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# POSTMODERN TIMES

*A Christian Guide to Contemporary  
Thought and Culture*

Gene Edward Veith, Jr.

CROSSWAY BOOKS • WHEATON, ILLINOIS  
A DIVISION OF GOOD NEWS PUBLISHERS

E L E V E N

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## SPIRITUALITY WITHOUT TRUTH

Ever since the Enlightenment and throughout the modern age, scholars have expected religion to die out. It hasn't happened. "Modern man," it was said (this was before feminism), was incapable of believing in the supernatural.

The twentieth century opened with a theological battle between the so-called modernists and the fundamentalists. With the Scopes Trial of 1925, the media caricatured the fundamentalists, and the intellectual elite ridiculed them. The modernists seized the denominational structures of most mainline churches, including the seminaries, and emerged triumphant. Ever since, modernist theologians have been "demythologizing" the Bible in an effort to make Christianity palatable to the twentieth-century mind. They assume that "modern man" is so oriented to the scientific method and the triumph of the "secular city" that he simply cannot believe in miracles, divine revelation, and a God unseen.

Seminaries began studying the Bible, not as the authoritative Word of God, but as any other ancient document, using the historical-critical methodology of "modern scientific scholarship." This approach assumed that the miracles of the Bible did not occur and must be accounted for in nonsupernatural ways. Rather than seeing the Bible as authoritative, it held that Bible statements should be received "critically," as reflecting the culture and preoccupations of an ancient people. According to the modernist approach, what the Bible says is not necessarily true. Rather, theological liberals put their confidence in the alleged truth about

Scripture as uncovered by the Biblical critics, garbed in the infallible robes of modern scientific rationalism.

Liberals designed their theology to accommodate modern thought and culture, turning the church away from its preoccupation with an otherworldly salvation to a concern with society's tangible problems. The church's traditional concern for good works shifted into political activism designed to usher in the centrally planned utopia modernists expected. The church's traditional concern for spirituality switched to psychology, using the very same methods and assumptions of the secular "social scientists." Churches began to sponsor encounter groups, and pastors began counseling their flock to help them to "self-realization."

Now the political utopianism and the psychological naiveté of liberal theology—while still dominating most mainline seminaries—seem curiously dated. Far from appealing to modern man, the liberal churches have plummeted in membership. If the liberals were right, there is really no need for a church. If the Bible is a myth and we do not really need to be saved, as the liberals so earnestly preached, why not sleep in on Sunday mornings? Ironically, the conservative and fundamentalist churches began to grow, addressing the genuine spiritual needs that modernist churches denied.

Of course, the "modern man" the liberals tried to appeal to did not really exist. This new breed of humanity, so scientific, so rational, was a projection of modern philosophy, a myth created by a tiny number of intellectuals who wanted to attribute their own scientism and rationalism to the whole human race. Ordinary people faced their limitations and their guilt as they always have, and many of them found faith in the Word of God. The theological liberals squandered their Christian heritage in a futile attempt to gain favor with modernist intellectuals. After awhile modernism itself, with its supreme overconfidence and manifest failures, became a mockery. The fall of modernism dragged down liberal theology with it. For that, we can be eternally grateful.

The postmodern era holds promise for Bible-believing Christians. But it also holds new and different perils. Modernist heresies have floundered, but now postmodernist heresies replace them. Rationalism, having failed, is giving way to *irrationalism*—both are hostile to God's revelation, but in different ways. Modernists did not believe the Bible is true. Postmodernists have

cast out the category of truth altogether. In doing so, they have opened up a Pandora's box of New Age religions, syncretism, and moral chaos.

The fundamentalist churches could easily define themselves against the modernists—the battle lines were clearly drawn. Today the issues are more complex and more insidious. Tragically, the postmodernist mind-set is gaining a foothold *within* evangelical churches.

#### TRUTH OR DESIRE

To review, postmodernism assumes that there is no objective truth, that moral values are relative, and that reality is socially constructed by a host of diverse communities. These beliefs by no means rule out religion, as modernism tended to. But the religions and the theologies they promote are very different from both Biblical orthodoxy and modernism.

