

# POSTMODERNISM: THE DEATH OF GOD AND THE RISE OF THE COMMUNITY

**MICHAEL D. MAKIDON**

Director of Publications  
Grace Evangelical Society  
Irving, Texas

## I. INTRODUCTION

It was the summer of Ninety-Nine. Sitting on the back porch of a good friend's house, I listened as she poured out her heart to me. She had been dating a guy for several years, but was distraught over the fact that he was an atheist. She was a non-believer whom I had witnessed to several times—a Roman Catholic, nominal at best.

Her words still remain clear in my mind, “I don't care what he believes. I just want him to believe in something—in God. I don't care what religion he is—Buddhist, Muslim, Christian—I don't care. I just don't want my kids to grow up not believing in something.” I thought to myself, “Well, this one is pretty simple.” So, I explained to her, “Actually, he is a believer. He *believes* that there isn't a God. Just as Buddhists don't believe that Jesus is *the way, the truth, and the life, the only way* to the Father, neither do atheists. So, if Christ's claim is correct that He is the *only way*, there is no difference between an atheist and a Buddhist. Both are wrong.” And so I sat back and waited for the *truth* I had just imparted to her to be processed, realized, and believed.

And sure enough, for the first time, she knew exactly what I had said. There was no doubt in her mind. With a horrified look, she turned and asked, “Are you saying that your religion is the best religion? I think that's arrogant. I guess that's fine for you, but not me.”

That day two paradigms collided—Christianity and postmodernism. So, what happened? And how in the world did we get here?

## II. THE LINE OF DESPAIR

Francis Schaeffer in his book *The God Who Is There* proposed what is called the “line of despair.” He suggests that cultural paradigms shift

in an orderly manner. They begin with philosophy, continue with art and music, saturate the culture, and then gradually seep into theology.<sup>1</sup> It is a repetitious cycle. A philosopher comes up with a new spin on reality, an artist then puts his interpretation down on canvas, the culture soaks it up like a dry sponge in water, and then culture infects the church. This cycle repeats itself over and over again.

I wish that we were on the verge of a cultural shift—that we were at a crossroads and if we turned the wheel hard enough we could circumvent what lies before us as a Church. However, this shift is upon us. It has been going on for centuries—since the beginning of the second millennium. This repetitive cycle where one period's philosophy becomes the next period's theology, was not born out of the modern period, but more rightly the medieval period.

Let us look at this *line of despair*, which begins with philosophy and ends with theology.

### III. THE DEATH OF GOD IN PHILOSOPHY

#### A. RENÉ DESCARTES

From the late 15th century to the mid-16th century, the belief system of the medieval world collapsed. Instead of sailing off the edge of the world, Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) expanded the known geography of the medieval period, Copernicus (1472–1543) decentered the earth from the middle of the solar system, and Martin Luther (1483–1546) tore the pope from the center of the world and exposed the church's history of deception. In other words, Columbus, Copernicus, and Luther literally pulled the rug out from under the medieval world. Everything that had been accepted by faith for over a millennium<sup>2</sup> was now under serious scrutiny.

---

<sup>1</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There: Speaking Historic Christianity into the Twentieth Century*, 30th Anniversary Ed. (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 28.

<sup>2</sup> While Anselm (1033–1109) is best known as the archbishop of Canterbury, his greatest impact was on the formation of scholasticism—an era when the development of theology transferred from the monasteries to the universities. Anselm's desire was to apply reason to questions of faith. The medieval period could be summed up by his phrase, "I believe in order that I may understand." In other words, he wasn't trying to prove something that he didn't believe. He was

And along came René Descartes (1596–1650), who has been called the father of modern philosophy. He ushered in what is known as the Enlightenment period.

“I think, therefore I am,” he announced. This statement was meant to serve as the foundation for knowledge. He believed that self-knowledge was the basis for all knowledge. Human reason began to take the place of God’s revelation. In the Enlightenment, the measure of truth became “what I think” instead of “what God reveals.” Thus, Descartes pushed God from the center and left man in His place.

