places at once automatically. This, in turn, reminds us of the importance of mass-production, Jack's ability to consume specific brands rather than locally-produced items.

His reassurance at the ATM is above simple relief. He describes "[w]aves of relief and gratitude," a feeling of "support and approval." The language he uses when he says, "[t]he system had blessed my life," and that "something of deep personal value... had been authenticated and confirmed" demonstrates that this is a transcendent experience for him. Late capitalism does more than influence his perception, it gives him a meaningful role in the system and allows him to feel emotionally secure and valuable.

The role of the supermarket throughout *White Noise* illustrates the importance of this system to Jack and his entire society. Early in the novel, Murray, a friend of Jack's, explains that Tibetans believe in "a transitional state between death and rebirth" (37). It is a non-place where

“the soul restores to itself some of the divinity lost at birth” (37). Murray then makes the leap of likening this transitional state to the supermarket. He says:

[the supermarket] recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, it's a gateway or pathway. Look how bright. It's full of psychic data... Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material. (37)

There is no obvious Western analogue to this transitional state Murray describes. Still, he adopts its general aura, and re-interprets it through what he believes to be the Western equivalent. The supermarket is full of the “psychic data” of consumerism – the symbolism that brands products, the “layers of cultural material” that are all the products of late capitalism. It is within this that Murray locates the “divinity” of his culture. The late capitalist equivalent of being restored the “divinity lost at birth” is being bathed in this epicenter of mass production and of mass media. The “large and clean and modern” building facilitates this kind of meditation where a person like Babette can buy yogurt and tabloids and thus be restored to a certain height of “divinity,” or immersion in and conformity with late capitalistic society (38).

Jack ascribes similar meaningfulness to the supermarket. After the airborne toxic event, Jack looks to the supermarket as a point of stability in the otherwise uncertain and dangerous world. Though the town shows signs of neglect and even ruin, he explains:

...the supermarket did not change, except for the better. It was well-stocked, musical and bright. This was the key, it seemed to us. Everything was fine, would continue to be fine, would eventually get even better as long as the supermarket did not slip. (170)

The supermarket, a central structure of consumerism, is Jack's metric of the standard of living. The “large and clean and modern,” incredibly bright space houses a level of significance above being just a place to shop. By containing all this “psychic energy” related to consumer culture, it



serves as an image of the world at large. It is prophetic; it dictates whether everything will “continue to be fine.” Even in the face of the rather poor condition of Jack’s town, the upkeep of the supermarket tells him that his world will be alright.

Throughout *White Noise*, the major concern that preoccupies Jack, as well as Babette, is a fear of death. We have seen this in the first chapter, when Jack took refuge in ideas of the afterlife offered by Christianity despite not having faith in the religion. The two of them discuss death often, and a common refrain in the narration is the question, “Who will die first?” (15, 30, 100). After the airborne toxic event, when Jack is told he has a dangerous amount of toxin in his body and may die sometime within the next 35 years, the threat of death hangs over his head constantly. After Jack discovers Babette has been taking an experimental drug meant to alleviate fear of dying, they have a conversation of one-upsmanship about who is more afraid of death:

“I’m afraid all the time.”

“I’ve been afraid for more than half my life.”

...“I wake up sweating. I break out in killer sweats.”

“I chew gum because my throat constricts.”

...“I seize up.”

“I’m too weak to move.” (198).

Jack’s fear of dying is the biggest burden in his life. He goes for medical examinations often to see if the toxin in his system is bringing him closer to death, and has frequent conversations with Murray and others about death.

One of Jack’s methods for avoiding the imminence of death is to immerse himself in academia, his obsession with Hitler. Murray explains to him that he hoped Hitler would protect him, both concealing the entity that was Jack within the power of Hitler’s works, and using him

to “grow in significance and strength” (287). Jack’s identity as a professor of Hitler studies is important in trying to keep his death away. Thus, cultivating that identity is important – Jack wears a pair of distinctive glasses he chose early in his career after he was advised to “do something” about his appearance if he “wanted to be taken seriously as a Hitler innovator” (16). He also wears academic robes on campus, like the other department heads, a custom of the college. His costume is a reinforcement of this persona tied up with Hitler, cultivating a sense of grandeur to match.

