2 Anglo-American postmodernity: a theology of communal practice

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WHY WOULD ANYONE WANT TO THINK THAT?

We take Nicholas Lash, formerly Professor of Divinity at Cambridge University, as our first exemplar of postmodern theology in the Anglo-American tradition. Lash makes several claims that may strike the (modern) reader as strange. For one, he criticizes accounts of religious experience that assume such experience, at least in its richest and purest forms, to be experience of God. In contrast, he says, “on the account that I shall offer, our experience of God is by no means necessarily ‘religious’ in character nor, from the fact that a particular type of experience is appropriately characterized as ‘religious,’ may it be inferred that it is, in any special or privileged sense, experience of God.”  

What is it, then, to know God? The word “God” is descriptive and not a proper name, and to believe in God is to believe that “there is something or other which has divine attributes.” The important question, then, is not whether God exists, but how to speak of God without becoming inane. All attempts to speak about God express the speakers’ deepest convictions about the character and outcome of that transformative (creative and redemptive) process in which they and others are engaged.  

The outcome of this process will define what it is to be human. Thus, Lash says, “human persons are not what we initially, privately, and ‘inwardly’ are, but what we may (perhaps) together hope and struggle to become.”

So we are not persons yet, experience of God is not “religious” experience, and the question of God’s existence is inappropriate. We have intentionally focused here on several of Lash’s more surprising claims. To see why he would want to make them will require a narrative involving modern philosophy, its effects on modern theology, and a critique of that modern way of thinking that Lash describes as not merely a mistaken philosophy but “a pathological deformation, a personal and cultural disease.”

CONSTRUCTING THE CARTESIAN THEATER

Rene Descartes (1596–1650) is called the father of modern philosophy and, as often happens to fathers when their children seek independence, is now blamed for most of the ills of modernity. We invoke Descartes’s name often, but with the caveat that what matters most about Descartes’s thought is that aspects of that his followers found reason to adopt and develop.

Descartes is well known for his method of doubt; to question everything he had been taught and then attempt to reconstruct his world-view on the basis of any ideas found to be indubitable. Chief among these indubitable was the fact of his own thinking. Descartes’s method was the beginnings of modern foundationalist epistemology. We focus here, instead, on Descartes’s image of human nature. Descartes described himself as a thinking thing, distinct from and somehow “within” his body. Thinking is a process of focusing the mind’s eye; but focusing on what? On ideas in his mind. Thus there arose the image of the “Cartesian theater”: the real “I” is an observer “in” the mind, looking at mental representations of what is outside. Throughout his epistemological writings Descartes focused on the solitary knower: “I am here quite alone”; “I stayed all day shut up in a stove-heated room where I was completely free to converse with myself about my own thoughts.”

Stephen Toulmin and others provide a plausible account of why Descartes’s quest for absolutely certain foundations seemed so important in his historical location: social and political life could no longer be based on the authorities of the past because these authorities’ divergent claims had led Europe into the chaos of the Thirty Years War. The desire to find rational agreement beyond the bounds of religious and political parties led to a quest for knowledge that was general and timeless rather than local and timely – in other words, to the quest for universal theory.

If we look not to politics but to science and the Catholic spiritual tradition we gain insight into the appeal of the image of the “Cartesian ego, sitting inside the skull and wondering whether it can make reliable contact with the world ‘outside’ the mind.” Descartes was undoubtedly familiar with

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3 Lash, *Easter in Ordinary*, p. 89.

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7 Lash’s characterization, *Easter in Ordinary*, p. 64.
Augustine's musings on "the roomy chambers" of his memory where images and ideas are stored, and with Augustine's description of thinking as among "the things I do within, in that vast chamber." But the physics and optics of Descartes's day made contact with anything outside the "chamber" seem problematic. The new "corpuscular" physics made it appear that all knowledge of the "outside world" needed to be transmitted by particles striking sensory surfaces, from which coded information could be sent to the brain and thence to the mind. This picture set Descartes up for a pernicious sort of skepticism: how to know that this transmission process was reliable, or, more generally, how to know that any ideas in the theater accurately represented the outside world - if, indeed, there were an outside world. Wallace Matson describes this approach to philosophy as "inside-out," in contrast to outside-in philosophies, which begin with an account of the world and at the end explain the human mind and its knowledge in the terms of that account.

