

'To Live and Die Upon a Dogma': Newman and Post/Modern Faith

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Today, as in his own day, John Henry Newman (1801-1890) is a contested site, the name for different ways of being Catholic. Competing views of Catholicity still seek for legitimacy by appealing to the authority of Newman's thought, of his intellect, and, not least, his Cardinal's red hat, conferred on him by Pope Leo XIII in 1879.¹ At the beginning of the last century, those known as Liberal Catholics or Catholic Modernists appealed to Newman as their patron saint. George Tyrrell (1861-1909) declared himself a 'devout disciple of Newman',² and confessed to having been 'brought into, and kept in, the Church by the influence of Cardinal Newman and of the mystical theology of the Fathers and of the Saints'.³ Today, however, it is not Catholic Modernism, but religious postmodernism that might be in want of Newman's *imprimatur*.

Professor Terry Wright, for example, has recently suggested that Newman's reading of the Bible offers a *via media* to postmodernity.⁴ For Newman recognised the 'multiplicity of meanings' to which a critical, open and historical reading of the Bible gives rise.⁵ 'The All-wise, All-knowing God cannot speak without meaning many things at once', Newman declared.

Every word of His is full of instruction, looking many ways; and though it is not often given to us to know these various senses, and we are not at liberty to attempt lightly to imagine them, yet, as far as they are told us, and as far as we may reasonably infer them, we must thankfully accept them. Look at Christ's words, and this same characteristic will strike you; whatever He says is fruitful in meaning, and refers to many things.⁶

This is of course a perfectly traditional, medieval and patristic, point of view; the Church Fathers having inherited the ancient Greek practice of allegorising any significant religious text. However, it was less common in Newman's day, when the modern interest in a strictly historical reading of the scriptural texts had restricted their meaning to the intentions of their human authors.⁷

It is in Newman's insistence on the several senses of scripture, and in his sensitivity to scripture's indeterminacies and hermeneutical *lacunae*,

that Terry Wright finds Newman a proto-Derridean, for whom the meaning of any text is always unstable, a momentary anchorage against the drift of metaphor that affects even the most strictly regulated of discourses. Thus Newman could welcome the power of language to capture our imaginations, while aware of its dangerous imprecision, its always falling short of what we attempt to say when we speak of God's word.⁸ If we want Newman's confirmation of such a view of language in general, and the scriptures in particular, then, as Wright shows, it is not hard to find. But of course not everyone will welcome such a reading, either of Newman or of the Bible.

William Philbin, writing in 1945, warned that Newman greatly exaggerated the prominence of the allegorical mode of interpretation in patristic times, and omitted to 'mention the excesses to which it led many of the Fathers.'⁹ Philbin is commenting on Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), and is keen to demonstrate Newman's distance from the Catholic Modernist heresy. When Newman locates the justification for many ecclesial developments, especially regarding the papacy, in the mystical rather than the literal sense of scripture, he is in danger of casting doubt on the authenticity of these developments. For then they are not properly grounded in the literal, bedrock sense of the scriptures, but in the vagaries of spiritual discernment. Philbin is quick to reassure us that Newman's appeal to the mystical meaning of scripture is just Newman's way of referring to the Church's tradition, which is simply the logical working out of what is always already there in the texts, rather than, as Catholic Modernism might suppose, the expression of the church's changing intimations of the Christian 'idea'.¹⁰ Yet Philbin's anxiety points to the always tendentious and to be tested nature of Bible reading. It also helps to make the point that Newman is suspect of Modernism or postmodernism because he is also medieval, patristic, ancient; what, today, some would call 'radically orthodox'.¹¹ And it is the idea that Newman is open to the modern and the postmodern because his theological imagination was open to the premodern, that is advocated in this essay.

Modernism

Accounts of the modern and its cult, modernism, are various. For some the modern world arrives in the eighteenth century with the industrial revolution, while for others it begins in the seventeenth century with the scientific revolution occasioned by Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo and Newton. Some trace it farther back, to the sixteenth century and the Protestant Reformation, to the religious revolution that, according to Max Weber, inaugurated the capitalist ethic. If we think of the modern

as not so much a period as a mode of cultural sensibility, we may trace its emergence back to St Augustine and his *Confessions*, and what many see as the birth of the modern 'self' in Augustine's interrogation of his own actions and character.

The modern is the idea that humanity is the maker of its own destiny, of progress toward technological and social utopia. Newton produced the idea of constructing clear and powerful models of the world's working. He provided a paradigm for scientific precision and success. Everyone who came after him wanted to be the Newton of his or her own chosen field. He modelled the stars; Darwin modelled the species; Marx modelled society; and Freud modelled the mind. Others followed. Ferdinand de Saussure modelled language and Claude Lévi-Strauss modelled myth. Above all, there was Hegel and his story of the world as the self-realisation of Spirit. In the modern moment, in the mind of the European philosopher, Spirit achieves consummation in a moment of perfect modelling or story telling – telling the world as it truly is. The modern is thus imbued with a great sense of its own importance, of its ability to comprehend the world and make it new. In this it is spurred on by its ability to transform the material environment through technology, and through commerce the matrix of society.