In one scene, a man who knows him from the college sees him off campus, and points out that he is not wearing the glasses. Jack says he only wears them on campus; the man, called Eric Massingale, responds, “I get it,” as though to suggest he knows the glasses are part of this persona he cultivated – not part of his true identity. Minutes later, the man tells him he looks different without the glasses and gown. Massingale asks, “Where did you get that sweater?...Mail order, right?” and comments, “I think I know those shoes” (82, 83). He is separating Jack-the-Hitler-professor from Jack-in-real-life, the Jack in a mail order sweater and shoes the man recognizes from somewhere – shoes that are nothing special. He tells Jack, “‘You’re a different person altogether’ ... ‘You look so harmless, Jack. A big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy’” (83). Massingale rips Jack apart from the identity he has tried so hard to maintain in order to hide himself in Hitler, hide from death. He brings this fear and threat of death to the surface for Jack, telling him that he is not protected by his identity in Hitler; he is a harmless, indistinct man.

What follows is a massive shopping spree. Jack says the encounter put him “in the mood to shop,” and he gathers up his family and he shops for shirts, food, “for immediate needs and distant contingencies” (83, 84). As the girls find things they think Jack “might want or need,”

helping him buy, he refers to them as his “guides to endless well-being” (83). Shopping is an act of building himself back up. Jack says,

I began to grow in value and self-regard...The more money I spent, the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums...These sums in fact came back to me in the form of existential credit. I felt expansive. (84)

Through this shopping spree, Jack recuperates from the belittling words Massingale had for him. His mortality had been called out – Massingale had told him he was aging, harmless (so unlike Hitler), indistinct. Through shopping, buying products and simply immersing himself in consumer culture, Jack is able to grow his value; he feels “existential credit” making himself more “expansive.” Rather than turning to religious faith to quell fears related to mortality and the mystery of death, consumption serves the postmodern society to settle this anxiety.

Jack’s mortality becomes apparent once again after he discovers he has a toxin in his body in the refugee camp his family is staying at after the toxic airborne event. That night, he describes watching his children sleep. He explains in the narration, “Watching children sleep makes me feel devout, part of a spiritual system. It is the closest I can come to God” (147).

Arriving in the barracks where they sleep, he says:

In those soft warm faces, there was a quality of trust so absolute and pure that I did not want to think it might be misplaced...A feeling of desperate piety swept over me. It was cosmic in nature, full of yearnings and reachings. It spoke of vast distances, awesome but subtle forces. These sleeping children were like figures in an ad for the Rosicrucians...(154)

He is entranced watching them. Watching the children evokes in him a feeling of piety and devoutness; he believes that something timeless and grand is occurring in it. Yet he compares

their sleeping bodies to figures in an advertisement for Rosicrucians – not the Rosicrucians themselves, but simply the image that would market them. Jack is only able to perceive this moment through the language of consumerism. The timelessness and religiousness that the Rosicrucians themselves suggest is not a useful analogy for Jack. He must interpret this spiritual feeling through the lens of mass consumption instead.

As he watches the children, his youngest daughter, Steffie, begins to sleep-talk:

...a language not quite of this world. I struggled to understand...She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant.

*Toyota Celica.*

A long moment passed before I realized this was the name of an automobile. The truth only amazed me more. (155)

Cornel Bonca explains that Steffie has just been through the terrifying situation of a toxic event; her outburst is “an example of the death-fear speaking *through* consumer jargon” (469). He elaborates:

It is as if she has...understood what the hopped-hysteria of mass advertising has really been saying all along (beneath, below or above it all), which is this: You are afraid of dying; let this phrase, this sound-bite, this whirling bit of language so pervasive worldwide that it can serve as common coin in Sri Lanka or Schenectady, Rio de Janeiro or Reykjavik—let it soothe your fears; let your dread dissolve in the chanting of this media mantra. (469-470)

As Bonca notes, this media message, this brand name, serves as an outlet for fear. Steffie is not just repeating a phrase she has heard on television, she is repeating a phrase that has the societal

role of soothing the fear of death. Consumption in a postmodern society turns into a tool to manage one's mortality; this brand name, repeated in commercials, evokes power. Jack, meanwhile, has just been told of his possible impending death. For him, hearing his daughter utter this phrase that allays the fear of dying is an incredibly powerful moment. He associates this sense of transcendence with his sleeping children already, and his belief is exceeded with his daughter's profound speech.

