

A CRITICAL REVIEW •  
**kategoria**

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**FEMINIST THEOLOGY**

*Women and the word of God*



**POSTMODERN**  
*morality*



**REASONABLE**  
*science?*



A CRITICAL REVIEW •  
kategoria

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# editorial

It's an old fallacy that science is about reason and thinking, whereas Christianity is about 'blind' faith and mystery. However, it's a fallacy that keeps on rearing its head in popular and academic literature. In this issue we take a few pokes at particular portrayals of this misunderstanding. The Bible is anything but anti-intellectual; in fact, it pointedly encourages serious study and understanding of the Scriptures and the significance of Christ's actions, not to mention the importance of real, external corroborative evidence for its claims. Only the most naïve of characterizations of Christian theology—or indeed of science, as Andrew Ford's article in this issue shows—would continue a bland faith/reason division.

Yet the Bible is also misunderstood from a completely different angle—celebrating the interpretive role of a community which may choose to disregard aspects of more traditional interpretation. This is characteristic of 'postmodern' readings, such as the feminist readings discussed in this issue. To what extent are they valid? Certainly the way in which feminist readings can seem to redefine or simply ignore

basic rationality is hardly what we would expect from good scholarship, even given the dedication and considerable intelligence of some of these writers.

Postmodernism is coming to be seen in many circles as the end of history, a black hole that will destroy civilization as we know it. In this area too, however, we must not fall into naïve dichotomies. Life, thinking and ethics have certainly changed in what we might call the postmodern world. Yet civilization somehow manages to wander on. Just what is happening to our collective Western understanding? Is truth giving way to 'myths', as some writers argue? On the other hand, what is filling the moral void that people feel?

It has struck me recently, after reading Harry Blamire's *The Post-Christian Mind*, that simple shifts in language can bring enormous shifts in social understanding. An article I have just read in *Family Matters*, the Australian Institute of Family Studies journal, illustrates the point well.

Take for instance, the sentence "divorce might reflect changes to moral practices

6 | rather than moral decline”. Seemingly innocuous, but holds a whole agenda about ethics. If moral practices can change and still be moral, then what does it mean to add the adjective ‘moral’? On the other hand, if moral *decline* is possible—if being moral is a matter of degree according to a fixed standard—then how can we have a ‘change in moral practices’? If it is a change, then how is it still a ‘moral’ practice?

Another phrase which caught my eye was “as marriages are terminated and as family life takes new turns”. Wait a minute—if a marriage is terminated, then the family has now split. Family life is not simply ‘taking new turns’ but is breaking up. It is a tragedy, not an interesting development. A similar shorthand is ‘post-divorce family life’—as if this is just another phase in family life, perhaps like the ‘small children’ phase or the ‘teenage’ phase.

It seems we must redefine ‘family’ to mean not just married parents and their

children, but any group of people related in the present or past, whether living together and committed to each other or not. In other words, to make ‘family’ a fairly meaningless concept.

Families matter—a concept which I would have thought linked to the name of the journal, but evidently not. The phrases I noticed may be simple expressions, but they represent a devaluing of the family until the word can mean anything. The breakdown of a family is terrible, and my heart goes out to the children described in this article who are so “accomplished” in their “ethic of care” as they juggle competing emotional demands from separate parents. If this is ‘family’, we have lost something very valuable. It may only be language, but language is powerful. It pays to watch what it is doing. ☒

Kirsten Birkett  
EDITOR





# Feminist interpretations of Scripture

## *The hermeneutics of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*

*Darren Box*

To read feminist theology and hermeneutics is to enter a ‘brave new world’ of radical ways of reading and appropriating the biblical text. It is a field of enquiry that has risen to the fore in academic circles over the past 30 years. This article examines the work of one of the key scholars in the field, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Fiorenza is widely acknowledged as a leading feminist thinker and her approach to the Bible is both sophisticated and comprehensive. At the heart of Fiorenza’s ‘re-visioning’ of the Scriptures in a feminist key is her move from seeing the text as ‘archetype’ to seeing it as ‘prototype’. To summon another metaphor, we must understand the Scriptures as ‘bread’ not ‘stone’. What does this mean? What is involved in such a paradigm shift?<sup>1</sup>

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1 Fiorenza is fond of drawing comparisons between her own ground-breaking work and the theories of Thomas Kuhn in the scientific world.

The first part of my review is primarily descriptive of Fiorenza’s position. I will answer the above question in three stages: (i) presenting a concise summary of what Fiorenza is proposing; (ii) exploring the situational or contextual factors that are important for understanding Fiorenza’s thought; (iii) probing the deeper metaphysical and epistemological currents that enable such a move.

The second part of the review critically evaluates Fiorenza’s position in the light of evangelical presuppositions about Scripture. What would we gain—and what would we lose—by adopting the paradigm shift Fiorenza is advocating?

