

Postmodernism and the 'Trinity': How to be postmodern and post-Barthian too

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The trouble with post-modern theology is that it tends to be pre-Barthian. Indeed, two main strands of English theology that have attempted to write from a postmodern perspective—the 'Sea of Faith' school surrounding Don Cupitt, and the 'Radical Orthodoxy' school surrounding John Milbank, Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock—share very little else but their postmodernism and different kinds of pre-Barthianism. I suspect the arguments of this article could be applied equally to the American 'post-liberal' school surrounding George Lindbeck, but space forbids treatment of too many variants.

For a definition of postmodernism I follow Milbank:

The end of modernity, which is not yet accomplished, but continues to arrive, means the end of a single system of truth based on universal reason, which tells us what reality is like.¹

Modernism then represents faith in three things:

- 1 **Deductivism:** the idea that all meaningful language forms a single deductive system, wherein the truth value of any proposition can be calculated;
- 1 **Foundationalism:** the idea that this system can be securely based on universally accepted premises
- 1 **Correspondence** theory: the idea that statements exist to express truth, which consists in the correspondence between what they assert and what is the case.

Modernism hopes one day to get at a text that is consistent with itself, demonstrable to all reasonable people, and adequate to the world. Of course, there is a lot out there in the world that is currently 'outside the text', but one day we will expand the text to fit the world exactly, like a glove. In the most characteristic version of modernism, the necessary expansion of the glove to fit reality's many-fingered hand is said to take place by the advance of science, with philosophy serving the subordinate role of stitching up the conceptual holes that from time to

time appear in the glove as science performs the necessary stretching to fit newly discovered fingers of reality.

Postmodernism, then, represents the loss—or surrender—of this modern faith. It therefore tends to be, respectively, *pluralist*, allowing language to mean things in many different ways; *relativist*, deconstructing any claim to universal foundations for truth, and seeing in such claims the workings of power; and *non-realist*, denying that language mirrors something outside itself, claiming that ‘there is nothing outside the text’.

That is enough, for now, to locate what I mean by postmodernism; but what about pre-Barthianism? Here I refer to Karl Barth’s insistence, against the whole weight of nineteenth century liberal theology, that we are not saved by fine ideas, but by the historical fact of Jesus Christ, incarnate, crucified and risen. Within postmodernism, as we shall see, it is indeed very hard to state a Barthian faith in the historical givenness of the Word made flesh. If there is nothing outside the text, the Word can only remain Word, since the flesh is fundamentally Word also. So despite the strong difference, even antipathy, between the Sea of Faith and Radical Orthodoxy, both could be accused of sharing an essentially pre-Barthian account of salvation by illumination, by having sublime concepts and a wonderful approach to life.

Is it possible to be post-modern and post-Barthian too? I shall argue that, by questioning non-realism, one can move into a much more constructive postmodernism that embraces a paradoxical ‘Trinity’. Cupitt himself can be seen as moving towards a new kind of ‘Trinitarian’ realism, which can also supply a way of interpreting Radical Orthodoxy so as to give its ‘mission’ the grounding it needs. So I shall sketch, at the end, a vista that is genuinely post-modern and post-Barthian; a broad space in which the Sea of Faith might flourish in a less threatened and threatening manner, and the Radical Orthodox might begin to realise their profoundly challenging objectives.

Radical Orthodoxy: the Word remains on high

The articles of Milbank, Ward, et al. have the effect of obscuring and superseding the particular identity of Jesus Christ as the mediator of salvation. As a consequence, they demonstrate an overall ambivalence about the role of Scripture, creed, and inherited ecclesial practice that moves in a modernist direction. Authority shifts out of the particularity of word and sacrament into a supervening theory or concept. To be sure, the theory or concept is a practice, an inhabited language, rather than a static idea. Nonetheless, however modified with appropriate postmodern twists and turns, the “speculative grasp” that lives in the generative practices of “reconciling differences” is more perspicuous,

more redemptively potent, than the particular form of Christ present in word and sacrament. “New Being” replaces the crucified and risen Lord as the glue that holds all things together. How could this collapse into modern theology happen?²

So Reno has argued that for all its postmodernity, Radical Orthodoxy after all collapses into the familiar patterns of modern—in our terms pre-Barthian (and arguably pre-Kierkegaardian)—theology. From the particular story and history of Christ, certain general truths are abstracted, and these general truth then replace the particular event as the means of our salvation and liberation.