The seventh chapter of *God is Dead*, titled "The Helmet of Salvation and the Sword of the Spirit," takes place in a post-religious society. The main character of this chapter, a sixteen-year-old called Arnold, is the son of the central character of an earlier chapter. He, and the other adolescents of his time, were born well after the death of God and the eradication of religion.

One of Arnold's main concerns in this chapter is his love for a girl called Amanda – but what he calls love is rather different from what we would regard as love today. Arnold does not know her. He sends her text messages constantly, telling her how wonderful she is and talking about his own emotional struggles. Amanda never responds; Arnold says that he receives the same kinds of messages from another teenage girl and does not even open them before deleting them. This kind of behavior is typical. Though adolescent obsession with another from afar might not be new, the habit of sending them these kinds of messages is.

Arnold sends her two types of messages: praise, like "*Divine Amanda—open my lips and my mouth will proclaim your praise,*" and with more substantial messages where he talks about his life. Together, Arnold's communication with Amanda works as an act of prayer. Arnold not know Amanda, and says that he and his friends all understand that if the object of their affection reciprocated in any way, if there was any sort of "real contact" or "an actual dialogue,"

everything would be ruined (117). The messages he sends her about his life talk about what is troubling him:

*“Divine Amanda, I am a coward...How can I find the courage to go to war...when I can’t even stand up to my own mother?”* (123-124).

*“Divine Amanda—things are not good, and I need your help. I feel like I don’t belong here anymore. There are bigger things I’m bound for, things I know you would want me to do”* (119).

Arnold does not expect any sort of intervention from Amanda; he doesn’t want her advice. Instead, by sending these messages to her, he is expressing his emotions and uncertainties in a way that resembles prayer. In this light, the messages that praise Amanda perhaps serve the purpose of keeping her elevated in his mind. By naming Amanda as special, Arnold can construct an image of someone worthy of telling all his problems. It may also indicate a desire to continue practicing the habits of religion without the theism and belief – Arnold and his peers engage in idolation of other people instead of gods.

Arnold’s society is dominated by a school of philosophy called Postmodern Anthropology. Postmodern Anthropology generally believes in multiplicity of perspectives and relativism. It also emphasizes free will. Arnold’s society of Postmodern Anthropologists are at war with a group that believes in a philosophy called Evolutionary Psychology. Evolutionary Psychology is a philosophy that claims genetic predisposition makes humans helpless against their nature, which is to “destroy the weak,” hence the war. An Evolutionary Psychology leader quoted in a news excerpt in this chapter explains, “It is in our nature to destroy the weak...thus, we had no choice but to execute your soldiers...In fact, we apologize for this entire war. Sadly, it is in our nature to fight. And we are helpless against our nature. As are you” (115).

Postmodern Anthropology has no deity, no ritual for worship, no obvious spiritual element. Did they exist in this contemporary time, alongside Christianity and Hinduism and any other familiar religion, it is extremely unlikely anyone would consider them anything but a secular philosophy. But, the characters in this chapter certainly talk about the philosophies as though they are religious. The word faith is repeatedly used to describe the way the characters feel about Postmodern Anthropology. When one local young man dies at war, the mayor delivers a eulogy that says that at his time of death, the young man was surely “comforted by his faith in Postmodern Anthropology and the righteousness of his struggle,” and comments on “the sacrifice that [he] has made on the altar of free will” (128). His language evokes religious ideas, referring to faith, righteousness, sacrifice, and an altar. What is most profound about this, and what is repeated over and over throughout the chapter, is the idea that a philosophy explaining human nature and the mechanics of the world is something to have faith in. Arnold proclaims about Postmodern Anthropology that “what matters is whether or not I believe. And I do. I believe more in this than in anything else” (136). Arnold regards himself as duty-bound to defend his faith; his teacher refers to the obligation the students bear to defend Postmodern Anthropology in the war against the Evolutionary Psychologists (115, 131).