It is this confidence in human endeavour that is also the mark of modernism in theology. Strangely, the apogee of theological modernism was already attained at its inception, in the work of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872).¹² Strangely, because after Feuerbach, modernism would retreat to the halfway position of liberal theology, and it would not be until well into the twentieth century – when, for many, modernism was becoming postmodernism – that Feuerbach's thought would make a significant return, though now with a Nietzschean inflection. The 1960s witnessed 'secular' and 'death of God' theology (Thomas J. J. Altizer, Paul Van Buren), and the 1980s produced the avowedly postmodern theology of people like Mark C. Taylor in the United States of America and Don Cupitt and the 'Sea of Faith' movement in the United Kingdom.

Feuerbach, in his most famous and important work, *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), had inverted Hegel's account of history as the dialectical development of absolute Spirit, arguing that it was Spirit that expressed the development of nature, of human self-understanding. In the works of the religious imagination we see the 'objectification' (*Vergegenständlichung*) or 'projection' of human ideals. But in casting such values as love, wisdom and justice into the heavens, humanity is alienated from its true being, and it is the work of the philosopher to return men and women to authenticity by disabusing them of their

religious illusions. Borrowing a term from the postmodern lexicon, we can say that Feuerbach sought to 'deconstruct' rather than to destroy religion; he sought to show how it worked, and what was valuable in its working. Through religion, and above all the Christian religion, human beings imagine their own perfection, and so begin their own perfecting.

Liberal theology – Protestant and Catholic – is Feuerbachian when it emphasizes the social and subjective dynamics of religion, the cultural contexts in which its stories, symbols and rites are formed, and the way in which these humanly constructed objectivities rebound upon their makers, influencing the cultural milieu from which they are born and by which they are supported. But liberal theology resists Feuerbach to the extent that it insists upon a still persisting transcendence, which though culturally mediated, is nevertheless beyond both culture and subjectivity. There are of course many versions of such a theological stance, and what makes for the liberal version is the extent to which a theology supposes the transcendent to be the wager or supposition of a religious culture, as opposed to thinking religion a wager of the transcendent, the means by which the Other draws near. In short, theology is liberal to the extent that it accepts something like the Kantian division between the phenomenal world that we know and the noumenal world that we cannot know but may, or even must, postulate. Furthermore, and most importantly, theology is liberal when it accepts the hegemony of certain scientific methodologies that claim a universal applicability, due to their supposed neutrality regarding all metaphysics; best fitted for investigating a world judged entirely mechanical in its operations.

To some extent, Catholic Modernism fits this rough sketch of liberal theology, since Modernist theologians were greatly influenced by historical biblical criticism, which treated the scriptures as contingent testimonies, requiring a supposedly neutral investigation. Furthermore, they were of the view that religion was the product of human imagination, even if a product that gave unto transcendent reality. Above all, the Modernists sought not to oppose other forms of knowledge, but to integrate them with that of the Church, even though, as their opponents stressed, the Church's knowledge was to be put to the test of these other cognitions, and, more importantly, their methodologies. To the extent that the Modernists looked for an integration of religious and secular knowledge we might suppose them deeply Catholic, but to the extent that the religious was made subservient to the secular, we might suppose them liberals, and, for some, even to allow the distinction of 'religious' and 'secular' is already to have betrayed an underlying liberalism.

That Newman might be thought modern in the sense thus outlined can seem purely paradoxical, since Newman, if anyone, surely resisted putting the dogmas of the faith to the test of an impartial, secular reason? Newman was famously a defender of the dogmatic principle against the 'anti-dogmatic principle' of liberalism, and on this he claimed never to have wavered. 'From the age of fifteen, dogma has been the fundamental principle of my religion: I know no other religion; I cannot enter into the idea of any other sort of religion; religion, as a mere sentiment is to me a dream and a mockery.'¹³ Newman claims to have witnessed in his own lifetime the expansion of liberalism from being the name of a religious faction or party in the Church of England, to its encompassing all of educated society; the development of human reason into the 'deep, plausible scepticism ... practically exercised by the natural man.'¹⁴ Yet we know that several of the Catholic Modernists in particular, and many avowed liberals in general, looked to Newman for a modern Catholicism.

The liberal Catholic and biographer of Newman, Wilfred Ward (1856-1916), looked to Newman for an interpretation of what had befallen the Church with the declaration of papal infallibility in 1870, and sought Newman's authority for the legitimate freedom of Catholic scholarship to engage with non-Catholic thought. 'To show the richness of life which she showed in the Middle Ages', Ward declared, 'the Church must have the same opportunities which she had then. She must be able safely and freely to hold intercourse with secular culture.' Like Ward, George Tyrrell found in Newman's stress on the ultimate inviolability and responsibility of the individual's conscience, space for a legitimate resistance to forms of church governance that had little respect for the governed.¹⁶ In Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Tyrrell learned the necessity of doctrinal development for the appearance of eternal truth in a changing world. Tyrrell was later to hold that Newman's *Essay* failed to think through the nature of the 'deposit of faith', and thus did not really attain to liberal theology.¹⁷ But it was Newman's work that enabled Tyrrell to develop his view that the Christian 'idea', while unstatable in itself, is that for which the Church must seek in each Age.¹⁸

For those antipathetic to the modernist spirit, Newman was always suspect; after all, he was, like George Tyrrell, a convert from Protestantism, which taught, above all else, the independence of the individual in matters of faith.¹⁹ One may think Modernism the heresy of heresies, or, on the other hand, a sane and sensible development of Catholic thought, that erred only in being, as Mrs Wilfred Ward put it, in the title of her novel on Modernism, *Out of Due Time* (1906). But

there can be little argument that Newman's work lent itself to the Modernist cause, whether or not Newman himself would have approved of such a use. One might say that Newman's style allows for that multiplicity of interpretation that, according to Terry Wright, Newman found in the scriptures.