This does not seem totally unfair. The Christ of Radical Orthodoxy does seem to be more Word than flesh. And it is hard to see how it could be otherwise, given the degree to which Radical Orthodoxy adopts the view that there is nothing outside the word, or text. Christ’s incarnate flesh has to be more than just textually mediated; within the perspective of Radical Orthodoxy, his body has to be essentially a textual body, and essentially the ecclesial, Church body.

So Ward argues that the body of Jesus Christ is ‘displaced’ through the handing over of the Eucharistic body, through the cross, the resurrection, the ascension, to become the ‘multi-gendered’ body of the Church. This would perhaps be no cause for alarm, but for the way it allows Ward to replace the historical Jesus with the Christ of the Church, instead of allowing this Jesus and this Christ to stand in any dialectical relation.

The search for the historical Jesus... is pointless because the Church is now the body of Christ, so to understand the body of Jesus we can only examine what the Church is and what it has to say concerning the nature of that body.³

The result is that the historical Jesus tends to be replaced by the Christ of the Creeds, that is, by the Church’s delight in the pleasant *idea* of the God-Man. So Milbank describes

the necessity for the *Deus Homo*. Such a speculation is an important part of Christianity, a theoretical component which a postmodern approach can recognise as actually ‘taking off’ from the narrative sources... validated merely by the profundity of the picture of God which results, merely by the pleasing shape of the conceits which it generates.⁴

The reductionist (hence rather modern) ‘merely’ here would be my main bone of contention. In the Words of Edwin Muir, ‘The Word made flesh is here made word again’.⁵ Or according to Kolakowski’s parody of the

Johannine prologue, 'God is just a Word, but the Word is God.'⁶ This logocentricity pervades Radical Orthodoxy. To read a Radical Orthodox (or indeed many a post-modern) text is indeed to be bombarded by and entangled in a violent tissue of words, to which it is hard to give any outside referent that would render it coherent. The discarnate word prevails in the medium, but alas, subverts the message.

For Radical Orthodoxy has, as its name implies, a radical message and mission, which is nothing less than to deconstruct the whole project of 'secular' modernity and replace it, not with secular postmodernity, but something radically different. So Ward speaks of the rise of postmodernism in apocalyptic terms:

For several centuries now, secularism has been defining and constructing the world. It is a world in which the theological is either discredited or turned into a harmless leisure time activity.... Today the logic of secularism is imploding. Speaking with a microphoned and digitally simulated voice, it proclaims—uneasily, or else increasingly unashamedly—its own lack of values and lack of meaning. In its cyberspaces and theme-parks it promotes a materialism which is soulless, aggressive, nonchalant and nihilistic.⁷

Secular postmodernists—it is argued—see only the possibility of replacing the violence of language with alternative violence, all language being a battleground between rival perspectives that no 'universal reason' can arbitrate between. But Radical Orthodoxy strives to replace this violence with a peace that is grounded not rationally and philosophically but theologically, such that differences between perspectives can coexist non-violently as different notes coexist harmoniously in music.⁸

The goal is admirable, but to achieve such a huge and worthwhile objective, the movement itself surely needs to be less verbal, less obscure, and more embodied, dare one say more populist, at any rate more engaged with the actual practice of the historical Jesus and the historical Church. As it is, Radical Orthodoxy remains ensnared in the coils of the postmodern dragon it is trying to defeat, unable to find any foothold outside the word with which to lever against it, and defeat its warlike intentions with Christ's peace.

Don Cupitt: towards the 'Trinity'

Like the writers just considered, Don Cupitt is a person with a mission, who likes to overstate his case. But he does so with a refreshing clarity and beauty. Unlike Radical Orthodoxy, the Sea of Faith is a movement with grassroots support, and one can understand why. Cupitt writes:

Suppose we ask, "How old are the galaxies? Anglo-Saxon scientific

realism promptly replies: 'They began to form very early on in the universe - around 15×10^9 years ago'. But from the point of view of 'Man' the answer is: 'About 75 years. The transition from a single galaxy universe, in which the word 'galaxy' just meant the Milky Way, to a multi-galaxy universe took place gradually through the controversies of the 1920s.'⁹

Thus Don Cupitt vividly asserts the Postmodernist thesis of the primacy of the text, the view that there is nothing outside language, and that the world, and we ourselves, are created by language itself.