Descartes’ philosophy led him to say, “I will suppose then, that everything I see is spurious. I will believe that my memory tells me lies, and that none of the things that it reports ever happened. I have no senses. Body, shape, extension, movement and place are chimeras. So what remains true? Perhaps just the one fact that *nothing is certain*.”<sup>3</sup> Descartes began questioning everything.

## B. JOHN LOCKE

If Descartes pushed God from the center, John Locke (1632–1704) pushed Him out onto the cliff. He expanded upon Descartes’ view of reality by stating, “No man’s knowledge here can go beyond his experience.” In Locke’s work, the *Second Treatise of Civil Government* (1690), he initiated the celebration of the individual. Human beings were seen as unencumbered and autonomous. No longer was the church the source of knowledge. The source of knowledge had shifted to finite beings.

trying to better understand that which he already believed, which many would say was a noble endeavor. Yet, unbeknownst to him, he opened the door to rationalism.

Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274) wrote, “Belief *cannot* refer to something that one sees...and what can be proved likewise does not pertain to belief.” *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, Book 3, distinction 3, quaestio 2, articulus 1 (3d.24,2,1). In other words, the natural can be known by reason, but the supernatural can only be grasped by faith. And understanding leads to faith. Aquinas came up with “five ways” or arguments that God exists. All of them begin with the world as it is known through the senses, and then show how such a world requires a God. Aquinas believed that sense perception was the beginning of knowledge. He unwittingly opened the door to rationalism and empiricism.

<sup>3</sup> René Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy,” in *Epistemology: The Big Questions* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 8, italics added.

### C. IMMANUEL KANT

The epistemological avalanche that Descartes initiated waned momentarily with Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). He believed that all knowledge was constructed by the human senses and reason, but that theology was not dealing with the constructs of the human faculty of knowing, that is, with appearances, as were mathematics and physics. Thus, Kant was hoping that by limiting knowledge to the senses that there was still room for faith.

### D. GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH HEGEL

Hegel (1770–1831) began a renewed movement of celebrating the individual. He believed that “The rational is the real and the real is the rational.” Truth was not apart from man, but within the mind. This began to open wide the door to postmodern relativism.

### E. SØREN KIERKEGAARD

While little attention was paid to Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) in his own century, theologians in the 20th century such as Karl Barth were highly influenced by him. In the Enlightenment period, Christianity was believing a set of doctrines. Kierkegaard challenged this idea. He sought to show that faith was a matter of “inwardness” and “subjectivity” not objectivity.

He wrote,

If one who lives in the midst of Christendom goes up to the house of God, the house of the true God, with the true conception of God in his knowledge, and prays, but prays in a false spirit; and one who lives in an idolatrous community prays with the entire passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest upon the image of an idol: where is there most truth? The one prays in truth to God though he worships an idol; the other prays falsely to the true God, and hence worships in fact an idol.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David F. Swenson (Copenhagen 1846; Reprinted by Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 179-80.

Kierkegaard elevated passion above truth. This is most likely because he defines truth as: “An objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual.”<sup>5</sup>

Explaining Kierkegaard’s view of truth, Millard Erickson writes, “The objective approach involves what he calls an ‘approximation process,’ [or appropriation-process] whereby one continually gathers more data and comes closer to a correct description of the object. So with respect, for example, to historical matters, one can only have relative certainty.”<sup>6</sup> The door to relativism swung open even wider.

#### F. WILLIAM JAMES

Postmodern relativism arrived on the scene with men like William James (1842–1910) who said, “Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on this moonlit and dream-visited planet are they found?”<sup>7</sup> If nothing can be certain, how can someone tell another that he is right or wrong? This question would soon be thrust to the forefront of philosophical discussion.

#### G. FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

Nietzsche (1844–1900) instituted the “death of God” movement, which he knew would lead to the death of fixed meaning and objective truth.<sup>8</sup> Yet, he believed that these were necessary evils. In a poem entitled “The Madman” he wrote,

“Whither is God” he cried. “I shall tell you. We *have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers... Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>6</sup> Millard Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise & Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 82.

<sup>7</sup> William James, “The Will to Believe,” in *Essays on Faith and Morals* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1947), 45.