Like religions, these philosophies are the source of intense emotion and behavior for people in Arnold’s society. Their attitude towards these philosophies is not just intellectual, it is faithful. The philosophies are also encompassing, like a religion – they define certain ideologies that explain human nature and give guidance as to how one ought to act. The postmodern anthropologists have integrated their ideology into their constitution and use it to strategize in war. Though uncertainty is central to their philosophy, they are certain of the righteousness of uncertainty. They call postmodern anthropology their “way of life,” their “principles” (121).

Though postmodern anthropology does have many of the characteristics of religion, it does lack a theology or even an idea of a higher power. The characters integrate it into their society, then, through civil or secular means. For example, at the parade honoring the young man who died at war, the mayor delivers his eulogy. The mayor speaks of faith, righteousness, and sacrifice – his role is much like that of a religious leader. Because postmodern anthropology, as an ideology, addresses questions of human nature and human purpose without appealing to non-secular concepts, a secular leader takes on the role of leader in this ideological movement. The ideology is civil, and so it manifests through civil facets of society.

In a post-religious society, these philosophies are the systems of knowledge and value that give meaning to people's lives. They interpret their worlds and establish value systems based upon these philosophies. Much like Jack Gladney finds meaning through the symbolic systems of late capitalism, or Jack's German tutor is drawn to the power and system of knowledge of meteorology, the people in Arnold's society use the secular systems of these philosophies to understand and give meaning to their worlds. In the post-religious societies of *White Noise* and *God is Dead*, the people also continue to practice elements of religion without the religion – ritually reading the tabloids, or performing something very close to prayer. These two novels illustrate the post-religious habit of elevating the secular to have more meaning, occasionally transcendence, in lieu of engaging actual religious dogma.



## Conclusion

The three novels discussed in this thesis invoke a postmodern perspective that problematizes traditional religious ideals in order to reveal the secular terms by which religion persists in ostensibly secular, postmodern—and even post-apocalyptic—societies. *The Year of the Flood* suggests that religion serves a greater and more socially relevant purpose beyond behaving properly in the eyes of a divinity by depicting theology as a means of disseminating practical life skills and values that will help them survive in a relatively hostile world. *White Noise* expands on this notion of religion as an emotional tool. It proposes that the concept of religion in a postmodern society is necessary because it provides ways of mollifying fears and anxieties about life; notably, religion provides potential reassuring explanations for what comes after death. In *God is Dead*, Currie questions whether grand narratives are worthwhile by fragmenting his own novel, presenting it in pieces that do not together create a comfortable narrative arc or contribute to common themes.

*White Noise* proposes that, in the era of postmodernism, firm belief in one story about death and the afterlife is impossible, such that no one, even nuns or monks, can possibly invest their faith in a religious narrative like Christianity. Instead, religious piety is performed in the name of perpetuating the simulacrum that is religion, giving the appearance of life to the reassuring possibility of an afterlife and other such ideas that religion provides. *White Noise* also draws attention to the need for a system that defines and organizes values and the way we perceive our world; religion is in this regard a useful tool considering its historical influence on culturally defined worldviews and values.

Still, the postmodern novels discussed in this thesis are unable to see a religious narrative as transcending the usefulness it provides a society into offering some kind of ultimate truth. *The*

*Year of the Flood* and *God is Dead* question the merits of grand narratives. In *The Year of the Flood*, this questioning manifests through Atwood's contortion of the components that make up Christianity's grand narrative into a halfway-unrecognizable system of belief, re-interpreting the scripture that Christianity relies on to dictate its values and beliefs in a wholly different way. The events of the stories are called into question by their lack of sufficient detail in the way chapters end, as well as the way the novel as a whole ends. The fragmented novel also embraces multiple narrative perspectives, demonstrating how different perspectives can signify different understandings and valuations of the same events, as well as highlighting the way the individual experiences bear on an overall perspective.