Before, in both the modern and the premodern eras, religion involved beliefs about what is real. There either is a God, or there is not. Jesus was either the incarnate Son of God, or He was just a man. Miracles happened, or they did not. Some Christians vehemently disagreed with each other: Is there such a place as Purgatory? Does Mary intercede for us in Heaven? Are some predestined to damnation? But these were disagreements over questions of fact. Today religion is not seen as a set of beliefs about what is real and what is not. Rather, religion is seen as a preference, a choice.<sup>1</sup> We believe in what we like. We believe what we want to believe.

Where there are no absolute truths, the intellect gives over to the will. Aesthetic criteria replace rational criteria. Listen to the way people today discuss religion. "I really like that church," they will say. Agreeing with that church or believing in its teaching scarcely enters into it. People discuss tenets of faith in the same terms. "I really like the Bible passage that says, 'God is love.'" Fair enough and amen. There is much to like in Christianity—God's love for us, Christ's bearing our sins, His grace and help.

But then we start hearing about what the person does *not* like. "I don't like the idea of Hell." This is certainly an appropriate response—who could possibly "like" Hell? But our natural distaste

for this horrible doctrine is surely beside the point. The issue is not whether we like it, but whether there is such a place. Reality seldom takes into account our personal preferences, even in the most trivial facets of everyday life. That there might actually be a Hell, a realm of punishment and torment that lasts forever, is a momentous concept, staggeringly important.

To determine whether or not there is such a hideous existence beyond the grave—and to find out how we can be delivered from such a fate—a Christian must turn to the source of everything that we can know about spiritual reality, the revealed Word of God. The Christian must not necessarily expect to “like” the information thus uncovered. In fact, Christians must be leery of wholly pleasant theologies void of hard edges or challenging demands. Such a faith is nothing more than wish-fulfillment and seductive fantasies.

Today even conservative and evangelical ministers seldom mention Hell. Certainly “people don’t like to hear about that,” and we do not want to scare them away. But people have never liked to hear about Hell. The difference is that today, unlike any other time in history, many people are *unwilling* to believe (as if belief were a function of the will) what they do not *enjoy* (as if aesthetic considerations determined questions of fact).

This completely different way of thinking about religion—that it is a matter not of what is true but of what one likes and what one wants—explains why the cults take in so many intelligent and well-educated people. The Church of Scientology, for example, teaches that aliens from outer space entered our universe millions of years ago and fought a galactic war. These aliens affected us in our past lives. We can solve our problems by hooking up to an electronic box and by being counseled by a Scientologist (at great expense), who will remove the negative “engrams” accumulated in our past lives. Thus we become “clear” spiritual beings.

People who think of themselves as too sophisticated to believe in the Gospel of John can believe in this? Scientology, in fact, especially attracts affluent business executives, successful movie stars, and well-educated young professionals. For all of its scientific rhetoric, scientology makes no pretense of giving real evidence for the existence of these space aliens and previous lives. Scientologists may reject the possibility of revelation from God, but be quite willing to accept revelation from founder L. Ron Hubbard.

But postmodern religions do not require evidence or plausibility. Hubbard was originally a successful science fiction novelist. Many people tremendously enjoy the aliens and galactic conflicts that are the staple of science fiction. Would it not be even better if these were real? The doctrines of scientology are fascinating, imaginatively stimulating, even entertaining. Why not choose to believe them?

Talk to a member of any cult, and notice how the person describes and evaluates its teachings in completely subjective and pleasure-oriented terms: “The Maharishi is really *cool*.” “Transcendental Meditation gives me a natural high.” “The Reverend Moon makes me feel good about myself.” Liking something and wanting it to be true are the only criteria for their beliefs.

A Christian would explain these cults’ popularity in more depth by saying that their followers have been ensnared by Satan. We need to realize that Satan seduces us by appealing to our *desires*. Satan lures us by promising precisely what we like and what we want. (Of course, by demonic irony, what he actually gives is what we do *not* like and what we do *not* want, namely, Hell.) In light of “the desires of the sinful nature” (Romans 13:14), we dare not make the satisfaction of our desires our prime spiritual authority.

#### MORALITY OR DESIRE

For postmodernists, morality, like religion, is a matter of desire. What I want and what I choose is not only true (for me) but right (for me). That different people want and choose different things means that truth and morality are relative, but “I have a right” to my desires. Conversely, “no one has the right” to criticize my desires and my choices.

Although postmodernists tend to reject traditional morality, they can still be very moralistic. They will defend their “rights” to do what they want with puritanical zeal. Furthermore, they seem to feel that they have a right not to be criticized for what they are doing. They want not only license but approval.