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent article on Nietzsche’s contribution to society see Rodrigo de Sousa, “Rethinking an Evangelical Response to Postmodernism: A Critique and Proposal,” *Presbyterion* (Fall 2003): 94-102. Yet, while his discussion of Nietzsche’s death of God concept is helpful, he unfortunately falls into the post-modern trap of perspectivism himself.

all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night and more night coming on all the while?"<sup>9</sup>

What Nietzsche's philosophy led to is what most call *postmodernism* but is more rightly called *perspectivism* or *relativism*. He said, "Insofar as the word 'knowledge' has any meaning, the world is knowable: but it is *interpretive* otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings—'Perspectivism.'"<sup>10</sup> Now that God had died, the only one left to replace Him as the author of truth was man.

For Nietzsche the idea of an objective moral absolute is but an illusion constructed in the mind. Moral truth is relative because God is dead. The true force that drives our good and evil actions is an amoral force called *the will to power*. He foretold of a new age of humanity, personified by the superman, who having lived through nihilism (belief that everything is meaningless and chaotic), would emerge richer and stronger. Yet, David Wells explains, "It [the Enlightenment] had made extravagant promises about life, liberty and happiness, but in the modern world it had become increasingly difficult to see where those promises were being realized."<sup>11</sup>

In the Enlightenment period the autonomous self was the center of philosophical thought, which culminated in Friedrich Nietzsche's superman. And two ascended to power in the 20th century: Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin. After seeing the atrocities they committed, philosophers and others began to realize that they had taken this to the extreme. Jimmy Long writes, "People began to realize the necessity for a community that can hold individuals accountable, to avoid the rise of future Hitlers and Stalins."<sup>12</sup> God was replaced by the autonomous individual only to be ultimately replaced by the community. An atheistic amoral democracy was born—the society of the 20th century.

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Gay Science," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 95.

<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Random House, 1967), §481, 267.

<sup>11</sup> David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 286.

<sup>12</sup> Jimmy Long, *Generating Hope: A Strategy for Reaching the Postmodern Generation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 67.

## H. WILLARD VAN ORMAN QUINE

Further questioning certainty, Quine (1908–2000) and his student Joseph Ullian cooperatively wrote,

...knowledge is in some ways like a good golf score: each is substantially the fruit of something else, and there are no magic shortcuts to either one. To improve your golf score you work at perfecting the various strokes; for knowledge you work at garnering and sifting evidence and sharpening your reasoning skills. Your immediate concern must be with the *comprehensiveness and coherence of your belief body*. Knowledge is no more thus guaranteed than is the lowered golf score, but there is no better way. Perhaps philosophers have done us a disservice by focusing so much on knowledge and so little on belief.<sup>13</sup>

At first glance this sounds reasonable. But, after closer analysis, it actually further opens the door for relativism.

There are two major views of truth: 1) The correspondence view<sup>14</sup> which states that a proposition is said to be true only if it corresponds with reality; and 2) The coherence view which states that truth is like a web. The more consistent it is, the better it coheres together. What Quine is suggesting here is that we must be concerned with the coherence of our belief body. Thus, a Muslim's belief body, as long as it consistently holds together is said to cohere and thus be true.

## I. MICHAEL NOVAK

The young 20th century Catholic philosopher Michael Novak, in his work *Belief and Unbelief*, wished to define belief in a world where God was dead. He sought to set standards by which one might understand various belief systems within their respective communities:

No man believes, or disbelieves, in isolation; he believes in the context of a certain historical community. Moreover, belief

---

<sup>13</sup> W.V Quine and J.S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1978), 14, italics added.

<sup>14</sup> Roderick Chisholm (1916–1999) wrote, “‘*Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*’: a true belief or assertion is one that ‘corresponds with the facts,’” *Theory of Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), 104.

and unbelief draw their concrete meaning from the life of a particular community.<sup>15</sup>

This raises several questions: 1) How does a community come to a consensus?; and 2) How does it decide what beliefs are acceptable?