The world you see is the world we made. Humans are after all the only beings whose communication-system, and therefore whose consciousness, is sufficiently evolved for them to have a complete word. Nobody but us has a world *at all*.¹⁰

Such passages can be seen as a continuation of the modern, atheist Cupitt. For there seems to be no room for a real God, or anything real, beyond human subjectivity. A humanist idealism prevails, though it is a humanism that can feel free to take on board the insights of Christian spirituality if these promote the growth of the human subject.

But then we encounter something new. The human subject is no longer the foundational reality; human subjects are made by something else, by language. The new, postmodern Cupitt allows for something 'out there' transcending the human subject. This something is the Word, in whom we live and move and have our being; the language that creates the world we live in, and creates us too.

I am made of and by the torrent of words that spins through me each day,
and you are made of and by the torrent of words that spins through you.¹¹

And 'like us, God is made only of Words.'¹²

God is something like an endlessly self-outpouring Now, a fountain of linguistic meanings that wells up within us and pours out through us to our world.¹³

This affirmation could lead us two alternative ways. It could suggest that language makes us and everything else full stop. This would give us a Platonic realism based not on geometry but on language, which becomes the supreme reality, shaping us and the cosmos. God the Word can then be real after all, as for Radical Orthodoxy; though as we have seen, it is difficult for such a Word to become incarnate in real human flesh.

Alternatively, we could acknowledge that despite its shaping our

perceptions of the material world, language is after all a material thing and a human construct. Such acknowledgement is what leads Cupitt to the 'Trinity'.

What has happened can be imagined like this. Modernism was dualistic, positing a material world and a mental world, linked in some kind of correspondence by language. Philosophers debated as to which of the two worlds was fundamental. With postmodernism, the link, language, has grown to swallow up the other two worlds. Matter and consciousness are believed to arise out of language, which is effectively the fundamental reality. The other, 'Trinitarian' possibility arises when we allow language to grow bigger than a mere link, so that it has a life of its own, but not so big as to swallow up the world and consciousness; so that the three worlds, matter, mind and language coexist as interdependent equals.

We need now to look more closely at the first alternative, and the subtle confusions of a currently dominant view that is at once too idealist, and too nihilist, to be of real use in theology. These confusions will give us reason to examine the 'Trinitarian' alternative.

Relativist Realism?

A wholesale move beyond modernism might be seen as premature. The three theses of modernism seem independent; they have not been shown to stand or fall together. It has been shown (above all by Gödel) that it is conceptually impossible to attain the complete ideal of modernism: a complete description of the world by a completely consistent theory in which every statement is provable from indubitable foundations. Various thinkers have attacked different parts of the modern package. But it remains possible to accept some parts while rejecting others. We do not know whether it is possible, for example, to gain a complete picture of reality by way of a mix of incommensurable and perhaps antagonistic 'language games'. And we do not know (though the acceptance of science across all cultures suggests this might be so) whether we might appeal to 'universal reason' to establish a self-consistent common core of reality acceptable to all cultures, without presuming that this core is the whole. In between full blown modernism and full blown postmodernism there may be several legitimate variations.

With this in mind, let us work towards a subtler evaluation of the postmodern package, asking in particular whether relativism is necessarily linked to non-realism. We can discern at least three kinds of relativism. People often argue for a weaker form, then assume the stronger form has been established.¹⁴

1. Semantic relativism: different cultures use different words—or

sometimes the same word with different connotations—to describe the same world. We all live in the same world; we just classify it differently. Such relativism clearly causes no problems for realism.

2. Ontological relativism: our language generates our world. Different languages support different worlds which are ‘incommensurable’, such that it becomes impossible to translate from one culture’s picture of the world to another’s. Non-realism holds: there is ‘nothing outside the text’ because we can only describe what might be outside in terms of one or another language. There is nothing outside language because there is no language outside language (no ‘metalanguage’) to describe such extra-linguistic things.