Thus tolerance becomes the cardinal virtue. Under the postmodernist way of thinking, the principle of cultural diversity means that every like-minded group constitutes a culture that must be considered as good as any other culture. The postmodernist sins are

"being judgmental," "being narrow-minded," "thinking that you have the only truth," and "trying to enforce your values on anyone else." Those who question the postmodernist dogma that "there are no absolutes" are excluded from the canons of tolerance. The only wrong idea is to believe in truth; the only sin is to believe in sin.

The morality of desire has wreaked havoc with sexuality. The birth control pill divorced sex from procreation. Soon sex was detached from marriage. Men and women now routinely live together without being married. Women who want to have a child now do so without bothering about having a husband. The sexual revolution devastated the family. Society now sees the fulfillment of sexual desires as a right which no one can criticize.

Now the AIDS plague, in which the immune system turns against the body and destroys it, challenges sexual permissiveness. AIDS is an imminently postmodern disease, not only as a sort of macabre self-deconstruction, but because it is caused by the legacy of the '60s—the sexual revolution, gay rights, and drug abuse. While many are turning back to sexual morality, others are fleeing from AIDS into brands of sex not only detached from the family but from human beings altogether. Pornography, phone sex, and ultimately the technological promise of "virtual sex"—in which people will be able to strap themselves into a body condom and plug into a 3-D sexual fantasy<sup>2</sup>—threaten the ultimate dehumanization of sexuality. Despite all consequences, people cling tenaciously to the ethic of desire.

Postmodernist morality has a curious tenet—the concept of collective responsibility and collective guilt. As the group-oriented ideology minimizes the individual, it also minimizes personal responsibility. If the culture shapes the individual, then the culture must be responsible for what individuals do. As a result, blame falls on the culture rather than on individuals. Moral status is determined not by one's actions, but by one's membership in a group. A young white male is thus encouraged to feel collective guilt for the way white people have mistreated "people of color" through the centuries and for the way men have historically oppressed women. He may have never owned slaves, massacred Indians, or abused women, yet he should feel guilty for what his ancestors did. To atone for this guilt, he may plunge into liberal or radical politics. In the meantime, government and businesses set up affirmative

action programs to redress "historical injustices," compensating the victims of the past by rewarding their descendants, who themselves may not have suffered any injustice.

Of course, even the concept of collective guilt assumes the existence of objective moral standards. Calls for "justice" imply a standard of right and wrong, of people getting what they deserve. C. S. Lewis points out that even people who deny the existence of right and wrong react in ways that belie that belief when someone takes their seat on the bus or treats them unfairly.<sup>3</sup>

Honest postmodernists themselves recognize the dilemma of advocating "justice" while denying that moral absolutes exist. Steven Connor warns against

underestimating the effect of the postmodern abandonment of the universal horizon of value and morality. It will not do simply to assume the continuation of values and morality, in the hope that these will naturally persist among postmodern persons of good will who will automatically agree about what value and morality are.<sup>4</sup>

He points out the contradiction of postmodernists denying moral certainty in the West while championing moral struggles in the Third World. Such inconsistency, he says, asserts "the cultural relativity of certain values, and does not cope with the a priori denial of the possibility of any universal value."<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, when inspected closely, it becomes apparent that the postmodern critique of unjust and oppressive systems of universality implicitly depends for its force upon the assumptions of the universal right of all not to be treated unjustly and oppressively.<sup>6</sup>

Connor does not resolve this dilemma; he ends his book on postmodernism by calling for the forging of "new and more inclusive forms of ethical collectivity," "the creation of a common frame of assent."<sup>7</sup> But to do so would be to abandon the very assumptions of postmodernism.

The only consistent position for postmodernists is that all talk of morality, *including their own*, only masks the will to power.

Calls for justice, liberation, and the end to oppression can only be rhetorical devices. Groups that lack power must seize it by any means and use it against their oppressors. That the latter will now be victims of oppression is only fitting. The naked exercise of power, unrestrained by moral limits, is a formula first for terrorism and then for totalitarianism.

On both the political and the individual level, the ethics of desire amounts to *the will* (what I choose) to *power* (what I want). Politically, the ethics of desire means ruthless power struggles between competing groups. In the United States, this manifests itself in feminists seeking to imprison pro-life demonstrators, gay activists disrupting church services, the “Borking” of conservative candidates, and overt terrorism. In the former Soviet Empire, it manifests itself in civil war and ethnic cleansing. For individuals, the ethics of desire means selfishness, promiscuity, and moral abandon. “I must have the power to do what I want, and you do not have the power to stop me.”