#### J. MICHEL FOUCAULT

The Frenchman Michel Foucault (1926–1984) sought to clarify the sphere of truth when he wrote:

Truth isn't outside of power, or lacking in power, contrary to a myth...truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true.<sup>16</sup>

Nietzsche's "will to power" was thus resurrected. Since God is dead, the power brokers in society control what truth is acceptable. Thus, truth is relative to who holds the power.

#### K. CONCLUSION

Almost four hundred years ago, Descartes removed God from the center of the world's understanding of truth and pushed Him to the side. After three hundred years all that was left was the autonomous self—Nietzsche's superman, which culminated in horrible atrocities by monsters such as Hitler and Stalin. Because the Enlightenment could not fulfill its promise of unending progress, all that was certain was lost. When the dust settled, God was dead and the community was left in charge. And truth was relative to who held the power in the community.

### IV. THE LOSS OF FIXED MEANING IN ART

Just as we see this shift towards relative truth in philosophy, it is evident in art as well.

---

<sup>15</sup> Michael Novak, *Belief and Unbelief: A Philosophy of Self-Knowledge* (New York: The New American Library, 1967), 33.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 72-73.



### A. THE ROMANTIC PERIOD

The Romantic Period (1790–1850) characterized those who wanted to revolt against the established social and religious order. Romanticism exalted individualism, subjectiveness, irrationalism, imagination, emotions, and nature. Emotion was greater than reason and the senses were greater than the intellect.

The “Chalk Cliffs of Rügen” (1818) painted by Friedrich sums up this period. Three people stand at the cliffs. While two look for objective scientific discoveries by searching the ground, one peers off into the vastness of nature—where the sea and the sky become one. “Why limit yourself to what you can reason in nature?” the painting asks. Instead, nature should give us an emotional response through our senses (eyes).

### B. IMPRESSIONISM

Next we move to Impressionism (late 19th century, France). Monet’s “Water Lilies,” “The Starry Night,” and “Jardin De Monet” embody this period. These paintings give an immediate emotional impression. Impressionistic painters did not try to recreate a particular scene as it would be seen by the eyes. They began to explore the feeling of the scene—impression on canvas. Objectivity began to fade. This period bridged the gap between Romanticism and abstract art where objectivity was lost.

### C. ABSTRACT ART

After the period of Impressionism, art began to eliminate rational visual association. Kandinsky’s “Im Blau” (“In Blue,” 1925) perfectly represents this period. Various shapes and colors seek to float around in a seemingly unrelated abyss. Art no longer had to represent something rational or objective. Art began to lose objectivity and in turn elevate the *perspective* of the artist and the viewer.

### D. SURREALISM

This brings us to Surrealism (1924–1940). This period represented a reaction against what was seen as the destruction wrought by rationalism which culminated in the horrors of World War I. Surrealism sought to reunite the conscious and unconscious realms of experience in the hopes that the rational world would be joined by the world of dreams and fantasy. What was left was known as surreality.

René Magritte in “The Son of Man,” a picture of an androgynous person in a suit with an apple covering his or her assumed face, captures the essence of this period. Magritte toys with what is called *object permanence*, a form of conditioning that infants experience. All have

been taught that behind the apple lies a face. Magritte seeks to question how easily we unconsciously “fill in” what the apple covers. Furthermore, she seeks to question the blind faith we place in our “rational” assumptions.

There was no longer a fixed meaning in abstract and surrealist art. Instead of real, art was surreal and instead of factual, it became abstract. Fixed meaning in art shifted into perspectivism, which questioned the *individual's* ability to make sense of reality.

## V. THE RISE OF THE COMMUNITY IN CULTURE

Just as Nietzsche predicted, “the death of God” has led to the death of fixed meaning and objective truth. The relativism which began in philosophy and continued in art, has found its way into culture.

The cry of our post-Enlightenment culture is that what’s “true for you might not be for me.” The supermen that Nietzsche was hoping for collapsed in the 20th century and have been resurrected as nihilism (the belief that everything is chaotic and meaningless), relativism (a loss of fixed meaning and objective truth), and finally the community.