Many of the prominent features of modern thought can be explained as consequences of this inside-out approach to philosophy. It explains the skepticism regarding sensory knowledge that preoccupied early modern philosophers. Descartes solved this problem by arguing that a good God would not allow him to be entirely deceived by his senses. It also explains the persistence of the "problem of other minds" - how do I know that there is an "I" inside other human bodies, that they are not mere robots? And if the very existence of other consciousnesses has been one of the intractable problems of modern philosophy, it is easy to see why Descartes and his followers would want an account of knowledge relying only on what the solitary individual can know for him- or herself. Thus, modernity has been a period preoccupied by anxiety about knowledge: how can I ever know that any of the contents of my mind actually represent the world outside? This thoroughgoing skepticism in all realms of knowledge is the ill that foundationalism in all its forms was intended to cure. Philosophy's job became, in the modern era, not the systematizing of all knowledge - about the natural world, human life and well-being, God - but rather the discipline whose job it was to assure that any sort of knowledge was possible by providing the foundations of science and ethics, as well as the prolegomena to theology.

The modern concern with language and with the problem of whether and how language refers to reality can be seen as another consequence of the image of the Cartesian theater. Richard Rorty describes Descartes's predicament as living behind the "veil of ideas." But, if ideas represent reality, and words represent ideas, the question naturally arises whether words represent reality. Thus, when philosophers' attention shifts in the twentieth century from psychology to language (from ideas to words) the problem of the veil of ideas becomes the problem of the veil of language. Is there a real world to which our language refers (or to which our conceptual scheme corresponds) and is language transparent or opaque? Thus, modern philosophy of language has been preoccupied with questions of reference and representation: words get their meaning from the things in the world to which they refer, but how does reference happen? Postmodern thinkers of the sort represented here are content with the question: "Which description of reality is best?" But modern thinkers characteristically ask, "Look, we have descriptions; now, is there anything to which they correspond?" Their answers have produced a variety of realisms and anti-realisms. For example, in light of Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) absolute distinction between things-as-they-appear (phenomena) and things-as-they-are-in-themselves (noumena), the frustration of not even being able to say that noumenal reality must resemble phenomena drove some to idealism (the view that all reality is mental). Twentieth-century positivist philosophers of science proposed an instrumentalist (as opposed to realist) view of scientific theories to avoid the question of how those theories represent the reality they (seemed to) postulate. Current versions of scientific realism argue that the practical success of science shows that its theoretical terms (such as "electron") do in fact refer to objects in the real world and that well-established theories provide approximate descriptions of the way things are.

The most common form of anti-realism today (still indebted to Kant) is what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls "interpretation-universalism": experience is always-already conceptualized. To peel away this interpretation from experience would not be to get at the pure given but to lose the only given we have - the interpreted given. "Prisoners, all of us, within the house of interpretation." But the supposition of a ready-made, structured world waiting to be interpreted may not even be intelligible - any attempt to think such a world is already an interpretation of it. So, better to conclude that things exist and are the way they are only relative to conceptual schemes.12

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8 Augustine, Confessions, book 10, chaps. 8-11.
It is important to see that both realisms and anti-realisms are attempting to answer the same knowledge question, namely: “Can we know whether our concepts correspond with reality?” In the case of anti-realism (here “interpretation-universalism”), the answer is “it is interpretation all the way down.”

**MODERN THEOLOGY IN THE CARTESIAN THEATER**

Historian Claude Welch writes that “at the beginning of the nineteenth century the theological problem was, simply, ‘How is theology possible?’ This was a question of both rationale and method, and included, at least implicitly, the question whether theology is possible at all.”13 In this section we consider the role of Descartes’s legacy in raising the question of the very possibility of theology. This will serve as background for recognizing recent developments in both theology and philosophy that move decisively beyond modern dilemmas.

Cartesian anxiety led to a quest for foundations for all academic disciplines. In theology it manifested itself in the development of *theological prolegomena* – attempts to answer the question how theology is possible, and especially how it can be shown to be universally valid. Earlier these endeavors were described as fundamental or philosophical or (most revealingly) foundational theology. Today, with foundationalism in disrepute, the same goal is pursued as “public theology.”