Thus, in so far as Newman's work is open to a Modernist interpretation, it is open to a postmodernist reading. This is of course to suggest a certain congruity between modern and postmodern, that the latter is not so much a radical rupture of the former, as the former's intensification. The argument will be that postmodernism presses further the modern insight into the historically contingent and culturally specific nature of all human endeavours. Modern thought first saw this most clearly with regard to domains like the religious, supposing there to be other areas where such contingency was not operative; but postmodernism sees the ubiquity of the contingent and cultural, so that all pretence to a culture-free, positivist domain, must be abandoned. Thus neither science, nor its subject, the self-contained and autonomous rational neutral observer, is spared the effects of temporality, of his or her utterly human location. Postmodernism is the realisation that all forms of life – including the most rationalistic – depend upon an always prior belief. As Newman noted, 'almost all we do, every day of our lives, is on trust, i.e. *faith*.'²⁰

Postmodernism

Jean-François Lyotard has told us that postmodernism is what happens when master stories lose their appeal and become incredible.²² A master story or grand narrative is a tale that comprehends everything, telling us not only how things are, but also how they were and will be, and our place among them. Such stories tell us who we are. Religious stories are often said to be like this. The Christian story of Creation, Fall and Redemption places the individual soul within a divine drama of human possibility, of salvation or damnation. The advent of modernism did not so much end as transform this story. Instead of God's redeemed creation, Marxism placed us within the unfolding dialectic of history; Darwinism wrote us into the epic of evolution; and Freud located us in the theatre of the psyche. Cosmology wants to tell us how the world began and how it will end.

When modern master stories are avowedly political they are decidedly utopian; they tell us that society will be better under their narration. Such stories are always true because they make the world fit the narrative. We can be characters within them because we can be mastered by them, and it would seem that most of us want to be within such a story; we want to be mastered or written into a narrative that is

larger, longer and stronger than our own. This is because stories are secure places. We know how they begin and end. 'Once upon a time ... happily ever after.' But what happens when these stories break down, when their narrators lose the plot and forget what comes next?

When the grand narratives of religion began to lose their credibility, the modern world was invented by retelling the old stories in a new way. Forgetting about God, people told stories about history, evolution, the psyche, about stars and scientific progress, about genetic manipulation and a master race: about human emancipation through enlightenment and 'technoscience'. However, these stories also have now become incredible, undesirable, horrible. Now it seems that there are no master stories left, not because they have ceased to be told, but because no one story is dominant, and all jostle for prominence. Through competition with one another, they have been reduced to the level of partial, pragmatic, passing stories, providing the material from which each consumer must now make up his or her own story; and this, so the story goes, is something to be welcomed and celebrated. It is the free-market of self-creation.

We are now happy postmoderns! We are each our own storyteller, living among the ruins of former grand narratives. We tell stories purely for pleasure. Today we tell one story and tomorrow we will tell another. Stories are fashionable; we change them with the seasons, as we change our clothes. Perhaps because this is a relatively new game, we make our stories out of the rubble of the old narratives, the bits and pieces that are lying around, ready to hand. We mix and match, liking the fun of spotting from where the bits have come. Our novels and films are full of quotes and allusions; our buildings are a little classical, a little rococo, a little gothic, and even, sometimes a little modernist. Our religions are new age and neo-pagan, a spiritual smörgåsbord.²³ Our values and morals are equally multifarious, equally changeable, commodities like everything else. Alasdair MacIntyre has made a career out of lamenting the passing of a once stable and coherent tradition of virtuous habits. But even if such a tradition ever existed outside of a series of philosophical and theological texts, its disappearance doesn't matter, because now, as perhaps always before, we get by with what Jeffrey Stout has called a bricolage of ethical values and moral sentiments. Coherence is not a postmodern virtue.²⁵

Now that the once feared and powerful master narrative of emancipation through state socialism has ceased to be told with any conviction, and the space for the telling of many little stories – the market of the free world – is being constantly extended, the age of the master narrative seems finally finished. The announced passing of

modernity – and socialism was nothing if not modern – heralds the end of a world subject to a dominant code, a system rendering all life identical. We have entered a more hospitable, plural world, an unsystematic domain that no one can be against.

However, there are those who contend that the telling of many little stories is itself dependent on a rather larger tale, one that cannot be so easily controverted as those it has replaced, because dissembled as the space in which all the little stories are told, as telling itself. Thus, as Terry Eagleton and others proclaim, postmodern society – or late capitalist society – is a tyrannous space of freedom, at once ‘libertarian and authoritarian, hedonist and repressive, multiple and monolithic’. While consumer capitalism encourages all manner of possibilities, ‘restlessly transgressing boundaries and pitching diverse life forms together’, unafraid of their inconsistency and contradiction, it nevertheless requires the stable and unimpeded flow of capital and the regular incitement of want, with cycles of surfeit and recess.²⁶ Eagleton insists that it is no good setting diversity against uniformity, plurality against univocity, seeking to undermine the latter by the former, for the former are already in the service of the latter: ‘difference, transgressiveness and multiplicity ... are as native to capitalism as cherry pie is to the Land of the Free.’²⁷ The delirium of free-market consumerism is made possible by the iron fist of capitalist technoscience that brooks no dissenters.