### A. TELEVISION

The 20th century was a time in history like no other. Reality was placed in a little box called the television—a box that encourages us to sit back and relax. Don’t worry about thinking; it will think for you. We are now able to disengage our minds and become surrealists where reality and fantasy become one. For this reason, the television is the best known channel between art and culture. Instead of art infecting culture over a period of decades, the television has allowed a direct line into the mind since all our defense mechanisms have been effectively shut down.

There is no better illustration of our post-Enlightenment culture than the recent, wildly successful Seinfeld show. A self-professed “show about nothing,” where comedian Jerry Seinfeld plays a comedian named Jerry Seinfeld. The line between fiction and truth is obliterated.

In this narcissistic show, morality is altered at every whim, and urban thirty-something-singles float through a chaotic meaningless life (nihilism).

Jerry and Elaine are trying to get as much out of life as they can. George navigates his pathetic existence with whatever is expedient, claiming that his whole life is based on lies. Kramer’s life, though extremely chaotic, is eternally static.

While modernity promised progress, postmodernity desires just the opposite. One of the show's writers has confessed that there is only one rule in the composition of the show: the characters must never learn from their experiences; they must forever be what they intrinsically and eternally are.<sup>17</sup>

A two-part episode entitled "The Trip" illustrates perfectly the deep seeded nihilism and relativism of Seinfeld. Kramer moves to California in order to "find himself." He is apprehended for being the "smog killer" after the woman he was dating turns up dead with a piece of paper on her person bearing Kramer's name. Things were not looking too good for Kramer. Yet, he was finally released when the police learned that the "smog killer" had struck again.

As Kramer exits the jail, Jerry and George dance gleefully chanting "the smog killer struck again" as the parents of the newest victim pass behind them. Objective morality cannot be found. Jerry and George later question Kramer as to whether he will now return to New York. After all, his girlfriend was murdered and he had been put in jail. Kramer's *perspective* was that everything was going fine, "Yeah, well I wasn't looking for a long term relationship." All is relative.

TV is an unconscious infector of our American community's belief system.

## B. THE UNIVERSITY

Fixed meaning and objective truth have disappeared from the university as well. Charles Colson writes,

College campuses are caught in a face-off between modern Enlightenment rationalism and postmodern relativism. The Enlightenment philosophers wanted all the *benefits* of Christianity without *belief* in God. By human rationality alone they hoped to discover universal truth and universal morality.<sup>18</sup>

For the most part, God is dead on college campuses in the United States. The question that must be asked is: "What has been left in His place as the standard for truth?"

---

<sup>17</sup> See Thomas S. Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture: From the Exorcist to Seinfeld* (Dallas: Spence Publishing Co., 1999), 144-72.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Colson, "Postmodern Power Grab," in *Christianity Today* (June 1994): 80.

A former Harvard and Duke University Professor, Dr. Stanley Fish, wrote a book in the early eighties entitled *Is There a Text in This Class?* “In 1970 I was asking the question ‘Is the reader or the text the source of meaning?’ and the entities presupposed by the question *were* the text and the reader whose independence and stability were assumed.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, he soon learned that the text and the reader are not static.

One question would forever reorient this discussion. One day a student inquired, “Is there a text in this class?” to which he replied “Yes, it’s the *Norton Anthology of Literature*.” The student then rejoined, “No I meant do we believe in poems and things, or is it just us?” Because of this misunderstanding, Fish began to ponder how individuals could agree on the interpretation of a given statement. Concerning this quest for meaning, Millard Erickson queries,

How, then can there be any agreement on the meaning of statements, or even any meaningful discussion of them? This has seemed to present a significant problem for postmodernists. The concept of community is believed to solve this problem, and one of the most vigorous advocates of this idea is Stanley Fish.<sup>20</sup>

Fish believes that his concept of the community solves the problem of disagreements between individuals. In order to clarify his position, he writes,

Indeed, it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features. Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties. In other words these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, it is the community that decides what ideas are written down. Yet, this seems to apply to interpretation as well.

---

<sup>19</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *The Postmodern World: Discerning the Times and the Spirit of Our Age* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), 51.