### **From archetype to prototype**

Fiorenza follows the lead of Rachel Blau DuPlessis in her use of the words ‘archetype’ and ‘prototype’. DuPlessis, analyzing the works of poets Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich and Muriel Rukeyser, comments thus:

A dictionary definition reveals the significant distinction between the words. While both archetype and prototype “denote original models,” an archetype is “usually construed as an ideal form that establishes an unchanging pattern.”... However... a prototype is not a binding, timeless pattern, but one critically open to the possibility, even the necessity of its own transformation.<sup>2</sup>

Fiorenza is conscious that she is proposing a new paradigm in biblical interpretation that clashes with existing models.

This insight is applied by Fiorenza to the text of Scripture. Rather than conceptualizing the Bible as “normative immutable archetype” she proposes that we understand the Bible “as an open-ended paradigm that sets experience in motion and structures transformations...a formative root-model of women–church”. The following conclusion uses different language but summarizes well Fiorenza’s contention:

I have argued therefore that rather than seek a “revealed” Archimedean

point in the shifting sand of biblical-historical relativity—be it a liberating tradition, text, or principle in the Bible—a feminist critical hermeneutics has to explore and assess whether and how Scripture can become an enabling, motivating resource and empowering authority in women’s struggle for justice, liberation, and solidarity.<sup>3</sup>

Fiorenza is conscious that she is proposing a new paradigm in biblical interpretation that clashes with existing models. However, as she understands it, such a move is absolutely necessary if ‘Scripture’ and “the praxis of feminist liberation” are to ever become allies.

Understanding any scholar’s thought demands an appreciation of the contextual influences upon them and the politico-social commitments they have. Fiorenza is more forthright about her commitments than many. In the school of feminist interpretation “declaring one’s interest is regarded as a merit”.<sup>4</sup> There are two ‘interests’ especially that we must consider: (i) Fiorenza is a feminist in the Liberation-theology tradition, and (ii) Fiorenza is an accomplished scholar.

In line with the feminist movement more generally, Fiorenza is working towards

2 Rachel Blau DuPlessis, ‘The Critique of Consciousness and Myth in Levertov, Rich and Ruckeyser,’ *Feminist Studies* 3 (1975):219; quoted in Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* Beacon Press, Boston, 1984, p. 61.

3 Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, xxiii. References to this book are bracketed in the text from here on.

4 Ann Loades, ‘Feminist Interpretation,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John Barton Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 84.



“women’s (religious) self-affirmation, power, and liberation from all patriarchal alienation, marginalization, and exploitation” (p. xv). Consequently, the *experience* of women, and especially “the experience of women struggling for liberation from patriarchal oppression” is the locus of divine revelation and grace (p. xvi).

Given this experiential priority, what role does the Bible play in achieving feminist goals? According to Fiorenza, the answer to this is far from simple. On the one hand, women have experienced the Bible as an instrument of oppression. Historically, the Bible has been used (by dominant men) to justify the status quo and “to halt the emancipation of slaves and women”. This is not only because people have misused the Bible, but because the

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The experience of women... is the locus of divine revelation and grace.

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Bible is a “thoroughly patriarchal book written in androcentric language” (p. xiii). However, “at the same time [the Bible] has been a resource for courage, hope and commitment in this struggle” (p. x). In the experience of some women, the Bible also has been an inspiration to continue fighting. It has provided a “vision of freedom and wholeness...authorization and legitimization for women who have rejected slavery, racism, anti-Semitism, colonial exploitation, and misogyny as unbiblical and against God’s will” (p.xi).



According to her, a foundational shift has taken place which allows women to rediscover their biblical heritage.

To do justice to this polarity of experience, Fiorenza proposes a “critical dialectical mode of biblical interpretation”. All texts must be subjected to “a dialectical process of critical readings and feminist evaluations”. In order to do this “the litmus test for invoking Scripture as the Word of God must be whether or not biblical texts and traditions seek to end relations of domination and exploitation”. And in order to establish this we must transform our metaphor of Scripture

“from ‘tablets of stone’ on which the unchanging word of God is engraved for all time into the image of bread that nurtures, sustains, and energizes women” (pp. xiii–xiv). This enables women to reclaim the whole Bible (not just selected sections) as their ‘heritage’ and as part of their power for liberation praxis today.

Thus Fiorenza’s commitment to women’s liberation demands a new paradigm of biblical interpretation that understands the Bible not as archetype, but as formative prototype.

### **The rejection of academic paradigms**

The second area of ‘interest’ to explore is Fiorenza’s involvement in the

academy.<sup>5</sup> According to her, a foundational shift has taken place “in our perception of the function of biblical texts and interpretations”, which (along with feminism) allows women to rediscover their biblical heritage. The ‘text-as-prototype’ understanding of the Scriptures arises out of her engagement, and ultimate dissatisfaction with, models based upon ‘text-as-archetype’ presuppositions.