Writers like Eagleton and Lyotard point to a fundamental contradiction in the postmodern condition understood as the globalizing culture of late capitalism. For this is a culture that everywhere celebrates the autonomous self, freely choosing its own destiny, that promotes the authenticity of indigenous, home-grown products and homespun philosophies, and yet is supported by global networks of information and capital flow. Viewed positively, this is the irony of global systems thriving through support of local identities, producing the ‘glocal’. Viewed negatively, it is the commodification of anything and everything, to the point where each object or activity becomes equally worthless because only valued within the global system of exchange. Therefore every choice is permitted just as long as it doesn’t interfere with the working of the whole, and all choices are indifferent because choice itself is the only index of freedom and value. This is why shopping is now the major form of Western religion, and there is nothing for which one cannot shop – on the internet.²⁸

This is to offer an account of the postmodern as a cultural condition, a social phenomenon that developed toward the end of the twentieth century in many, if not most parts of the world, and, if not

actually global, aspires to that condition. It is an account that, variously detailed and nuanced, can be found in much social theory, and as such differs from accounts of the postmodern offered in literary and philosophical writing, which has been more interested in questions of 'language', 'knowledge' and 'truth'. However, both approaches – the social and the philosophical – have a shared interest in the condition of the subject, understood as an utterly material and textual reality, produced within natural and cultural systems that may be viewed from the perspectives of the physical and political sciences, from the point of view of economics, sociology and philosophy. What locks together the subject in postmodernity with the postmodern discipline that seeks to understand that subject, is the belief that both are already inseparably implicated within one another. For postmodernism, it is no longer possible to think that there is an absolute divide between the knower and the known, subject and object, because both exist only as they are mediated within a reality that is, as postmoderns like to say, always already textual, always already given over to the 'word'. Epistemology is now understood to be always already ontology. Or, to put the point another way, it is now not only sociology, but all forms of knowledge that are self-reflexive, so that what is known is changed in and through that knowing, because mediated within a common sociality. As it was famously put by Jacques Derrida, there is nothing outside the text, no outside text (*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*).²⁹

Postmodern theology

Christian theology has responded to postmodernism in several ways. Some theologians are hostile, others curious, and others extremely enthusiastic, declaring themselves to be postmodern theologians. Of those who are, or have been, enthusiastic over the advent of postmodernism, some, like Mark C. Taylor and Don Cupitt, are inheritors of Feuerbach's projectionism, but filtered through Nietzsche, and, above all, Derrida. They might be called nihilist textualist theologians. The other group of enthusiasts – enthusiastic for at least some postmodern themes – might be called orthodox narrativist theologians, and are people like George A. Lindbeck and John Milbank.³⁰

Mark C. Taylor came to prominence with his book *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (1984). It is an accomplished celebration of deferral, of the way in which meaning is always one step ahead of the signs in which we seek it. For Taylor, language is like a vast and endless maze, in which we are forever running, turning this way and that, but never finding a centre or an exit. We never find God, self or meaning, for they are dispersed throughout the labyrinth, noticeable by their absence.

Don Cupitt, who announced that he was *Taking Leave of God* in 1980, went on to provide a brilliant if at times hasty manifesto for nihilist postmodern theology. He believes that the old certainties have been dispersed across the surface of language. There are no longer any heights or depths, only a cultural skin of endlessly proliferating signs on which we must lightly tread, like *The Long-Legged Fly* (1987). In such a situation, religious values, like all values, have to be created out of nothing through the telling of stories, through make-believe.³¹

For both Taylor and Cupitt postmodernity is welcome and irreversible, and for both of them it has to do with the radical textuality of reality. Both of them are deeply influenced by twentieth-century philosophies of language; by structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstructionism. Both Taylor and Cupitt believe that Christian faith and practice must adopt the new postmodern understanding of the human condition. Cupitt, especially, champions a new sort of Christianity. 'We want a new religion that makes liberation and bliss out of the way the world is ... for a beliefless world that is rightly beliefless, we'll need a beliefless religion.'³²

This blissfully beliefless religion is textualism, or, as Cupitt calls it, 'culturalism' – the flowing together of language and world as a sea of signs in which we float and swim and have our being.³³ The basic idea of textualism can be grasped by looking up the meaning of a word in a dictionary. You want to find the meaning of the word, but all you find are other words, other signs. Meaning is not outside, but wholly inside language. This does not mean that there is nothing except language in the world. When I hit my foot against a stone it is not a word that causes my pain. But 'foot', 'stone' and 'pain' are all signs. If the world is to have meaning for me, it must come into language, into meaningful being.³⁴ It must be placed under a description, categorised and indexed. Without language I would hit my foot against a stone and feel pain, but I would not know what I had done, or that I was 'hurting', though I might cry out, for the event would be painful but without meaning, for I would be without language. 'When I seem to see red', Cupitt writes, 'I am already interpreting what I see, for I am classifying it. I am seeing it through a word. And unless I see through words I don't see at all.'³⁵

Story and narrative have become fashionable *topoi* for theology, and Cupitt takes to them with relish. Everything is a story, for stories produce every significant thing. Stories produce desire. They manipulate and channel our emotions, directing them toward objects we might otherwise find unexciting. Stories produce reality, establishing certain orders and relations between things and people and between them and other people. They establish the significance of age

and gender, of skin colour, class and accent: of all the things that matter and that could be otherwise, if told in a different story. Narratives produce time, the positioning of things before and after, the placing of the present at the complex intersection of individual and communal time-narratives. And stories produce us, our sense of self-hood, of being an 'I' with a past and a future, a narrative trajectory.