3. Epistemological relativism: different languages relate to different practices of knowing the world. For this reason we cannot translate term by term, as in semantic relativism; we have always to look at the practice of understanding (or misunderstanding, ideology) within which the term is being used. For we relate to the world primarily by our practices: knowing is primarily ‘knowing how’ to live in the world before this crystallises out into linguistically articulated ‘knowing that’. We do not look first to correspondence between word and world, but to the use of the word in practices of relating to the world, which involve a kind of correspondence between a whole form of life (in the context of which the word is used) and the world.¹⁵ A critical realism holds, such that languages can build out from themselves to cross the gulf between them, not through an overarching ‘metalanguage’, but through reflection on and development of our relation to the world through life.

The different kinds of relativism may be clarified by some examples. Firstly, consider demons and psychosis.

1. Semantic relativism would just say that demon-possession was the way those of Jesus’ day talked about what we refer to as psychosis. All we need to do when we read about the exorcisms in the Gospels is to translate ‘possessed by a demon’ into ‘suffering from psychosis’. Immediately we encounter a difficulty: Jesus responds to demon possession very differently from the way modern psychotherapy deals with psychosis. Moreover, Jesus’ response is an appropriate response to demons, but not to psychosis. A modern psychotherapist who started exorcising patients would be struck off the list. And an exorcist in Jesus’ day who offered psychoanalysis, or lobotomy, or pills, would (perhaps more reasonably?) have been struck off the list of accredited exorcists! We begin to see that the terms are functioning in different, incompatible practices of relating to the world.

2. Ontological relativism would say that the world in which Jesus

lived—as constructed by the language of his time—was full of demons. The people of his day knew what demons were, though we cannot possibly know. We, conversely, know about psychosis, which is something a first century Palestinian could never experience or understand. We and they are in different worlds, constructed by the language we use. Again we notice a difficulty. If demons are utterly unknowable and nonsensical to us, then why does the term ‘psychosis’ suggest itself so readily as a translation? Why not ‘rose’? According to strict ontological relativism, any attempt to understand the world that is locked into another culture’s language is misguided. For by and large, to understand someone is to understand what they are talking about (that is, intended, if not actual referents). If the ‘what the language is about’ is internal to the language, there is no way an outsider can understand it.

3. Epistemological relativism argues, from the conundrums facing the other versions of relativism, that ‘demon-possession’ and ‘psychosis’ are terms functioning in different practices of relating to similar kinds of phenomena in the real world. We cannot translate from one term to the other, but we can compare the *practices of knowing* and ask, for example, whether each has anything to learn from the other. Or we can ask, as James Alison does in his brilliant exegesis of the Exorcism of the Gerasene Demoniac, whether both practices are ideological *practices of evading* social reality by presenting it, respectively, in cosmic and in personal psychic terms: in both cases scapegoating an individual for structural bad relations within society as a whole.¹⁶

For a second example, we need to imagine two cultures. One has the concept of a *circle* as a geometric construction, a locus of points equidistant from a centre; but like the Incas it has not discovered the wheel; its coins are oblong, and it regards the circle as a purely theoretical idea never instanced in the real world. The other is more practical; it has no geometry, but has the idea of a *wheel* as the shape it carves pieces of wood to make its vehicles run smoothly.

1. Semantic Relativism says that circle and wheel translate each other; they just have a slightly different nuance. The problem here is that the person who tries to make his vehicle run on geometrical constructs will soon learn that there is more than a semantic difference between circles and wheels!

2. Ontological Relativism says that the two cultures construct incommensurable worlds. One lives in a world of pure geometry, the other in a much more practical world of horses and carts. There is no way the two cultures can come together and learn from each other.

3. Epistemological Relativism argues that the cultures practise two ways of knowing the same world. So we can imagine the wheel culture

coming along in its smooth-wheeled chariots to discover the circle culture. When the battles subside, it might learn from the circle culture the reason why its wheels run smoothly: because the wheels are circular, such that the circumference stays equidistant to the axle at the 'centre'. And the circle culture learns that its geometrical constructions have technological applications like wheels. Each society has been able to understand the other, not through simple translation of terms, nor through the mediation of a 'metalanguage', but by each stretching its concepts a till they touch the other's, and in the process enlarging its understanding of the world.