This thesis finally examined the way these novels discuss the existence of the postsecular in the postmodern world. The characters in *White Noise* and *God is Dead*, lacking an available theology, embrace the supposedly secular aspects of their world in terms that resemble traditional religious practice and belief systems. Jack and other characters in *White Noise* demonstrate a postmodern tendency to elevate the aspects of their lives that define the system of knowledge they live in – in this case, consumerism and the media which determine their postmodern outlooks. In *God is Dead*, characters develop systems of expressing their anxieties that resembled prayer, and find new philosophies to explain their world. These two novels suggest that in a post-religious society, people reach for other ways to organize their worlds.

Taken together, these three works of fiction illustrate ways a postmodern perspective delegitimizes the narratives offered by religious traditions. They question whether religions are in fact what they claim to be: narratives that bear some sort of ultimate truth about the purpose of humankind, the origins of the universe, and definitions of ethics and mortality. How can grand narratives be trusted when they are vulnerable to influence by external forces? Instead, these

novels, argue that religion likely exists as a practical tool to ensure society's longevity through concrete life lessons, as well as to provide value systems and emotional tools to give order and comfort to the religion's followers as well as others in the same society.

All the same, each of these three novels also has moments that suggest that religion is somehow a natural product of humanity. This is a startlingly non-postmodern notion. There are scenes and ideas throughout these novels that show humans re-claiming religion within the postmodern context. These novels do offer some explanations about how men and women come to believe in theistic, traditional faiths. They propose that religion is a good method for teaching life skills and organizing value systems. It serves as an outlet for the expression of human anxieties and fears. But none of these ideas explain why humans, especially in a postmodern society, would be inclined towards theology, other than the fact that it may exist as a pre-existing and therefore convenient ideology.

In *White Noise*, Christian ideas, especially the idea of Heaven, are comforting to Jack and others, in spite of their non-belief, because death is a frightening certainty. Murray urges him to look into other religious systems – “‘Read up on reincarnation, transmigration, hyperspace, the resurrection of the dead and so on’ ... ‘Seriously, you can find a great deal of long-range solace in the idea of an afterlife’” (286) – but this acknowledges the plurality of possibilities, and relies upon pre-existing religious traditions. Religion in this context is an artifact from pre-postmodern societies.

Despite the generally postmodern evaluation of religion in these three novels, they all share moments that suggest the construction of or reaching towards religion is innate in the human psyche. This does not conform to postmodern theory, which suggests that a postmodern perspective would perceive religion as a creation of a society that emphasized canon and

hierarchical systems. Unlike some of its predecessors, notably Enlightenment philosophy, postmodernism does not generally consider the role God plays in epistemology or human nature, so the idea that humans are naturally disposed to knowing God is out of line.

The most powerful example of this concept in these three postmodern novels comes from *The Year of the Flood*. The plot point that begins in this novel continues into its sequel, *MaddAddam*. Towards the end of the story, Toby and Ren meet a group of genetically-engineered people, put together by a man named Glenn, better known by his nickname Crake. These “gene-spliced, quasi-humans” were developed with the goal of creating a perfected humanity (*MaddAddam* 11). They therefore were kept entirely isolated from the rest of human society, in order to keep out its bad influences. They originally knew nothing of the rest of humanity. They were only acquainted with Crake’s partner, a woman known as Oryx, who occasionally visited them in their isolated world devised to resemble the natural world. Now, they are out on the loose in the real natural world, living in woods by the sea.