Religion, needless to say, is also a product of narrative. For Cupitt, it is only a story, but an important one, for the religious story provides our lives with significance; it inspires moral endeavour and conquers the Void. In the past we thought that God wrote the story, but now we know that we ourselves have written God. Now the religious task is to keep up the fiction, and not with a heavy but with a light touch. We must be 'cheerfully fictionalist'. For the heavy hand produces a master story that weighs upon the soul. Instead we must be 'continually improvising, retelling, embroidering, making it up as we go along'.³⁷

For textualist theologians such as Taylor or Cupitt, 'God' is also a sign; one which, like any other, depends for its meaning on all the rest. God is not outside language, in a place where meaning and truth are self-present, for language has no outside. God is wholly inside language, make-believe like everything else. God is language; the play of signs upon the Void.

The Void is just movement, change. Semiosis, signification, is a temporal moving process ... Just reading a sentence, we should be able to feel on our pulses the way life and meaning continually come out of the Void and return into it. That's the new religious object. That's what we have to learn to say yes to ... life's urgent transience ... The sign is our only metaphysics, our little bit of transcendence.³⁸

The chief problem with textualist theology is that it is not textualist enough. It tells us that there are only stories, but it tends to obscure the fact that in that case, textualism also is only a story; and it is not a Christian story, but a nihilist one, since for textualism it is the story of 'formlessness' that goes all the way down. For textualist theology we tell stories against the Void. There is nothing beyond our stories except white noise. This, after Feuerbach and Nietzsche, is its master story: that finally there is only nothing. For Cupitt, religious stories are told to keep the darkness at bay, until the night comes.

But we may wonder if there are not some other, better stories, ones that are less complacent about contemporary society, less pessimistic about the human condition, more hopeful of change? For the theologians to whom I now turn, the old ecclesial story of God's self-gift in Christ and Church is such a better story, since, in the telling, it

looks for the coming of the dawn. This is the story told by those theologians I am calling narrativists, of whom George A. Lindbeck and John Milbank are good examples. They are narrativists because, like the textualists, they accept the ubiquity of language. They believe that our sense of the world is formed by the socially constructed discourses in which we find ourselves, and to which we contribute. We are embedded in language, as is language in us. There is a reciprocal relation between story and storyteller. As I recount my life-story, my story produces the 'I' which tells it. I narrate the story by which I am told. And since I am part of a larger community – one in which other people tell stories about me, just as I tell stories about them – I am the product of many inter-related narratives, as is everyone else.

Narrativists also believe that stories go all the way down; our deepest convictions about the world and ourselves are constituted in stories only. As such, stories are human constructions, socially enacted. When the stories that society tells about itself change, so does society. When we change our stories about the world, the world itself changes. However, narrativists, unlike textualists, believe that what matters in story-telling is not the telling itself, but the stories told, the particular narratives unfolded. They are concerned not so much with the fictionality of the world, as with the particular world fictioned. Thus Lindbeck and Milbank are both orthodox theologians because they believe that the Christian story of Christ and his Church is preferable to all others. It is a story to live by.

In 1984 George Lindbeck published a short, powerful and provocative study on *The Nature of Doctrine*. In the book he sought to outline an ecumenical theory of doctrine as the neutral 'grammar' of varied Christian discourses. Lindbeck can be read as articulating Wittgenstein's remark that 'Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar).'³⁹ This idea is not original to Wittgenstein, having been suggested in 1901 by Harold Fielding Hall (1859-1917): 'the creeds are the grammar of religion, they are to religion what grammar is to speech'.⁴⁰ Lindbeck, however, finds a more ancient provenance for creed as grammar in St Athanasius. Following Bernard Lonergan (1904-85), Lindbeck argues that Athanasius had learned from Greek philosophy how to formulate propositions about propositions, and understood the credal doctrine of the 'consubstantiality' of Father and Son as expressing the rule that 'whatever is said of the Father is said of the Son, except that the Son is not the Father (*eadem de Filio quae de Patre dicuntur excepto Patris Nomine*)'.⁴¹ For Athanasius the doctrine of Nicaea was a second-order rule for Christian speech, and to accept the doctrine meant agreeing to

speak in a certain way.

The rule theory of doctrine is not uncontested, and certain related ambiguities and tensions need to be clarified. Firstly, it should be noted that while doctrines are understood as second-order propositions referring to other propositions, symbols and stories, they can also be taken as first-order propositions concerning worldly entities and divine mysteries. Lindbeck insists that a 'doctrinal statement may also function symbolically or as a first-order proposition'. But when it does so, the statement is no longer functioning as a 'church doctrine'.⁴² The doctrinal character of the statement is constituted by its grammatical use.

Secondly, doctrine construed as ecclesial grammar is intimately dependent upon that which it rules: the telling of the story. Doctrine is always secondary to that which it informs – the church's performance of the gospel – which is alone its basis or foundation. Doctrine rests upon nothing other than the Church's telling of Christ's charitable practices, heeding the command to 'follow', to do as he does; in short, upon the ecclesial tradition of discipleship. There is thus no legitimation of doctrine, in history or experience, outside of Christian practice itself.