According to epistemological relativism, then, language can contain *socially constructed* knowledge (or ignorance) *of the world*. Practices of knowing are *socially constructed*, invented and developed by human beings, within human traditions. That is why different societies know different things about the world. Psychotherapists know things that exorcists do not, and *vice versa*. But these social constructs embody knowledge *of the world*. That is why the two societies are able to share their knowledge and enrich each others' culture. Language opens two ways: to the human life that constructs it, and to the world it relates to, though not necessarily by any simple one to one correspondence of word and thing. This opens the way to a subtle, 'constructive' rather than nihilistic postmodernism.

Now consider God. There are many stories, languages and disciplines in which the term 'God' functions, but for simplicity I shall consider just two: 'God' in the biblical narrative and 'God' in modern secular philosophy of one kind or another.

1. Semantic Relativism gives us *liberalism*. The Biblical term 'God' needs to be translated into a concept we moderns understand. There is no need to challenge modern assumptions; we just need to translate the rather crude anthropomorphism of the Biblical narrative into terms more acceptable to the sophisticated world of today. Cupitt stands in a long line of such 'translators'. Of course, the translation has proved to be easier said than done, not least because of the sheer variety of Biblical and modern day contexts in which the term 'God' is used. Which Biblical God do we translate into which modern concept?

2. Ontological Relativism gives us *Barthian neo-Orthodoxy*. The Biblical world and our own are incommensurable. Barth explicitly states that we are not to understand by 'God' in his theology anything akin to what 'God' means in ancient religion or modern philosophy.¹⁷ We cannot translate the Gospel into terms acceptable to our modern world; we simply have to enter a different world, the world defined by the language of the Bible and the Church, because that is the world in which

God has spoken his saving Word, the world in which the 'God' of revelation makes sense. Barth employs a Trinitarian understanding here: the Father not only speaks his Word of revelation, but gives the Church the Spirit whereby to understand this Word. The problem here is that even Barth ends up being a little pre-Barthian! If revelation generates its own life-world, in which alone it can be understood, it becomes hard to articulate the common human world, the real flesh Christ takes to himself. The Word remains on high, inhabiting a Spirit filled ecclesial world, not the ordinary human world. The pre-Barthianism of Radical Orthodoxy may be something it has inherited and accentuated from Barth himself!¹⁸

3. Epistemological Relativism gives us a kind of *pluralist realism*. Bible and modern thought represent different practices (in fact a plurality of ways, not just two) of relating to God, Christ, world, salvation and so forth. The worlds need to build out from themselves to engage with each other in a manner too messy to constitute a metanarrative. Religions, and God, are manifestly human constructs of language and imagination. Because religions are so rooted in human traditions and cultures, it is seldom easy for people of different religions to understand each other. But religions and God relate us to reality, albeit not by one to one correspondence. So religious believers, and secular modernists too, when attentive to one another, can enrich one another's relation to reality, or living of life, even though they cannot identify a shared core of 'religious reality' independent of any religious practice.

In the remainder of this essay I shall explore one model (which does not quite amount to a metanarrative) whereby this might happen.

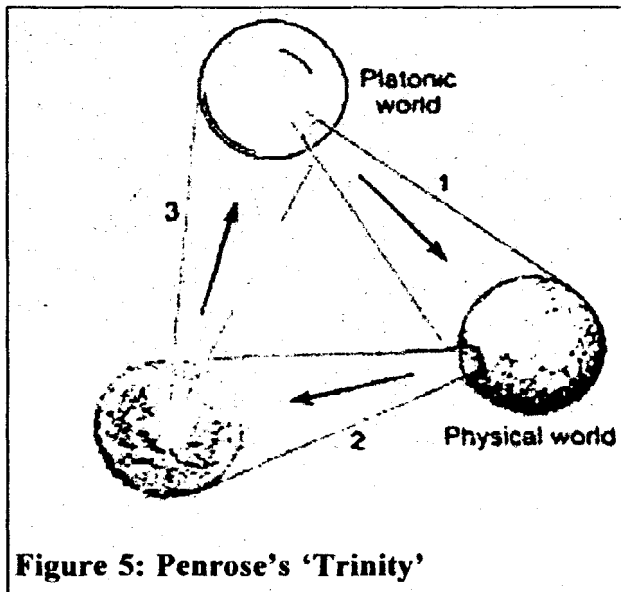
Embracing the 'Trinity'