Having known nothing of human history, they know nothing of the religious traditions that have existed throughout time. They have never heard of Christianity or Hinduism or the Greek and Roman gods. But, they manage to create religion again. They come to live alongside a man called Jimmy, who survived the catastrophe that wiped out most of humanity in the story. Eventually, they come into contact with some of the other men and women who have survived the catastrophe, including Toby and Ren, but their belief in Crake and the rituals that surround him are already concrete by then. Jimmy was once a personal friend of Crake’s, and he tells these people that Crake created them – which is, of course, factual. These people take this piece of information, however, and create a vision of Crake as a god, despite the fact that he was certainly just human. One of them describing Crake says, “Crake lives in the sky. He loves us”

(*Year of the Flood* 411). They constantly praise “good, kind Crake” (*MaddAddam* 9). Not only do they elevate Crake to a figure they love and worship, but they also believe he is powerful and is able to watch over them: one exclaims, “Why did you hit me? Crake will be angry! He will send a thunder!” (*MaddAddam* 14).

Through the construction of “Crake”, Atwood emphasizes how these beliefs evolve in a group of people who have had no religious precedent to follow. They have never known what images of gods generally look like – gods as more knowledgeable and powerful than humans, or even the trope of gods living in the sky and being associated with weather events. They construct their own notion of a benevolent god that watches over them and loves them. They even refer to themselves as Children of Crake, basing their identities in large part off of their belief in Crake.

Not only do they have a sort of deity, but they also construct other core aspects of religious practice. They interpret Jimmy, who tells them about Crake, as a kind of prophet. One of them tells Toby that Jimmy is “where the stories come from” (*MaddAddam*, 38). They work very hard to protect him, trying to heal his foot injury and bringing him fish for protein (though they have been engineered to be herbivores and cannot understand the urge to eat meat). When Jimmy is debilitatingly ill with fever, the Children of Crake make sure he has his ratty baseball cap and a pair of broken sunglasses on, because “he must have those things... Those are the things of Snowman-the-Jimmy” (their title for him) (*MaddAddam*, 37). These items of clothing become like the religious garb of a rabbi or the Pope. Jimmy must wear these things because they define his position as prophet, and his wearing them brings him closer to their god. They believe that they help him commune with Crake.

The Children of Crake develop rituals having to do with Crake and Jimmy. The Children of Crake explain their nightly ritual to Toby: in the evening (“moth time”), the Children of Crake

bring Jimmy a fish. This happens “when it is getting dark.” Then, Jimmy puts on his hat and listens to his watch – a “shiny round thing that you put on your arm” – and then “the words of Crake” come out of his mouth. They explain that Crake made the hat – a Boston *Red Sox* baseball cap – and helps to tell the story. When Jimmy is too sick to perform the ritual, they explain that Toby will have to fulfill his role. They explain the ritual, thoroughly, and are insistent on the precise way it is performed (38-39). They must be told, by someone they deem closer to their god – if not a prophet, like Jimmy, then a priestly figure like Toby – this creation story about their origins, how Crake made them, and how Jimmy led them from the “egg” (biodome) where Crake created them out into the world.

The ritual performance of this reflection on their system of belief about their cosmos and Crake, their god, over food, at dusk, evokes other existing religious practices, particularly the Jewish Shabbat. The ritualization occurring here solidifies this practice as a developed religious tradition. Their beliefs about Crake are not just incorrect ideas they have picked up somewhere. The Children of Crake are, without precedent to influence them, reconstructing the components of a religious tradition.

Though Toby explains she does not know the stories, the Children of Crake are confident that the words of Crake will come through the watch and tell her what to say. Come evening time, as she tells the story of their creation, they “prompt, they interrupt, they fill in the parts she’s missed” (45). The exact way the story is told is important. The Children of Crake have developed a canon. Though Atwood criticizes religious canon throughout the novel with the Gardeners, she nonetheless depicts these new characters as creating their own canon. This suggestion that canon is something humans naturally yearn for is confusing in light of the postmodern aversion to canon, unless you consider it from the perspective of the social function

of such religious narratives, which is what Atwood's deconstruction calls to our attention. *The Year of the Flood* simultaneously deconstructs a deeply ingrained canon in Western culture, then shows a new one rising.