Without a moral framework, society disintegrates into warring factions and isolated depraved individuals. The result is a replay of the violence, perversion, and anarchy described in the book of Judges, which at once diagnoses the moral collapse of ancient Palestine and precisely defines postmodernist ethical theory: “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25 NKJV).

### THE NEW RELIGIONS

Whereas modernism sought to rid the world of religion, postmodernism spawns new ones. Unconstrained by objectivity, tradition, reason, or morality, these new faiths differ radically from Christianity. They draw on strains of the most ancient and primitive paganism.

Even the deconstructionists speak in mystical terms. They have been compared to the medieval practitioners of “negative theology” who refused to say what God is, maintaining that they could only say what God is *not*. More precisely, they are like the monks of Zen Buddhism who undercut rationality itself, obliterating all distinctions to achieve the enlightenment of Nirvana, the state of cosmic nothingness. The deconstructionists dissolve every

positive statement, every rational argument, every truth claim—destroying form, they say, so as to open up what lies beyond the possibilities of representation. What lies beyond the final eclipse of absolutes will be beyond our imagining, conditioned as we are by rationalist categories. The inadequacies of language will be left behind, and the alienation of the isolated individual supposedly will be healed in a mystical reconciliation of nature, psychology, and culture.<sup>8</sup> (Postmodernists naively assume the best, lacking the doctrine of original sin, which would predict that destroying all form would release horrific evil.)

Postmodernism, in its rejection of objective truth, has clear affinities with Hinduism and Buddhism, which teach that the external world is only an illusion spun by the human mind. The Eastern religions also provide the basis for more popular brands of spirituality. As the postmodernist Walter Truett Anderson points out:

The rush of postmodern reaction from the old certainties has swept some people headlong into a worldview even more radical than that of the constructivists. Many voices can now be heard declaring that what is out there is only what we *put* out there. More precisely, what *I* put there—just little me, euphorically creating my own universe. We used to call this solipsism; now we call it New Age spirituality.<sup>9</sup>

New Age religions, for all of their pagan trappings, have in common the idea that the self is divine, that *you* are God, the creator of your own universe. As old as the Serpent’s lie to Eve (Genesis 3:5), this idea now finds its way into self-help books, motivational tracts, and pop psychology (“You create your own reality”).

The New Age movement, like postmodernism, exists in bewildering diversity, yet with common themes. New Age gurus may be “channelers” of ancient Egyptian warriors or extraterrestrial life forms. They may teach the beneficent powers of crystals or promote herbal medicine. They may do pseudoscientific research into extrasensory perception, or they may put on robes to practice Tibetan meditation. They may throw the *I Ching*, or they may practice witchcraft. For all of their differences, they will all assert the dogma that the self is god, that the objective universe is an illusion, and that truth is relative.

The New Age religions are, of course, little more than a revival of the old paganism. Behind the craze for horoscopes, E.S.P., and channeling lurks old-fashioned divination, magic, and demon possession. With the eclipse of Christianity, primitive nature religions come creeping back in all of their superstition and barbarism. These are, of course, adjusted to the contemporary imagination. Feminists, in reacting against "patriarchal" religions such as Christianity, try to restore goddess-worship. Environmentalists stress how the whole planet constitutes a single interdependent ecosystem. It is as if we are all individual cells of a larger organism, a living being long worshiped as Mother Earth, the goddess Gaia.

The pagan faiths, at least in their modern reincarnations, are morally permissive. Computer hackers, the cyberpunks, cultivate what they call "techno-erotic paganism," using their modems to enter the electronic realm of "cyberspace." Here on their interconnected computer screens, they attain a sort of global communion that enables them both to carry on quasi-theological conversations and to tap into pornographic E-mail.<sup>10</sup> The new religions are often tied to moral rebellion. The revival of goddess worship may relate to homosexuality as well as to feminism. Scholars have shown how in ancient times homosexuality was associated with goddess worship.<sup>11</sup> Many ancient religions also practiced infanticide. Whether or not abortion is a form of Molech worship, its acceptance signals a profound shift away from the presuppositions of a transcendent ethical religion back to a darker, more barbaric ethical consciousness.