<sup>21</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 14.

He gives the example of two professors arguing over the meaning of a literary text using the same word to prove their case. Fish notes,

What we have here then are two critics with opposing interpretations, each of whom claims the same word as internal and confirming evidence. Clearly they cannot both be right, but just as clearly there is no basis for deciding between them. One cannot appeal to the text, because the text has become an extension of the interpretive disagreement that divides them; and, in fact, the text as it is variously characterized is a *consequence* of the interpretation for which it is supposedly evidence.<sup>22</sup>

He seeks to clear up this by offering:

This, however, is an impasse only if one assumes that the activity of interpretation is itself unconstrained; but in fact the shape of that activity is determined by the literary institution which at any one time will authorize only a finite number of interpretive strategies. Thus, while there is no core of agreement in the text, there is a core agreement (although one subject to change) concerning the ways of *producing* the text. Nowhere is this set of acceptable ways written down, but it is a part of everyone's knowledge of what it means to operate within the literary institution as it is now constituted.<sup>23</sup>

Limits do exist in Fish's paradigm however. One of his students illustrated this by saying that she could enter into any class at Johns Hopkins University and win approval for

running one of a number of well-defined interpretive routines: she could view the assigned text as an instance of the tension between nature and culture; she could look in the text for evidence of large mythological oppositions; she could argue that the true subject of the text was its own composition...She could not, however, at least at Johns Hopkins University today, argue that the text was a prophetic message inspired by the ghost of her Aunt Tilly.<sup>24</sup>

For Fish, "no one is or could be capable of making the necessary determination (the determination of which preferred truths are the

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 343-44.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 343.

genuinely transcendent ones) because everyone is so enmeshed in time and circumstance that only circumstantial and timely (i.e., historically bounded) truths will be experienced as perspicuous.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, in Fish’s mind, the community is necessary in order to determine what truths are acceptable within that particular community. As we shall see, this same thinking prevails among religious scholars as well.

### C. CONCLUSION

Nietzsche’s death of God has led to the death of objective certainty in philosophy, art, our culture, and in our universities. Because the autonomous individual could not be trusted, something had to take its place. That something was the community. It is now the task of communities to set the standards of truth.

## VI. THE CULTURE’S INFLUENCE ON THE CHURCH

When most people think of postmodern philosophy they assume that the postmoderns are all “out there” and that we remain safe within the confines of our seminaries and churches.

Philosophy has never succeeded in walking directly through the front door of the church, marching up to the pulpit, and preaching to the congregation. It has always worked slowly from the outside in. The period we find ourselves in, the post-Enlightenment period, is no different. Instead of a canvas on the wall, the medium of postmodernism is the TV, internet, and university.

Postmodernity has replaced modernity’s autonomous self and objective truth with the community and relativism. This is reflected in institutions that were once evangelical such as Harvard and Duke.

Stanley Hauerwas, a professor of Theological Ethics at Duke’s Divinity School wrote,

I certainly believe that God uses the Scripture to help keep the Church faithful, but I do not believe, in the Church’s current circumstance, that each person in the Church thereby is given the right to interpret the Scripture.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Stanley Fish, *There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It’s a Good Thing, Too* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 7-8.

<sup>26</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 16.

A reaction against the individual has begun. In his work *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* he proceeds even further:

*Most North American Christians assume that they have a right, if not an obligation, to read the Bible. I challenge that assumption. No task is more important than for the Church to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America. Let us no longer give the Bible to all children when they enter the third grade or whenever their assumed rise to Christian maturity is marked, such as eighth-grade commencements. Let us rather tell them and their parents that they are possessed by habits far too corrupt for them to be encouraged to read the Bible on their own.<sup>27</sup>*

Hauerwas believes that there is *no task* greater than taking the Bible out of the hands of individuals in North America. The Bible was torn out of the hands of Roman Catholicism and now we are trotting back down the road to Rome in order to give it back. Should we apologize at the doors saying, “I’m sorry that our forefathers absurdly believed that we could actually interpret Scripture for ourselves—Please tell us what we should believe”?