In *God is Dead*, Ron Currie, Jr. similarly depicts men and women arriving at constructions of religion. In my third chapter, I've already discussed how, in the chapter "The Helmet of Salvation and the Sword of the Spirit," Arnold and his peers have formed a system of worshipping other teenagers; Arnold is always texting a girl called Amanda in a form of prayer. Though the need for an emotional outlet through a practice like prayer is not necessarily at odds with postmodernist theory, Arnold's conception of Amanda is. Arnold and his peers were all born well after the death of God, and presumably after the child-worshipping phase of society as well. Their generation has never experienced religion, never known a society inclined to attend church or talk about God. Nonetheless, the way Arnold imagines Amanda is certainly god-like. The language surrounding his idea of her conforms to language used today to talk about the Judeo-Christian God:

Arnold sat and imagined he was being observed tenderly from an unapproachable distance by Amanda. She was everywhere and nowhere at once, watching him, as he sat here smoking on his beach, or whistling a tune in the shower, or listening to a lecture in class on the evils of Evolutionary Psychology. No matter where he went or what he did, Amanda was with him, and this sense of being observed, even as he slept, produced in Arnold a constant, consuming exhilaration from which there was no relief. (116)

Arnold's image of Amanda transcends the way one would typically think about another person. He ascribes characteristics to her that are not human: she is omnipresent and omnipotent. Despite never having really known conceptions of God, he still conjures up those same characteristics of

omnipotence, watchfulness, and judgment and ascribes them to Amanda. Praising Amanda is also important to him. He addresses her as “Divine Amanda.” In one of his prayer-texts, he writes, “Divine Amanda, Open my lips and my mouth will proclaim your praise” (119).

The conceptions of Crake and Amanda have some powerful similarities. The Children of Crake and Arnold are constantly praising this other figure: refrains of “good, kind Crake” and “Divine Amanda” recur over and over in their respective texts. The watchfulness of these characters is also important. Neither the Children of Crake nor Arnold has ever met their deity-figure (Crake is dead, but the Children of Crake do not know this). Instead, their relationship to their respective deity is one where the deity watches over them, and they worship it. Neither Arnold nor the Children of Crake have lived in a society where religion exists, or where conceptions of gods exist for that matter. These texts, then, raise the surprising suggestion that ideas about gods, along with ritualization and other components of religion like prayer and prophets, are somehow inevitable ideas humankind produces.

The chapter “My Brother the Murderer” in *God is Dead* begins with an epigraph referencing Cain, the first man born, according to the book of Genesis. Here, Currie depicts what happens in the narrator’s life when his brother suddenly kills a group of mental health counselors, using as his weapon a Virgin Mary statuette. The society in which this happens is entirely post-religious, to the point that following the murders there circulate “rumors and accusations – of theism, closed-door worship, *Christianity*” (143). These practices of belief are unthinkable to the narrator’s peers. There is suspicion that the narrator’s family might have exposed his brother to theism and worship growing up – a scandalous idea – but the narrator doesn’t believe this is true. One of his friends explains these allegations to him by asking,



“Where did he get these ideas about a god? He must have learned them somewhere, right?”  
(144).

But, Currie raises the question whether the ideas must necessarily have been learned. There is no suggestion in the text that the brother was exposed to Christianity growing up, and the narrator has a memory (albeit one he is unsure is real) of his brother making religious claims as a boy. The allusion to Cain suggests this idea of the world beginning again. God is gone, and religion is gone, but is the brother in this chapter like Cain, the first man born in this new world that will once again embrace religion and God? That this is the second to last chapter in the novel can be read as gesturing toward the imminent arrival of a rebirth of religiosity in society. Is this man’s inclination towards God and religion the result of some childhood trauma, as the other characters believe, or is it a natural tendency of people living in a society without theism?

The final chapter of *God is Dead* depicts the world being destroyed in a war. The epigraph attached to this chapter reads, “Thus I will make mount Seir most desolate, and cut off from him that passeth out and him that returneth...I will make thee perpetual desolations, and thy cities shall not return: and ye shall know that I am the Lord. –(Ezekiel 35:7-9)” (157). This chapter, and thus the novel, ends with bombs falling from the sky in an incredible act of destruction. The epigraph seems to suggest that this must be linked to a coming to know God in society. This end of things, with the brother who has re-adopted Christian God-beliefs and the destruction that announces a God, perhaps foretells a beginning of things, where theism emerges yet again.