If generalized epistemological anxiety is not sufficient to account for questioning the entire theological enterprise, we find further insights in the image of the Cartesian theater. Descartes’s own approach to the problem of God set the stage for the majority who followed. Descartes cast about within his mind and found the idea of God. By means of complicated arguments (drawing on the scholastic philosophical resources he meant to leave behind) he managed to prove to his own satisfaction that his idea of God could only have been caused by a real God distinct from himself, and thus God exists.14

Yet Karl Barth has argued that this Cartesian “turn to the subject” has been fatal to theology: whenever Christianity is founded on human religious experience (as Friedrich Schleiermacher [1768–1834], the father of modern liberal theology, set out to do), the question will arise whether religion is a purely human phenomenon and thus God a mere projection (so Ludwig Feuerbach [1804–72]).15 This argument has been summarized in the slogan

that “a Schleiermacher will lead inevitably to a Feuerbach.” We might rather say that an inside-out approach to theology will lead inevitably to religious skepticism.

But why turn to religious experience to support the theological structure? Because more traditional approaches faced comparable problems: historical-critical methods applied to the scriptural texts led to an image of the text as a veil of words. Hans Frei noted that, for moderns, the referent of the biblical texts came to be seen as the history lying behind the texts, and scholars thereafter argued over the extent to which the texts reveal or conceal what one needs to know in order to provide a foundation for theology (see chapter 3 below). Theologians of the fundamentalist movement solved the problem by positing an act of God: the Holy Spirit guarantees the inerrancy of the texts and their accurate representation of what lies behind them (just as, for Descartes, God had guaranteed accurate sensory representation of the external world).

Against this historical background we can see the significance of Lash’s opposition not merely to the common notion that God is experienced by turning inward but, in Lash’s words, to the entire “philosophical temper which finds it necessary and unproblematic to draw a global or metaphysical distinction between ‘objective’ facts... and ‘subjective’ beliefs, impressions or attitudes.”16 With these words Lash echoes the most formidable opponent of the Cartesian theater: Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951).

**SHOWING THE FLY THE WAY OUT OF THE BOTTLE**

Wittgenstein thought that Descartes’s bifurcation of subject and object was particularly baneful philosophical confusion: “The idea of thinking as a process in the head, in a completely enclosed space, makes thinking something occult.”17 One of the most dangerous ideas for a philosopher is, oddly enough, that we think with our heads or in our heads.18 In order to counter such enchantments, he developed a therapeutic method of philosophy that attended to the “grammar” of ordinary language. In other words, Wittgenstein concerned himself with the patterns of ordinary language use within a given social matrix. This strategy undermines the very way the skeptic sets up the knowledge problem as one of ascertaining the correspondence between an individual’s concepts and brute reality “out there.”

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14 *Meditations on First Philosophy*, third meditation.
Attending to the grammar of concepts—that is, to the linguistic practice of ordinary speakers (and here the plurality of “speakers” in every case is of utmost importance and yet all too frequently overlooked)—can prevent seeds of bafflement from taking root. At this point we might be tempted to ask whether Wittgenstein is not simply a behaviorist in disguise: “Aren’t you at bottom really saying that everything except human behavior is a fiction?” Wittgenstein replied tersely to this question: “If I do speak of a fiction, then it is of a grammatical fiction.” His point is this: behaviorism looks at stimulus–response conditioning operating on the individual, whereas grammatical analysis comes to a full stop at the givenness of the whole hurly-burly of our social–linguistic world. In other words, what is real for humans is shown by the way human beings—in the plural—speak with one another. To pronounce upon matters that lie beyond the boundaries of language use can only breed confusion.

What troubled Wittgenstein was the pervasiveness of the urge to overcome the putative problem of skepticism by attempting to specify the correspondence between one’s ideas “in here” and the world “out there.” Kant dealt with the problem by making a sharp distinction between things-as-they-appear-to-us and (unknowable) things-as-they-are-in-themselves. While Kant himself thought that the mind that structured the phenomenal world was transculturally uniform, his work left open the possibility that persons or groups might operate with radically different cognitive frameworks—a possibility that only augmented skepticism. But Wittgenstein pressed Kant in a different direction. Crudely put, language played the part for Wittgenstein that the categorial framework played for Kant. And his careful exegesis of the hurly-burly of everyday speaking enabled Wittgenstein to untangle Cartesian skepticism. To recap, the problem for thinkers from Descartes onward has been knowing whether one’s ideas corresponded with reality. Staring at my hand, I can wonder, “I don’t know if this is a hand.” But Wittgenstein can reply: “But do you know what the word ‘hand’ means? And don’t say ‘I know what it means now for me.’ And isn’t it an empirical fact—that this word is used like this?”