While doctrine is secondary, it is at the same time creatively dependent upon churchly discourse and practice, a constitutive factor in the speech and performance of the Church. Fielding-Hall thought that doctrines were wholly descriptive, being to religion as grammar is to speech. 'Words are the expression of our wants; grammar is the theory formed afterwards. Speech never proceeded from grammar, but the reverse. As speech progresses and changes from unknown causes, grammar must follow.'⁴³ Yet grammar can also be understood prescriptively, as setting forth the rules for well-formed speech; and this is how the doctrinal grammar of theology must be understood, as not just describing but as prescribing the proper ordering of story and symbol, praise and prayer.

The canonical scriptures provide the basic narratives for how the Church imagines the world and herself in the world. The Church imagines herself within the narrative-world of the Bible, a written-world into which people can be 'inscribed'. Rather than understanding the Bible in worldly terms, the Christian understands the world in biblical ones; the Christian takes the biblical narratives, above all the narratives of Christ, as the fundamental story by which all others are to be understood, including his or her own story. 'The cross is not to be viewed as a figurative representation of suffering nor the messianic Kingdom viewed as a symbol for hope in the future; rather, suffering should be cruciform, and hopes for the future messianic'.⁴⁴ The

biblically formed narratives of Christ and his Church become the story that literally makes the world; it goes all the way down.

On Lindbeck's postliberal view, language and story come first, world and experience second. We only recognise the world as world because we can say 'world'. Experience occurs within language. All that we have has been given in words. This is much the same as textualism. But where narrativist theology differs is in its master story. Whereas for textualist nihilism it is the movement of signs upon the surface of the Void, for Lindbeck it is the story of Christ and his Church. One could say that the difference between these stories is the difference between Nothing and Everything, between ultimate darkness and hoped-for dawn, between violence and harmony. This last way of stating the difference is after John Milbank, who made the difference between malign and benign postmodernism a theme of his magisterial study, *Theology and Social Theory* (1990).

On Milbank's account, Christianity is postmodern because it is not founded on anything other than the performance of its story. It cannot be established against nihilism by reason, but only presented as a radical alternative, as something else altogether. It is also postmodern because its story – God's story – imagines a world 'out of nothing', as opposed to the chaos, the void of nihilism. God's world is one of true 'becoming', in which people are not fixed essences but life-narratives with a future. The story of Jesus Christ gives to the Church a pattern for peaceful existence. It is an 'atoning' peace of mutual forgiveness and the bearing of one another's burdens. This peace is sought in the nomadic city of the Church, an open-ended tradition of charity, of 'differences in community'.⁴⁵

From the point of view of Christian theology, narrativist orthodoxy would seem preferable to textualist nihilism, but many argue that what plagues the latter also affects the former. Firstly, is it possible to affirm God while allowing that such an affirmation can take place only within a story, albeit a master story which is said to go all the way down, without remainder? Cupitt believes that any talk of the transcendent, of that which is beyond or outside language, is rendered 'silly' by the fact that it is talk, and thus wholly within language.⁴⁶ If God appears in a story – as he does in the Bible – God must appear as a human-like, gendered and speaking character, with ideas and assumptions appropriate to the time of his appearing, with feelings and intentions, 'behaving in general like an extra-powerful and demanding king'. He will be all too human. And isn't it odd that people can write about him, as if from God's point of view? Who was around when God made the heaven and the earth, to tell us about it?

The whole thing is human artifice.

However, we can use words to talk about things other than words, and we can use words obliquely, metaphorically, analogically. Talk of God is not easy, but nor is it impossible. Thus in response to Cupitt, narrativist theology, while agreeing that God is a human-like character in the biblical narrative, nevertheless insists that God is not a human being. Of course the first story of Genesis is narrated from an impossible standpoint, it is a work of imagination after all. But this does not mean that it is a false depiction of the world as creation. Narrativist theology turns to the tradition of negative theology, which, while it insists on the unknowability of God, also insists that God's self-saying, above all in Jesus Christ, allows us to speak of God, even if we still do not know of what we speak when we speak of God.⁴⁸

Truth is said to be a problem for narrativism. How can there be true stories when it is said that there are only stories? For it is supposed by many that a true story is one that matches up to reality, to the way things are (a correspondence theory of truth). But if the way things are can never be known, because all we can know are stories of one sort or another, we can never match stories against reality, but only against one another. Thus it is said that even science is not so much about the matching of scientific theories against reality, as the matching of theories against experimental data, observation statements and so forth, which are always already theory-laden. Science matches theory-stories against observation-narratives (a coherentist theory of truth).

Whatever the case with science, narrative postmodern theology insists that Christian truth has never been a matter of matching stories against reality. It has always been a matter of matching reality-stories against the truth: Jesus Christ. For the Christian Church it has always been a life-story that comes first, against which all other things are to be matched. This life-story is what 'truth' means in Christianity. Nor is this a matter of making up the truth, because it is the truth that makes up the story. The story is imagined for Christians before it is re-imagined by them: the story is given to the Church. That, at any rate, is the Church's story.

Of course, the foregoing is a circular argument, and it is not possible to point to the giving of the story other than from within the story, which must already be underway for the gift to appear. Thus the gift can only be recognised in its reception, and in that moment recognised as already given. All attempts at an apology for the Church's story can only be *ad hoc* responses to alternative narratives, attempts to show that they also are already implicated in Christ's story, and so already constituted by a gift they have yet to recognise.