For epistemological relativism, then, the linguistic and other practices and interactions that relate us to the world are themselves in the world. Language is material; and matter is linguistic, or at least information-bearing. This is what Cupitt himself seems to be grasping when he moves in the new, theological direction of his 'Secular Trinity' of Being, Man and Language. This is not at all identical with the immanent or the economic Trinity of mainstream Christian theology; hence the scare-quotes. Connections are doubtless there to be made, but beyond the scope of this essay. Cupitt writes

Being is the quite-unfathomable continual silent outpouring of everything. It is ineffable, prior to language. It reveals itself in "Man" - which is what Heidegger calls *Dasein*, namely the lit-up, language-differentiated common human world in which we live, move and have

our being.... and the circle is completed by Language, the living web of symbolic expression and communication that is the medium of our social and historical life. So Being, Man and Language are the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, apprehended in the structure of the way we see what we see before our eyes, now.¹⁹

An uncannily similar 'Trinity' has recently emerged from a very different source: the mathematician and cosmologist, Roger Penrose. Following Karl Popper, Penrose writes of three 'worlds': the world of mathematical laws, which he sees Platonically as a real world; the world of matter, and the world of thought and consciousness. The curious thing is that each of these worlds seems to emerge out of the others in a cycle, as illustrated in his diagram.



What, then, are the mysteries? These are illustrated in the figure. There is the mystery of why such precise and profoundly mathematical laws play such an important role in the behaviour of the physical world. Somehow the very world of physical reality seems almost mysteriously to emerge out of the Platonic world of mathematics. This is represented by the arrow down on the right, from the Platonic world to the physical world. Then there is the second mystery of how it is that perceiving beings can arise from out of the physical world. How is it that subtly organised material objects can mysteriously conjure up mental entities from out of its material substance? This is represented by the arrow pointing at the bottom, from the physical to the mental world. Finally, there is the mystery of how it is that mentality is able

seemingly to 'create' mathematical concepts out of some kind of mental model. These apparently vague, unreliable and often inappropriate mental tools, with which our mental world seems to come equipped, appear nevertheless mysteriously able (at least when they are at their best) to conjure up abstract mathematical forms, and thereby enable our minds to gain entry, by understanding, into the Platonic mathematical realm. This is indicated by the arrow that points upwards on the left, from the mental to the Platonic world.²⁰

The Platonic World 3 is conceived by Penrose in terms mainly of mathematical language, whereas postmodernism would tend to identify this apex with language generally. Otherwise, Penrose's physical world seems to correspond with Cupitt's 'Being', and his mental world with Cupitt's provocatively termed 'Man'.

In a sense Cupitt and Penrose are simply exploring what happens if we allow the truth of both statements in the first quotation in the section on Cupitt, above.

1. The galaxies were formed millions of years ago, and out of them, eventually, have evolved planet earth and now us.
2. The galaxies are a concept that evolved about 45 years ago.

Semantic relativism, would not question the realism of (1), whereas ontological relativism would opt for (2), making the world a linguistic construct. Epistemological relativism accepts (1) and (2) together, taking the galaxies to be socially constructed expressions of real knowledge.²¹ What seemed so sensible and obvious plummets us straightaway into the paradoxes of the 'Trinity'. In (1) we follow the bottom of Penrose's triangle, where matter evolves into consciousness; in (2) we follow the right side, where the conceptual World 3 (itself a product of consciousness) generates the modern concept of a galaxy.

Responding as Artists

We can dodge this paradox in three ways. We can take the Platonic view, and deny that World 3 emerges from the world of thought, viewing it as something that really exists whether anyone thinks of it or not. We can take a crudely materialist view that matter somehow exists beyond the formularies and laws which enable us humanly to grasp it. Or we can take the idealistic view that the world of thought and imagination is much larger than the physical world.

Each of these alternatives gives us a kind of essentialism — Platonic, materialist, and idealist essentialism respectively. Each alternative makes one of the three worlds foundational by a

fundamentally arbitrary step of eliding one of the three worlds, so leaving us with just a foundational world, a constructed world, and an arrow between them. Postmodernism can be regarded as precisely the denial of any of these three moves; a decision to embrace the paradoxical in preference to the arbitrary.