Wittgenstein’s celebrated demonstration of the impossibility of private language means that doubt can only go as deep as one’s fluency in his or her native tongue. Moreover, one can never get a purchase on language to analyze it in general, for every description is done by means of language. Wittgenstein wryly observed:

A French politician once said that it was a special characteristic of the French language that in French sentences words occurred in the sequence in which one thinks them.

The idea that one language in contrast to others has a word order which corresponds to the order of thinking arises from the notion that thought is an essentially different process going on independently of the expression of the thoughts.

We cannot treat the world in isolation from language because it is by means of language that we “treat” anything at all. Language is the means by which we understand both our world and ourselves: “It is in language that it is all done.”

Human inability to escape the inextricability of language and world enabled Wittgenstein to envision a realism that altogether avoided the problems of Cartesian skepticism. Wittgenstein asks: “How do I know that this color is red? It would be an answer to say ‘I have learnt English.’” This strategy is not as trivial as it first appears. Imagine the skeptic standing in a downpour asking: “How do I know that I am wet?” For Wittgenstein, no puzzle surrounds the concept “know” that is not simultaneously solved by attention to the grammar of the word “wet.” We learned the concept “wet” by being drilled by our mothers: “Come out of the rain this instant! You’re soaking wet!” Standing in the rain, wetting our beds, spilling on our shirts, falling down in puddles, and the like, comprise a complicated form of life in which young English speakers are socialized into correct usage of the term “wet.” Thus, the adult who speaks the word in the context of a steady rain already correctly uses the concept, which is to say, coherent with the way the rest of the linguistic community uses the term. This habitual reflex for correct usage is what we mean, at bottom, by retorting to the skeptic, “You’re all wet!”

The philosopher’s temptation is always to use words in illegitimate or ungrammatical ways. The skeptic overlooks the ordinary use of words like “know” when asking “how do I know I’m wet?” Philosophy of religion suffers from similar confusion and requires a similar therapy: believers insist, and atheists deny, that “God exists.” But the grammar of “exists” shows that the sentence engenders confusion. We ordinarily say, “For how long has this institution existed?”, “When did dinosaurs cease to exist?”, and “Sadly,

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22 Ibid., section 95.
23 Ibid., section 381.
racism still exists in the world today." In each case, it makes sense to speak of something's coming into existence and passing out of existence - a mode of reality that Christian believers rightly say does not apply to God. If the grammar of "exists" means that the word applies to the furniture of the universe, then we ought to agree with the atheist that God does not "exist." As Kierkegaard put it, "God does not exist. He is eternal." 24

A similar analysis could be made of the grammar of the word "God." What does the word "God" mean? The word becomes meaningful by its use in a complicated form of life: we pray to God, we witness about God, we confess our sins to God, and so on. If practice gives the word its sense, then the word "God" spoken from within an atheistic form of life and the word "God" spoken by Christian believers are simply homonyms. It is no wonder that the theist–atheist debate has been interminable.

What astonished Wittgenstein is the (largely unnoticed) agreement in our form of life that enables linguistic practices to become matters of habit. We pucker at lemons, cry at babies, cry when we skin a knee, and pale when our friend skins a knee. Wittgenstein calls these behaviors "primitive reactions" in order to emphasize their givenness for the functioning of language. One way (and only one way) to think of the connection between primitive reactions and language use is to imagine vocables as going proxy for these other behaviors.

How do words refer to sensations? ... Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain behavior.

"So you are saying that the word 'pain' really means crying?" - On the contrary: the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it.25

Wittgenstein's point is that language does not refer, or picture, or correspond to, some nonlinguistic reality; there is no way for us to imagine that to which language corresponds ("a state of affairs," "the world," "reality," etc.) except in terms of the very language that this "reality" is supposed to be considered in isolation of. Rather, learning a language is an irredoubitably social enterprise by which a child is trained into a communal mode of living. Thus Wittgenstein likened language to a series of games that require partners for playing: "In a conversation: One person throws a ball; the other does not know: whether he is supposed to throw it back, or throw it to a third person, or leave it on the ground, or pick it up and put it in his pocket, etc."26