The next major new religion, however, will probably not be one of the old forms of overt paganism, but rather a syncretic hybrid. In a postmodernist and increasingly consumer-centered world in which truth is relative, people will pick and choose various aspects of the different faiths according to what they "like." George Barna predicts that "left to their own devices, adults will be less impressed by, and less accepting of, Christianity's most basic and important beliefs. Instead, as adults continue their search for truth and purpose, they will become syncretistic."

As elements of Eastern religions become more prolific, the most appealing aspects of Christianity (which will be the lifestyle elements, rather than the central spiritual tenets) will be

wed to the exotic and fascinating attributes of Eastern faiths. The result will be a people who honestly believe that they have improved Christianity, and who would even consider themselves to be Christian, despite their creative restructuring of faith.<sup>12</sup>

Barna goes on to observe that "those who feared the takeover of communism railed against the dangers of America becoming a godless nation. They need not fear: we will become just the opposite, a nation filled with many gods."<sup>13</sup>

Biblical Christians will find themselves in exactly the position of the ancient Israelites and the early church—having to hold on to their faith in the midst of hostile pagan neighbors. They will also face the same temptations. Many of the Israelites fell into syncretism, going so far as to erect pagan altars in the Temple of the one true God. Many in the early church fell into heresy as they attempted to combine Christianity with Gnostic philosophy and Manichean mystery cults. The pressure to follow the practices, values, and beliefs of pagan neighbors has always been intense. But God's Word is clear:

Be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, "How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same." You must not worship the LORD your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods. See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it. (Deuteronomy 12:30-32)

#### SOCIETY'S OPTIONS

Can a society exist for long without a moral and religious consensus? Societies divided against themselves into fragmented and warring factions, lacking any cohesive frame of reference, are by definition unstable. Societies that fly apart eventually reassemble themselves in a different way. Presently, in this postmodernist moment, we are in the demolition phase, when not only traditional values but modern values are being taken apart. What comes next,

when the pieces of society are put together again into a new design, remains to be seen. There are, however, signs of new kinds of secularized religions that herald new kinds of societies.

Sir Arnold Toynbee, in his magisterial analyses of world civilizations, has argued that successful societies have some sort of religious consensus. When this consensus is lost, new objects of worship will rush in to fill the spiritual vacuum. According to Toynbee, when a society loses its transcendent faith, it turns to three alternatives, which he frankly terms "idolatries": nationalism, ecumenicalism, and technicalism.

Under the first option, nationalism, a transcendent universal faith gives way to the "deified parochial community."<sup>14</sup> In this model, each little group considers itself to be divine. The particular culture or subculture idolizes itself. The community becomes the source of moral values, which extend only to members of that community. Outsiders are enemies, to whom moral considerations do not apply. Toynbee shows how this happened with ancient Athens and Sparta, in the rise of Renaissance nationalism after the medieval consensus collapsed, and in the fascism of Mussolini and the National Socialism of Hitler.<sup>15</sup>

Toynbee's model is startlingly prophetic of postmodernism and postmodernist society. When Eastern Europe lost its Marxist consensus, new nationalisms emerged—"deified parochial communities" that are at each other's throats. The loss of a democratic consensus in the United States has led to racial politics, militant interest groups, and subcultures that simmer with hostility towards each other.

Another option to the loss of a transcendent religious consensus is the "deified ecumenical empire."<sup>16</sup> This model idolizes unity while still accommodating great diversity. When Rome lost its localized ancestral religion and turned into a vast empire, it instituted emperor worship. The empire itself, in the person of its ruler, became a god. Rome insisted that everyone under its rule burn incense and offer prayer to Caesar. Under this one condition, Rome could tolerate people of all religions. But Christians claimed that there was only one true faith and refused to worship the emperor. Consequently, the Romans excluded them from this pluralistic society and put them to death. Otherwise, the society held together by deifying itself. The divinized Roman empire was "ecumenical,"

that is, worldwide. Religions seek to be universal in scope. Rome advanced its faith by conquering everyone in sight, bringing everyone into the fold with evangelistic (and murderous) zeal, uniting the whole known world.