It is said that narrativist theology renders the Church sectarian. For it denies that reason provides an autonomous language in which everything can be discussed; rather it supposes a multiplicity of self-sustaining language communities. There is no common language the Church can use to express itself to an unbelieving world. Postmodern theology rejects the idea that Christian discourse can be translated into alien tongues without ceasing to be Christian. But then it seems that Christian discourse is the in-language of an in-group, cut off from a larger commonwealth. But this is to forget that people can learn to speak more than one language without recourse to a third, common tongue.

Finally, we must consider the question of violence, for it is said that despite all its talk about 'harmony' and 'peace', narrativist theology is itself violent in thinking the Christian story a master narrative that positions all other stories. It is the violence of having the last word. In response, it may be noted that the Christian story is always provisional because not yet ended. It is performed in the hope that the one of whom it speaks will return again to say it. The last word is yet to be said; and when it is, the Church will find herself positioned, out-narrated. Thus the narrativist might make the plea that the Christian story resists mastery by being the prayerful tale of one who came in the form of a servant and who will return as a friend. Nevertheless, the resistance of mastery often requires the resistance of some Christians to others – and here there lurks the suspicion that Christian faith is finally only a ruse of Nietzsche's 'will to power'. This, perhaps, is what must always remain undecidable in Christianity, or in any other faith.

Newman's radical orthodoxy

In the October 1870 issue of *The Edinburgh Review*, John Tulloch concluded his anonymous review of John Henry Newman's *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, by noting that while it was the product of Romanism's perhaps 'finest mind', it was yet a work of 'intellectual havoc and the audacious yet hopeless dogmatism which it teaches.'⁴⁹ Newman, his mind 'intensely dogmatic and authoritative', abandons not only reason but argument in 'reference to his faith', and refuses to 'look around'.⁵⁰ He attempts to render faith secure from criticism simply by refusing its claims. Tulloch, of course, was not the first to say this of Newman's thought, nor the last. But what he found unacceptable in Newman is precisely that which opens Newman to a postmodernist reading, as a sort of narrativist theologian.

It is precisely at the point where Newman rejects liberalism, that he accepts, or opens the way to accepting, the radically textual, mediated nature of the world. For Newman, what always comes first is faith, an

imagining of how the world is, a symbolic view or master narrative, within which reason operates. The liberal quaintly supposes that the world can be viewed impartially, without prejudice. We open our eyes and take a good look, and having established the facts we then go on to infer a view of the world from which we may eventually conclude that there is a God, probably. 'First comes knowledge, then a view, then reasoning, and then belief.'⁵¹ But this, for Newman, is to get matters back to front, and even if it gets us somewhere, it will never get us to that belief which is of the heart; a passion that changes lives. This is what Newman meant by the dogmatic principle. Faith is held as dogma, not against reason, but as that within which reason operates, as that embodied complex of doctrinally ruled stories, symbols and rites, which gives rise to faith as its expression. This, after all, is the labour of Newman's *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, to offer a thick, detailed description of how it is that in the manifold messiness of human life, the religious imagining of the world can take hold of mind and body, transforming us into the family of Jesus Christ.

The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description. Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us. Many a man will live and die upon a dogma: no man will be a martyr for a conclusion. ... Life is for action. If we insist on proofs for every thing, we shall never come to action: to act you must assume, and that assumption is faith.⁵²

Newman is not a fideist, if by fideism we suppose a faith that cannot give a reasonable account of itself, that cannot show how it is impelled by the mystery of the world. Rather Newman is a non-foundationalist, for whom those beliefs that are most basic to a person's imagining of the world can only be held as assumptions, and there is no one for whom this is not the case. The assumption of first beliefs – the inhabiting of the fundamental stories by which we live – is not irrational, but that which permits reason in the first place, since reason can only operate within an always prior assumption. The assumption of faith gives us a meaningful world in which we can live and reason. And it is this non-foundationalist stance, this recognition that we must always begin in the middle, that postmodernism has sought to generalise.

Unlike modernism, which fondly imagined an assumption-free zone from which to view the world, postmodern thought ventures that all points of view must first assume what they can see. Admittedly, postmodern culture secretly retains a modernist moment, that allows it to resist relativizing absolutely everything, and most particularly the

laws of consumption, whose religious observance produces an ever-burgeoning array of consumer beliefs. Postmodern dogmatic theology rejects the modernist assumption of a hegemonic non-theological reason, and, in holding to its own view of the world, it also rejects the modernist moment of consumer capitalism. Thus, unlike the retail beliefs of secular postmodernism, which must never be taken too seriously for fear that they will be banned from the market place, postmodern dogmatic theology holds only to itself, to the view that the world is creation rather than happenstance. For such a theology, the world is drenched with meanings requiring discernment rather than a Void that remains silent in the face of our entreaties. This means that a postmodern theology which imagines a God who has given us the gift of imagination – as opposed to a postmodern theology for which God is merely a comforting idol, a play-thing – is a dangerous kind of theology, which at worst will authorize our violence, and at best lead us to venture our lives upon impossible dreams. For, as Newman often reminds us, it is above all in the stories of the Christian martyrs that we see what it is to ‘live and die upon a dogma’.