Wittgenstein saw an interdependent relation among primitive reactions, socially constituted forms of life, and language use. Agreement in primitive reactions constitutes a community's form of life, which, in turn, conditions the shape of its language games, which, in turn, shapes the way the community conceives the world, which, in turn, shapes the primitive reactions shared by its members.27

Such an arrangement has suggested to some the need for a wholesale conversion to a very different way of thinking. At the very center of this conversion would be a deep humility that confesses grave human limits; we cannot pretend to achieve a translinguistic God's-eye view from which to judge the putative correspondence between ideas and words or between words and states of affairs. We receive our community's linguistic practices, and the form of life internally related to these practices, as a gift that enables communication - but only within grammatical limits. How humiliating! Surely we can do better than that! But perhaps we cannot recover from Babel after all.

For Wittgenstein, our human inability to extract language from world or word from language meant that the picture of the Cartesian theater, which so neatly separated subjects from objects, only muddies the water. In contrast, clarity begins with an acknowledgment of the irreducibly social character of human experience and the intrinsic relation of human experience to the real world: "What has to be accepted, the given, is - so one could say - forms of life."28

For theologians after Wittgenstein, there is much work to do in order to free religious believers from the Cartesian bottle. To take up our former examples, what distinguishes human persons is not the possession of a little "I" inside the mind, but the practice of telling stories and having our stories told to and by one another.29 Thus, we are not persons yet, but persons on the way as our stories unfold. Moreover, as Lash warns, "religious experience" is neither private nor self-identifying nor self-authenticating. What counts as "religious" experience can only be so identified and described once the communal gift of language is already largely in place. By the same token, if naming appears to be the paradigmatic case of the Cartesian ego acting

25 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, section 244. See also section 257.
29 Lash, Theology on the Way to Emmaus, p. 73.
in isolation, Lash cannot imagine the word “God” functioning simply as a label. Rather, “God” acts as a proxy for a whole host of stories that manifest God’s publicly knowable character. (What can “ywhw yireh” mean but a shorthand account of Genesis 22?) Finally, the question of God’s existence is inappropriate because the grammar of “God” does not admit questions of existence, for that puts matters too hypothetically. As Wittgenstein commented to Drury: “Can you imagine St. Augustine saying that the existence of God was ‘highly probable’?”

It is frequently objected that Wittgenstein’s work yields a fideism that undermines theology’s ability to do serious work. In surprising contrast, Wittgenstein thought that it was Descartes’s legacy that threatened to distort theology: “if you believe, say, Spinoza or Kant, this interferes with what you believe in religion; but if you believe me, nothing of the sort.”

From Wittgenstein’s stance, first-order religious claims mean what they mean within the given form of life. Referring explicitly to theology, Wittgenstein remarked: “How words are understood is not told by words alone,” rather, it is praxis that gives words their sense. But this does not mean that religious claims are insulated from criticism. On the contrary, theology performs both critical and constructive tasks. By attending to the grammar of religious discourse, theologians discipline the tendency of believers’ words toward self-delusion and over-simplification. Moreover, theological grammarians coach believers in the proper use of first-order language in a way that enables them to see the pattern of God’s presence in the realm of the ordinary. In Lash’s words:

It is the task of those who bear the burden of theological responsibility to show, quite concretely, in particular circumstances, how it is that the question of human identity, significance and destiny may be construed as the question of God; to show how it is that the coincidence of these questions, as the content of specifically Christian hope, is clarified, defined and illuminated by the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

**CLOSING THE OMEGA**

So then, modern theology operates within the conceptual confines of the Cartesian theater, crafting a theology that is simultaneously individualistic and totalizing (in that human nature is presumed to be everywhere uniform). Postmodern theology inhabits a different space altogether, for if the language by which religious experience is enabled and described is not of an individual’s own making, then religion itself has an irreducibly social and historical component. Investigation into religious reality is never more profound than when the faithful historical community is its object. Thus Lash asks: “What kind of community is it that might be realistically and concretely envisaged as the symbolic or sacramental expression of eschatological hope, of a hope that is effectively critical of all idolatrous absolutization of particular places and times, nations and destinies, projects and policies?” If Lash has been prodded by Wittgenstein to change the very questions he inherited from modern theologians, John Howard Yoder can be seen to occupy a similar space in so far as he transforms their answers.