Ancient Rome was not the only society to try to forge an idolized ecumenical community. Toynbee sees a similar pattern in ancient Egypt, Sumeria, Persia, and more recently in the Ottoman Empire, the Imperial Dynasties of China, and even the trappings of the worldwide British Empire.<sup>17</sup> He also sees a resurgence of ecumenism in his own time (the years after World War II) with the high hopes being invested in the United Nations and the utopian schemes for a single world government.

"Unity," of course, is a modernist value. The ecumenical idolatry may be a function of late modernism, a response to the lack of religious consensus that began with the Enlightenment and reached its peak in the twentieth century. Modernist theologians led the way with their appropriately termed "ecumenical movement," an attempt to unite all churches by obliterating their distinct beliefs. Many churches jettisoned orthodoxy in favor of vague sentiments and left-wing one-world politics.

The concern for "unity" may be a modernist value, but it remains a postmodernist option. The ecumenical movement, having failed to unify all Christian churches, now works to unite all world religions, which again means obliterating their distinct beliefs in favor of a new faith alien to them all. These theologians embrace the postmodernist principle of relativism while trying to formulate a more or less arbitrary framework for embracing all cultures and religions. This may be a harbinger of what is to come. Certainly, the value of "tolerance" above all, as Toynbee shows, is a defining characteristic of ecumenical communities.<sup>18</sup> So is intolerance for those, such as Christians, who dissent.

Despite the postmodernist preference for diversity, environmentalists, New Age theologians, business gurus, rock stars, and other champions of the new consciousness are speaking again of "global unity." (We are all dependent on a single ecosystem. We are all cells in "Gaia," the single global organism that constitutes the earth. American businesses are part of an interdependent global economy. We are the world.) The term "globalization," in fact, may be the new buzz word for this emerging postmodernist ecumeni-

calism. The word suggests both cultural relativism and an overarching though ill-defined global unity.

The worship of unity inevitably results, says Toynbee, in a loss of liberty. Individuality, by definition, must be suppressed if there is to be unity. Yet the prospect of a unified society taking upon itself all of the attributes and responsibilities of the gods—defining our values and taking care of all of our needs—remains attractive. Toynbee saw the modern welfare state as a particular example of the deified community. The state poses as the ultimate provider of food, jobs, health, and everything else its people need, with its citizens trading their freedom for security. Toynbee wrote in the 1950s, “It looks as if the ecumenical welfare state may be the next idol that will be erected in a still discarded Christianity’s place.”<sup>19</sup>

This vision of an omni-benevolent and omnipotent state still allures many in the West (particularly in America, which has not yet fully implemented the welfare state so as to experience its failures). Nevertheless, the colossal collapse of Soviet communism, the ultimate welfare state, the most flagrant deified ecumenical empire, may render this option obsolete.

The third alternative to a transcendent religious faith, according to Toynbee, is the “idolization of the invincible technician.”<sup>20</sup> He traces how technology developed to the point of taking on the functions of a religion. The divine attributes of omniscience and omnipotence were ascribed to technology.

Certainly, science as such defines the modern, not the postmodern world. But Toynbee is concerned not so much with the impact of scientific knowledge as with the ascendancy of technique, with the mastery of nature and with a lifestyle made possible by machines. Postmodernist anti-intellectualism may well slow the pursuit of scientific knowledge, but the appetite for television, computers, and as yet unimagined electronic technology will be insatiable. The technicians who invent these products will form a new priesthood with knowledge inaccessible to the laity—to whom the technology will be as incomprehensible as magic. The masses may be totally uninterested in objective science, but they will build their lives and their values around technology.

Toynbee seems to have predicted what Neil Postman now describes as taking place throughout contemporary society—the advent of “technopoly,” a condition in which technology acquires

a monopoly over all of culture. Technology’s preoccupation with process over content, Postman argues, results in moral and spiritual confusion and alters our whole capacity for thought. “Abetted by a form of education that in itself has been emptied of any coherent worldview,” he writes, “technopoly deprives us of the social, political, historical, metaphysical, logical, or spiritual basis for knowing what is beyond belief.”<sup>21</sup>

Technology, needing constant revision to be “up to date,” is inherently opposed to tradition.<sup>22</sup> This is appropriate in the sphere of technology. A brand-new computer is likely to be better than an old one. But what is valid in one realm is not necessarily valid in others. Though traditions in all cultures have always served an important social function (such as to preserve moral values and create stable families), technology trashes them all. In the Middle Ages, scholastic theology inappropriately applied its methodology to realms outside its ken, such as science. Today the reverse has happened. People apply the technological mind-set to everything, including theology and ethics.