Consistent with its affinities for neoplatonism and for Augustine, Radical Orthodoxy broadly opts for a Platonic realism. Where Plato had essentialised the forms of geometry, Radical Orthodoxy, along with quite a lot of continental postmodernism, essentialises language, text and word. But as we have seen, this makes the coming of the Word in human flesh and history difficult to articulate. Cupitt, meanwhile, in his modern phase, focussed, as modernism tends to, on the two other poles: the 'cold' objective world of matter and the 'warm' subjective world of human consciousness. The only space for God was in the latter; hence Cupitt's theological non-realism. Now we see Cupitt admit the importance of language; it remains to be seen quite where this is leading him regarding the reality of God and incarnation.

What happens if we resist all forms of essentialism, and allow the 'Trinity' to be in all its foundationless glory? Doing this commits us to a pluralist, relativist realism. We forgo foundationalism, because the 'Trinity' has no foundational starting point within itself, and being circular, has no opening to a foundation outside itself either! The 'Trinity' thereby forecloses both any metaphysical basis for atheism (a self-explaining universe that needs no God) *and* any metaphysical basis for theism (a universe that demands a God outside itself for explanation.) This demands a very different strategy from the dualistic process of first establishing a metaphysical God by reason, then invoking revelation to divide this godhead into the Trinity.

There is also no universal language, no single deductive system, from which we can construct a perfect language for the world. Description both precedes the world, forming the concepts with which we grasp it, and emerges from the world, as we struggle for better ways to articulate what we have experienced. So we cannot specify in advance of the 'Trinitarian' process an ideal 'God's eye' view for perfect description. Though perhaps it looks like a metanarrative, the 'Trinity' cannot really supply any fixed overarching view; it is a kind of metanarrative to end all metanarratives. But it commits us to an inescapably messy kind of realism, because both consciousness and matter have a life outside of, though never independent of, the text.

This 'Trinity' demands that we accept its world as gift. We cannot 'found' it on something more amenable to our reason; it demands a theological, rather than a metaphysical response to reality. Rather than

trying to establish God on the basis of metaphysics, we look to a pre-metaphysical God in the irreducible, circularly enfolded givenness of matter, consciousness and communication.²² The dualism of reason and revelation is unsustainable; we need to respond to *all* reality as revelation, and apply reason to *all* reality, however 'sacred'; not to judge reality and assess its foundations, but to extract the judgement every new experience makes upon us and our adequacy to receive it.

In this way the 'Trinity' can be seen as an opening out of the Trinitarian basis Barth established for the understanding of revelation, to cover every reality. Many events, and not just the Christ-event, challenge us to create for them new language and new awareness. Christ uniquely focuses and explicates the judgement on our language and hence our life implicit in all experience. We have seen also (from the example of possession and psychosis) how the clash of different languages can effect judgement by revealing an ideological concealment operating in both, forcing us to develop, through better language, a better way of living in the world. This is why Christian language often needs the challenge of the secular, and vice versa. Only by accepting these challenges, and not narrowing ourselves to a sacred self-contained language of response to Christ, can we be post-Barthian, avoiding the 'pre-Barthianism' of Barth, as we release Christ to be fully incarnate in the flesh all humans share.²³

Arguably, to write poetically is to allow experience to judge and transform one's concepts. Poems can sometimes almost set up their own unique language games, specially attuned to the uniqueness of their subject. Science normally advances by the contrary method of bringing new experience under the reign of tried and tested concepts; though as Kuhn has shown, when these concepts break down, science is forced to a more poetic, revolutionary phase in the search for new paradigms. So poets and revolutionary-phase scientists respond to their experience as Barth responds to revelation. I am suggesting the believer responds to the whole world in this same way. Like an artist looking at her model with rapt attention, and producing through her subjective passion a World 3 art object that is in turn material and feeds back a new vision of the model; so the believer uses language and concept to create new worlds that do not spin away from, but resonate and interilluminate with the material world we are in. Engagement with reality then comes not from subjecting our ideas to an imperialist 'universal reason' or calculus for producing infallible truth, but through bold, imaginative exercises of creativity correlated with a passionate attention to the particulars of our material world.