Yoder was a walking set of contradictions: a Mennonite theologian who studied under Barth and ended his career teaching at the University of Notre Dame; a proactive pacifist who tirelessly advanced the “modest proposal” that Christians refrain from killing each other as the first step toward abolishing war; a sectarian (by Ernst Troeltsch’s standards) who advocated strong social action (Yoder himself both served Mennonite relief and mission agencies throughout Europe and Algeria as well as spent twenty years working in various capacities for the World Council of Churches); a church historian who is as much postmodern as he is pre-modern by virtue of his affirmation that Jesus’ life and teachings, including the prohibition of killing, are normative for us today.

Yoder entered the fray of contemporary theology through the door of church history and focused his energies on the historical reality of the community that worships Jesus. Yoder understood the unbroken historical continuity of that community not only as permission to say “this is that” (i.e., this church today is that church back then), but also as that which validates this community’s present moral judgment (by virtue of the present Christian community’s approximation to the first-century church’s discourse and form of life). Yoder was thus suspicious of the modern obsession to find foundations for ethics and theology in theoretical demonstrations of first principles since this overlooks the obvious prior condition: “There had to be a human social fabric, in which people’s relationships were mediated

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37 Wittgenstein, Zettel, section 144.
38 Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, p. 85c.
39 Lash, Theology on the Way to Emmanuel, p. 17.
40 Ibid., p. 191.
41 Yoder resisted the term “Mennonite theologian,” preferring instead to view himself as a theologian of the church catholic.

In the absence of theoretical foundations, Yoder suggested that ethics must begin with “a phenomenology of moral life” — that is, with a description of the moral life of an actual community. Ironically, such a description is, in fact, less biased than accounts of putative first principles, because community life is subject to criteria that philosophical discussions are not: the viability of a historical community depends on the ongoing felicity of its communications. Thus, “for the society to be viable, most of this communication has to be ‘true’ most of the time; i.e. it has to provide a reliable basis for structuring our common life, counting on each other and not being routinely disappointed.” This social matrix is simply the given beyond which ethics cannot go. The fabric exists, and functions more or less well, before anyone asks for an accounting about why it works. The ‘accounting’ that we can do is therefore not ‘validation’ but *a posteriori* elucidation.\footnote{Ibid., p. 86.}

For Yoder, then, Christian ethics could not be separated from theology since both involve explication of the Gospel as it has been embodied in the form of life of the believing community since the New Testament. Jesus matters for contemporary believers because Jesus mattered for the original lot. Yet Yoder is not advocating a naive biblicism that might be offered in place of other reductive methodologies. He explained: “Precisely because of my commitment to a community which in turn is committed to canonical accountability, I saw no way to squeeze such accountability into such a straitjacket as biblicism.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 87.} In contrast: “Skepticism about methodological reductivism and respect for the ‘thick’ reading of any real history, in which the Bible belongs, go naturally hand in hand.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 88.} Consequently, Yoder understood there to be a dialectical relationship between canon and community.

On the one hand, the canon shapes the community. Faithfulness to the cruciform pattern established by the story of Jesus is the chief aim of those for whom the biblical texts are taken to be Scripture. The biblical texts have been read in various ways — as literature, as science, as fiction, etc. — but those for whom the biblical texts are canonical read them as *Scripture* and thus submit themselves to interrogation by the text rather than become the interrogators of the text. Yoder’s “precritical”\footnote{Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: a Study in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).} reading strategy enabled him to be well informed of historical-critical debates over the textual minutaie (such as are incorporated into the copious footnotes of *The Politics of Jesus*)\footnote{Yoder, *The Otherness of the Church,* in Michael G. Cartwright, ed., *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 57-64.} yet remain untroubled by historical-critical challenges that take the Bible as an object of study rather than the lens through which the world is brought into focus.

On the other hand, community life is determinative for the proper reading of Scripture. Before we can know how the Scripture ought to be read, Yoder wants us to get clear on who is the “we” doing the reading. Thus in “The Otherness of the Church” he insists on the enduring distinctive identity of the church over and against the world by recounting the narrative of Christian history both prior to and after the church’s (lamentable) Constantinianization.\footnote{Ibid., p. 88.} Similarly, Yoder writes that Jesus’ “original revolution” was the establishment of the church as the social embodiment of a radical pacifist alternative to secular strategies for living together.\footnote{John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), pp. 148–82.} When this community rightly reads Scripture, its reading takes the form of an ecumenical conversation that is sometimes reforming and other times prophetic, and only insiders have a sense of timing that is developed finely enough to tell the difference.