Whereas modern society was aggressively secular, postmodern society assigns religious functions to itself. Postmodernists reduce theological, moral, and human mysteries to matters of technical expertise. Postman shows how technical experts have become the new priests:

In *Technopoly*, all experts are invested with the charisma of priestliness. Some of our priest-experts are called psychiatrists, some psychologists, some sociologists, some statisticians. The god they serve does not speak of righteousness or goodness or mercy or grace. Their god speaks of efficiency, precision, objectivity. And that is why such concepts as sin and evil disappear in *Technopoly*. They come from a moral universe that is irrelevant to the theology of expertise. And so the priests of *Technopoly* call sin “social deviance,” which is a statistical concept, and they call evil “psychopathology,” which is a medical concept. Sin and evil disappear because they cannot be measured and objectified, and therefore cannot be dealt with by experts.<sup>23</sup>

People, feelings, ideas, values all must be *quantified*. The technological mind-set must reduce everything to numbers. We are in the age of statistics—opinion polls, standardized tests, and “assessment instruments” which purport to measure everything from the quality of our work to our psychological condition. We evaluate not in terms of right and wrong, but by circling a number on a ten-point scale.

Traditional symbols, such as those of religion, are not repudiated; rather, they are trivialized.<sup>24</sup> Statistics reduce beliefs to opinions and moral standards to personal preferences. Technological reproduction and ceaseless visual representation work against any concept of mystery or the sacred. The Biblical concept of holiness means literally “set apart”; technology brings everything into view—sex, suffering, personality, the inner life—rendering everything profane, which means literally “common.”

It is no accident that the electronic media love to portray sex, which was once kept secret and private, and violence, which was once hidden as being too horrible. The new visual media will portray everything that can be seen. What cannot be seen—God, faith, goodness, spirituality—is outside its ken and will be ignored. If not ignored, spiritual reality will be visualized in terms of the new media, and thus trivialized. When God is to be treated in a movie, He will be played by George Burns, and the movie will be a comedy. Religious images still have a powerful emotional resonance, but they will be employed without reference to their meaning. The latest sex symbol calls herself Madonna, the title of the Virgin Mary. She flaunts a crucifix as part of her sexy wardrobe and makes a steamy video in which a statue of a saint comes alive, and they have sex in a church. The media repeats profanity and blasphemy so often that after awhile it no longer shocks. The public gets used to it, whereupon, as Postman says, the symbols are drained of their significance.<sup>25</sup>

In a technopoly people “make no moral decisions, only practical ones.”<sup>26</sup> Because they lack transcendent notions of good and evil, they fall back on the only standard they have, that of technology: What *works*? People reduce the value-of-human-life issue to a question of health care costs. They justify killing the sick, the handicapped, and children in the womb in quantifiable economic terms—polls show that a majority of people would not want to be

kept alive on a machine; euthanasia would keep hospital costs down; abortion would help trim the welfare rolls. People turn to “experts” to resolve their ethical dilemmas, entrusting end-of-life decisions to hospital ethics boards. Many who wish to commit suicide want a doctor’s supervision, enlisting the counsel, support, and aid of someone such as Dr. Kevorkian, a new kind of priest who administers a different kind of last rites.

We are currently in the midst of a profound transition, away from the premodern and the modern into uncharted waters. Whether the new world disorder will move in the direction of “deified parochial communities,” “a deified ecumenical empire,” or “the idolization of the invincible technician” is not clear. Currently, we see signs of all three—of fierce group identity, globalized schemes for enforced unity, and an unfettered technopoly. There is, of course, one more option—recovering transcendent faith.

Toynbee approvingly quotes a letter he received from Edwyn Bevan, who recognizes the connection between anarchy and tyranny. Bevan’s bleak forecast of the world’s future carries with it one specific ray of hope:

Anarchy is essentially weak, and in an anarchic world any firmly organized group with rational organisation and scientific knowledge could spread its dominion over the rest. And, as an alternative to anarchy, the world would welcome the despotic state. . . . But there is the Christian Church . . . a factor to be reckoned with. It may have to undergo martyrdom in the future world-state, but as it compelled the Roman world-state in the end to make at any rate formal submission to Christ, it might again, by the way of martyrdom, conquer the . . . world-state of the future.<sup>27</sup>