To many this sounds ridiculous and to some extent it is. Nonetheless, slowly but surely that is exactly what is happening.

A clear shift in exegesis has occurred even in the last twenty years in evangelical seminaries. While they once taught students to go to Scripture to find the meaning of a given text, they are now teaching that students must first evaluate the views of commentators that have come before them—some of whom do not believe the words they are commenting on are even inspired. Exegesis is slowly shifting from the individual to the community.

The former president of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) noted in a 2002 paper presented in Dallas, Texas:

If the ETS were to seek a “doctrinal” base beyond Scripture and the Trinity, here [the creeds] would be where to look for it. This is a far better option in my view than trying to rewrite such creeds from scratch today, for it would affirm the unity of our community with those that went before us, an act that

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 15, italics added.

ultimately affirms the work of the Spirit in the community throughout her history.<sup>28</sup>

He clearly believes that the Holy Spirit guides the community (the Body of Christ) through history—a corporate rather than individual focus.

This paper was later included in a book. The author gives an example of a debate where two sides argue their views from Scripture and both believe they are correct. His remarks are uncannily similar to those Fish discussed earlier:

Note also how individualized this doctrine of the Spirit risks being: I have read it right, but you, also a member of the believing community, have read the text wrong. It is here that the corporateness of the Spirit's work needs to be applied to this discussion. Healthy dialogue need not be seen as a bad thing for evangelicals, provided we all agree that the text is the key arbiter in our discussion... Provided they also have a historical sense of where the core of the faith lies (i.e., Scripture) evangelicals should welcome these denominations into dialogue.<sup>29</sup>

In regards to the Openness debate, he wrote, "Only solid, dialogical community will save us from our individual tendencies to be drawn in where we do not belong."<sup>30</sup> Sadly, society has replaced the individual with the community and the church is following its lead. Some might question whether God (the Holy Spirit) will be fully replaced by the community in this arena as well.

---

<sup>28</sup> Darrell Bock, "Prolegomena on Controversy in Evangelicalism and a Purpose-Driven Theology: How Should We Approach Discussion and Debate in the ETS and Evangelicalism?—An Appeal for Meta-Narrative, 'Critical Realism' and a 'Biblical Foundationalist' Approach" (ETS 2002 Regional Meeting, Dallas, TX): 8, fn. 14.

<sup>29</sup> Darrell Bock, *Purpose-Directed Theology: Getting Our Priorities Right in Evangelical Controversies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 32.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 34. May we remember Peter Abelard's words: "Doubtless the fathers might err, even Peter, the prince of the apostles, fell into error: what wonder that the saints do not always show themselves inspired? The fathers did not themselves believe that they, or their companions, were always right. Augustine found himself mistaken in some cases and did not hesitate to retract his errors. He warns his admirers not to look upon his letters as they would upon the Scripture, but to accept only those things which, upon examination, they find to be true," *Readings in European History*, ed. James Harvey Robinson (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1904–1906), I:450.



## VII. CONCLUSION

Nietzsche's pronouncement of the death of God movement sent shockwaves through history. The individual was elevated above God only to be replaced by the community. God was dead, the individual could not be trusted, and so the community was left in charge.

The church will be faced with great challenges in the twenty-first century. How will we answer them? Will we give in to the death of objective truth or will we proclaim that God is indeed alive, that He is *the* author of truth, and that His revelation is absolute?

May the words of Adolph Hitler in a speech dated November 6, 1933 soberly remind us that our job is to take care of the next generation:

When an opponent declares, "I will not come over to your side," I calmly say, "Your child belongs to us already...What are you? You will pass on. Your descendants, however, now stand in the new camp. In a short time they will know nothing else but this new community."<sup>31</sup>

The community is new and it demands the power to determine what truth is acceptable. May we not be oblivious of our surroundings as a recent bumper sticker jokes, "Where are we going? And why are we in this handbasket?" But instead, we should be mindful of the past and hopeful of the future. May we not give in to relativism disguised as the community view of truth.

---

<sup>31</sup> Adolph Hitler quoted in William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 249.