- 1 For an account see Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.715-23.
- 2 Tyrrell to Wilfred Ward, 22 September 1898; quoted in Nicholas Sagovsky, *‘On God’s Side’: A Life of George Tyrrell* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p.85.
- 3 Tyrrell to Bishop Amigo of Southwark; quoted in M. D. Petre, *The Life of George Tyrrell 1884-1909* (London: Edward Arnold, 1902), pp.342; and in Sagovsky, *‘On God’s Side’*, p.228.
- 4 T. R. Wright, ‘Newman on the Bible: A Via Media to Postmodernity?’ in *Newman and the Word*, edited by Terrence Merrigan and Ian T. Ker (Louvain: Peeters Press, 2000), pp.211-49.
- 5 Wright, ‘Newman and the Bible’, pp.211-12.
- 6 John Henry Newman, ‘The Resurrection of the Body’ in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, [1834] 1997), 174-180 (p.174).
- 7 See Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God’s Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1996] 1999), pp.120-32.
- 8 Wright, ‘Newman and the Bible’, pp.248-9.
- 9 William J. Philbin, ‘*The Essay on Development*’, in *A Tribute to Newman: Essays on Aspects of His Life and Thought*, edited by Michael Tierney (Dublin: Browne and Nolan Limited, 1945), 116-43 (p.138).
- 10 Philbin, ‘*The Essay on Development*’, p.139.
- 11 Not, I think, ‘neo-orthodox’, as Wright suggests (‘Newman and the Bible’, p.222), since that might be thought to indicate a connection with the Reformed neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth. See further *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999).

- 12 According to John Milbank, William Warburton (1698-1779) had already outlined all the 'analyses of Feuerbach, Marx and Freud concerning such phenomena as projection, displacement, alienation, reification and class conflict'. See John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p.59. A more famous progenitor is of course David Hume (1711-1776) and his *Natural History of Religion* (1757).
- 13 John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, edited by Martin J. Svaglic (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [2nd ed. 1865] 1967), p.54.
- 14 Newman, *Apologia*, p.234.
- 15 Wilfred Ward, *The Life and Times of Cardinal Wiseman*, 2 vols (London, 1897), II, p.581; quoted in Sagovsky, 'On God's Side', p.83.
- 16 See John Henry Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* (1875): 'If I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts (which indeed does not seem quite the thing) I shall drink – to the Pope if you please – still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards.'
- 17 See Sagovsky, 'On God's Side', p.176.
- 18 George Tyrrell, 'The Mind of the Church', *The Month*, 96 (1900): 125-42; see Sagovsky, 'On God's Side', pp.110-115.
- 19 See Désiré Joseph Mercier, 'Lettre Pastorale et Mandement et Carême' (1908), translated in George Tyrrell, *Medievalism: A Reply to Cardinal Mercier* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1908), 1-21 (pp.7-9).
- 20 John Henry Newman, 'Religious Faith Rational' in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, 123-30 (p.125).
- 21 In this and the following section I, like Newman in *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (ch.4 sec.3), partly quote from one of my earlier works, where an extended discussion of postmodernism and postmodern theology can be found. See Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, pp.3-26, 29-33. See also Gerard Loughlin, 'The Basis and Authority of Doctrine', in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, edited by Colin Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.41-64.
- 22 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, [1979] 1984).
- 23 See Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).
- 24 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, second edition (London: Duckworth, [1981] 1985).
- 25 Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Cambridge: James Clark & Co, 1988).
- 26 Terry Eagleton, 'Discourse and Discos: Theory in the Space between Culture and Capitalism', *The Times Literary Supplement* (15 July 1994): 3-4 (p.4).
- 27 Eagleton, 'Discourse and Discos', p.4.
- 28 See Steven Spielberg's film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (USA 2001) for the dream that even love can be manufactured and mass produced.
- 29 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, [1967] 1976), p.158.

- 30 Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, p.10. See further Gavin Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).
- 31 See Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM Press, 1980) and Don Cupitt, *The Long-Legged Fly: A Theology of Language and Desire* (London: SCM Press, 1987).
- 32 Don Cupitt, *The Time Being* (London: SCM Press, 1992), p.117.
- 33 Cupitt, *Time Being*, p.64.
- 34 Arguably this is also the view of Thomas Aquinas (in *De principiis naturae*); but for Thomas, unlike Cupitt, being demands entry into language, and is this not a Kantian unknown or worse, the efflorescence of a Nietzschean void.
- 35 Cupitt, *Time Being*, p.56.
- 36 Cupitt, *What is a Story?*, (London: SCM Press, 1991), p.96.
- 37 Cupitt, *What is a Story?*, p.154.
- 38 Cupitt, *Time Being*, p.95.
- 39 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd edition, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, [1952] 1958), section 371.
- 40 H[arold] Fielding[- Hall], *The Hearts of Men* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1901), p.313.
- 41 George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London: SPCK, 1984), p.94. See also Bernard Lonergan, *De Deo Trino* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1964), partly translated by Conn O'Donovan as *The Way to Nicea* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976); and Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972), p.307.
- 42 Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, p.80.
- 43 Fielding-Hall, *Hearts*, p.313.
- 44 Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, p.118.
- 45 John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p.417.
- 46 Cupitt, *Time Being*, p.90.
- 47 Cupitt, *What is a Story?*, p.114.
- 48 See Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- 49 [John Tulloch], 'Dr Newman's Grammar of Assent', *The Edinburgh Review*, 132 (October 1870): 382-414 (p.414).
- 50 Tulloch, 'Dr Newman's Grammar of Assent', pp.391-2.
- 51 John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, edited by I. T. Ker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1870] 1985), p.65.
- 52 Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, pp.66-7.
- 53 Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, p.66