And this is what enables us to be post-Barthian as well as (subtly,

constructively) postmodern. Theology has to do justice to the historical materiality of Jesus and the Kingdom he has established by his resurrection. It will not do to reduce Jesus to the Christ of the Church's Word and communication. If the Church is the body of Christ, it is as the work of art formed by the inspiring work of the Spirit on the body of history in response to the historical body of Jesus. That work requires bold imagination, but discipline too. If the artwork is to transform and renew our understanding of the model, it needs to arise out of close attention to it. We cannot escape the Trinitarian circles, if the Church is to be a great interconnected trans-cultural work of art, based on the model of Jesus, imagining and inaugurating the Kingdom he proclaimed.

Modern and postmodern secularism are not—any more than the Gospel—simply bits of language with nothing outside them; they are rooted in the material practices of the modern world, with its market and multinational power-relations. If Christianity offers—as so often it does, and as Radical Orthodoxy seems to—only sublime words and ideas to counter this deeply entrenched network, it will fail. But if the Kingdom of peace is really advancing among us on all three fronts—through the material life, death and resurrection of Jesus, through inspired human consciousness, and through the word, sacrament and action of the Church—then the gates of hell cannot prevail.

- 1 'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A short summa in Forty-two Responses to Unasked Questions', in Graham Ward, ed., *The Postmodern God, a theological Reader*, Blackwell 1997, p.265.
- 2 R. R. Reno, 'The Radical Orthodoxy Project', in *First Things* 100 (2000), p.40.
- 3 'The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ', in *Radical Orthodoxy*, eds. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, Routledge 1999, p.177.
- 4 'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism', *op. cit.*, p.271.
- 5 'The Incarnate One'.
- 6 *Metaphysical Horror*, Penguin 2001, p.55.
- 7 Graham Ward, Introduction to *Radical Orthodoxy*, *op. cit.*, p.1.
- 8 Cf Catherine Pickstock, 'Music: Soul, City and Cosmos after Augustine', in *ibid.*, pp.243 ff.
- 9 *The Revelation of Being*, SCM 1998, p.23.
- 10 *op. cit.* p.21.
- 11 *op. cit.* p.69.
- 12 *Creation out of Nothing*, SCM 1990, p.129.
- 13 *ibid.*, p. x.
- 14 I have described these three forms of relativism in greater detail in my article, 'What kind of Relativism?', *New Blackfriars*, April 1989. Roughly, ontological relativism relates to 'strong thesis postmodernism', and

- epistemological relativism to 'weak thesis postmodernism', in Sue Patterson's *Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age*, Cambridge University Press 1999. Patterson deals with an almost entirely different set of writers, but her aims seem to be similar to mine.
- 15 The terms derive, of course, from Wittgenstein, who was probably an epistemological relativist. Cf Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, SPCK 1997, Chapter 6: Assurances of Realism.
 - 16 *Faith beyond Resentment*, DLT 2001.
 - 17 Cf e.g. *Dogmatics in Outline*, SCM 1949, pp.35-6.
 - 18 Barth himself later corrected some of these tendencies in his beautiful booklet, *The Humanity of God*.
 - 19 Don Cupitt, *The Revelation of Being*, *op. cit.*, p.94.
 - 20 *Shadows of the Mind*, Oxford University Press 1994, pp. 413-4.
 - 21 Some modern cosmologies actually make observation by human consciousness constitutive of cosmic reality, without denying consciousness as something that has evolved within the cosmos. This creates a similar kind of circle.
 - 22 Cf Jean-Luc Marion, 'Metaphysics and Phenomenology: a Summary for Theologians', in *Radical Orthodoxy*, *op. cit.*, pp.279 ff.
 - 23 *It is on this basis that one might take issue with Lindbeck's post-liberalism*. Cf Rowan Williams, 'The Judgement of the World', in *On Christian Theology*, Blackwell 2000, pp. 29 ff.

Brer Rabbit Christology

Francesca Aran Murphy

James Cone begins his book about *The Spirituals and Blues* by defining this music as 'the power of song in the struggle for black survival'.¹ The quality of spirituals and blues is 'an optimism that uses the pessimism of life as raw material out of which it creates its own strength'.² The use of human life at its roughest as a source of power is also the meaning of *comedy*. Comedy is not just a funny ha-ha plot, it is a *milieu*. It is a milieu over which love presides. Speaking about the earthiness of the blues, Cone observes, 'People cannot love physically and spiritually ... until they have been up against the edge of life, experiencing the hurt and pain of existence.'³ The painful, raw sounds of the blues and the spirituals venture further into the comic milieu than do Hollywood

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