Although *White Noise* does not directly address characters having faith in gods, it does depict the idea of a postsecular society and likewise begs the question of human inclination towards spirituality. We can understand why Jack and others choose to have an elevated vision

of symbols of consumerism and media, in the face of an all-consuming fear of death, yet we must wonder why these characters are compelled to look for such transcendence at all. For example, if we consider the way the supermarket is imagined in the novel, we see Murray describing it as similar to the Tibetan state between death and rebirth – this spiritual idea, wholly removed from the observable world, not attached to time or space. He says about the supermarket, “[t]his place recharges us spiritually...It’s full of psychic data’...‘The large doors slide open, they close unbidden. Energy waves, incident radiation. All the letters and numbers are here, all the colors of the spectrum’” (38). The cadence of his speech, the way he describes the totalization that happens in the supermarket – he likens it to this Tibetan in-between, this fuzzy spiritual world.

Why does this yearning for spirituality arise in a postmodern society? In an interview, Don DeLillo said of writing *White Noise*:

I tried to find a kind of radiance in dailiness. Sometimes this radiance can be almost frightening. Other times it can be almost holy or sacred...I think that’s something that has been in the background of my work: a sense of something extraordinary hovering just beyond our touch and just beyond our vision. (*White Noise*, 330)

*White Noise* clearly establishes that a postmodern mind cannot have faith in some sort of grand narrative religious tradition. What remains is a vague *sense* of spirituality, which attempts to imbue banal things with transcendence and elevate daily life to a more meaningful plane of existence. The root of this need is not adequately answered by postmodernism.

In an interview conducted for a literary blog following the publication of *God is Dead*, Ron Currie, Jr. said:

I am not myself religious in any sense. I'm an atheist. Despite these things, though, I still experience strong spiritual yearnings, like most people, I think. I haven't figured out how to satisfy them, and I doubt that I will unless I decide at some point that there is, after all, a God.

This statement seems to capture the crux of the conflict between postmodern attitudes towards religion and the tendency of these postmodern novels to demonstrate a reaching towards religion regardless. The novels all wrestle with the way most people experience spiritual yearnings. In *White Noise*, Jack and others reach for the things that define their worlds most, like the supermarket. In *God is Dead* and *The Year of the Flood*, this is taken to another level. Currie suggests his yearnings won't be fulfilled without belief in a god. That is why we see Arnold imagine Amanda as a god, and why the Children of Crake, experiencing an internal push towards spirituality that calls for faith in a god, respond by inventing one.

This idea is strikingly divergent from postmodernism, and the consistency with which it appears in these postmodern novels warrants further examination. It raises questions about why humans are inclined to spirituality in the first place, if the reason is not, as *White Noise* seems to propose, simply that this inclination reflects existing and therefore entrenched ideologies. The novels' paradoxical return to a definition of humanity that is bound up with religious impulse seems old-fashioned and hardly in conformity with the postmodern perspective that otherwise seems to characterize these texts.

Further research in contemporary fiction would have to negotiate this idea of an innate impulse to religion within the context of postmodernism. I was unable to find any scholarship that gives substantial discussion to this topic, though it merits further study. If postmodern fiction generally does give credence to the notion that humankind has innate longings for a godhead,

spirituality, and related ideas, this would have an important impact on the perception of humanity within postmodern theory. It would lend itself to a more meaningful definition of the human, as well as adding another dimension to discussions of the human experience. Similarly, the conception of religion in a postmodern society would have to be re-examined, and the human proclivity towards the religious would need to play an important role in considering the role of religion and its impact. On the other hand, this religious impulse could prove to be irreconcilable with postmodernism, perhaps indicating a hole in the theory. If the pattern of portraying humans as naturally drawn to the religious, demonstrated in these three novels, proved to be pervasive in postmodern fiction, it would necessitate an important reconsideration of the conception of humanity in the thinking of postmodernist authors.

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