Modernity, wrote Stephen Toulmin, is a giant Ω-shaped detour.\footnote{Toulmin, *Cosmopolis,* p. 167.} If Toulmin’s metaphor is apt, then we should not be surprised to discover that postmodern philosophy shares much in common with its premodern cousins (a thesis not pursued here) and that postmodern theology finds a kinship with premodern theology. While Lash has crafted his theology with an eye toward Wittgenstein, Yoder’s theology resonates with Anglo-American postmodern thought even though he explicitly eschewed philosophy in favor of close reading of the historical Christian community. In our view, both Lash and Yoder disclose the way forward for theologians who have grown lonely under the bewitchment of Cartesian solipsism.

**AN EMERGING THEOLOGY OF COMMUNAL PRACTICE**

As writers born and raised in the modern world, we had to resist the temptation to begin this chapter with a theoretical definition of the general philosophical characteristics of Anglo-American postmodern theology. We began instead with examples and historical narrative. At this point, though,
an overview is in order. We suggested an understanding of “post”-modern as that which dissolves longstanding modern dilemmas by escaping the bewitchment of pictures or images that have shaped them. We concentrated here on the image of the Cartesian theater because we see it as most powerful, but there are others: knowledge as a building, language itself as a picture (representation) of a world divorced from it, physical reality as a series of levels of complex wholes all reducing without remainder to their simplest parts.46

In the centuries since Descartes a cosmopolitan European philosophical community has become divided – one now has to specify “Anglo-American” or “Continental” tradition – but this is a distinction of style rather than geography. A number of Anglo-American philosophers, since the mid-twentieth century, have contributed to the dissolution of modern problems. We can mention here only some of the most significant. Gilbert Ryle47 and Richard Rorty48 have joined Wittgenstein in his critique of the Cartesian mind. W. V. O. Quine provided a picture of knowledge as a web or net to replace Descartes’s building image.49 J. L. Austin showed how the social and practical aspects of language take precedence over reference and representation.50 Thomas Kuhn emphasized the role of communal practice in science.51 Alasdair MacIntyre emphasized the social embodiment and historical rootedness of all human reasoning, both theoretical and moral.52

We count as postmodern, then, theologians who either explicitly appropriate these philosophical developments or who have arrived at similar positions by alternate routes. Some representatives: David Burrell and Rowan Williams, obviously indebted to Wittgenstein; the Yale School and its fellow travelers, who acknowledge debts to Wittgenstein, Austin, and Quine; James Wm. McClendon, Jr. and Stanley Hauerwas, who acknowledge debts to Austin and Wittgenstein but, as did Yoder, arrived at similar conclusions by disparate routes.

Despite risk of over-simplification, we can describe all of these as sharing a concept of mind that is irreducibly linguistic in texture and thus already actively entangled with reality. There is no general problem of knowledge or reference or representation. Rather, there are specific problems of meaning and knowledge and practice germane to various disciplines at particular points in their development. Theology has its own particular epistemological and linguistic and practical problems. Theologians do not have to wait for an adequate philosophical foundation before they begin; they are already a part of a tradition of inquiry and thus the task is not to begin from scratch but to pick up where their predecessors left off.

So for postmodern theologians there is no general question of whether or how theology is possible – many do it before breakfast! There is no need to answer the question, “does the word ‘God’ refer?” The question is instead, “what is our God really like?” There is no need for them to begin with the question, “is Christianity true?” The question is rather, “are there good reasons to be a Christian, to engage in this form of life?” and this is as much a moral question as an epistemological one.

But why be postmodern? We have emphasized the role of pictures in shaping the thought of an historical era. Is one picture (the old one) not as good as another? An answer to this question requires some reflection on how philosophical change comes about. We suggest that pictures generate philosophical theories and programs. But sometimes the philosophical programs run into obstacles; the theories succumb to repeated critique (for example, foundationalism). When a new picture is offered (for example, Quine’s web), it not only provides an alternative and a fresh set of resources, but also shows why the older program failed, and was bound to fail, exactly where it did. So there is no going back.

Further reading
Kallenberg, Brad J. Ethics as Grammar: Changing the Postmodern Subject (University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).