There are two models she rejects: the ‘doctrinal paradigm’ and the ‘historical-critical’ approach. Fiorenza describes the doctrinal paradigm:

This paradigm... conceives of the authority and truth claims of the Bible in ahistoric, dogmatic terms. In its most consistent form it insists on the verbal inspiration and literal accuracy of these biblical books.... the Bible not only communicates the Word of God but is the Word of God.... Therefore it is directly binding and has absolute authority (p. 25).

Fiorenza goes on to highlight a number of practical expressions of this paradigm: proof texting; the psychoanalytical approach (Who is the ‘paralytic’ in you?) and the illustrative (or thematic) approach as found in Catholic lectionary readings. This paradigm is to be rejected because it does not

pay enough attention to context (or historical grounding); it is simplistic in that it ignores glaring contradictions in the text; and most seriously it encourages both Church and individual to “appropriate biblical interpretation for [their] own authority” (p. 28). Fiorenza argues that Scripture is in danger of becoming an ideological justification for institutional or personal legitimization.

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The canon must arise from the contemporary struggle of women against patriarchy.

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In confrontation with this dogmatic understanding of Scripture, the historical-critical approach to the Bible has emerged. This model “establishes the archetypal significance of the bible through historical verification”. Scholars in this field seek to be objective, value-neutral and rational. They attempt “to create a purely objective reconstruction of the facts...theological meaning and truth thus become identified with historical factualness”. While still adhering to the dogma of a value-neutral, uninvolved historiography, the academy has become increasingly suspicious of the ‘objectivist-factual’ understanding of history. The result is a study of Bible texts simply as ‘ancient history’ or as ‘literature’. It is not appropriate to ask what the Bible text means for Christian and church self-understanding today. The historical para-

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<sup>5</sup> Fiorenza holds degrees in theology from the Universities of Wurzburg and Munster. She has been a member of the department of theology at the University of Notre Dame since 1970 and is currently Talbot Professor of New Testament Studies at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

14 | digm asks what the text *meant*, but not what it *means*. For this reason it must, according to Fiorenza, be rejected as ultimately inadequate.

However, the methodological insights of historical-critical research point to a third model of biblical interpretation. A theological criterion by which to evaluate the truth and authority of various biblical texts and traditions cannot be derived from *within* the canon (e.g. the words of Jesus, coherence with the gospel message, etc). Instead the canon must arise “from the contemporary struggle of women against ... patriarchy” (p. 14), from “Christian communities to which these texts speak today” (p. 40). Fiorenza commends a hermeneutic that

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“In short, if we claim that oppressive patriarchal texts are the Word of God then we proclaim God as a God of oppression and dehumanization.”

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follows Augustine, Thomas, and the Second Vatican Council in formulating a criterion or canon that limits inspired truth and revelation to matters pertaining to the salvation, freedom and liberation of all, especially women (p. 14).

This, Fiorenza argues, can only be done as we understand the Bible not as archetype, but as historical prototype or formative root-model of biblical faith and life.

So we see that along with her feminist commitment, Fiorenza’s engagement with the academy and her search for a coherent and relevant model of biblical interpretation has resulted in her proposal of a new paradigm.

### **Fiorenza’s world view**

We turn now to investigate the deeper currents running through Fiorenza’s proposals. What are the philosophical foundations upon which she builds? My assessment will deal, in turn, with the traditional triad of metaphysics (theology), epistemology and ethics.

Fiorenza understands her task to be “theological” in the strictest sense of the word, requiring “a new naming of God”. Insofar as the Bible “renders God” male it serves to legitimate patriarchal power and oppression. God is just and gracious, concerned for the liberation and ‘wholeness’ of every person. As such, the divine being is implacably opposed to all exploitation and dehumanization, especially the kind of patriarchal oppression which is inherent in Bible texts: “In short, if we claim that oppressive patriarchal texts are the Word of God then we proclaim God as a God of oppression and dehumanization.”

In a more recent work (*But She Said*: 1992), Fiorenza also identifies the ‘kyriocentric’ or master-centered character of biblical language as contributing to the ‘colonization’ of women. Ellen Wondra’s summary of feminist theology more generally captures Fiorenza’s preferred conception of God:



The divine is understood as fully present in human history, not as imperial Lord, but as fellow-sufferer and as the ultimate source of struggles for liberation.<sup>6</sup>

God can be known, but not directly through the Scriptures or any human institution. Rather, God's nurturing presence "reveals" its power in the struggles of all women who seek to live "the option for our women selves" in a patriarchal society and religion (p. xv). The Bible can, at best, give us a window onto the past experiences of 'women-church' which can be used as a resource for empowerment now.

Much feminist theology understands Jesus to be an exemplary figure, "who as the Christ embodies liberated humanity

6 Ellen K. Wondra, 'By Whose Authority? The Status of Scripture in Contemporary Feminist Theologies,' *Anglican Theological Review* 74, 1: p. 96.

and the restored mutual relation between humanity and divinity".<sup>7</sup> Fiorenza is more circumspect, questioning whether it is possible to know the historical Jesus, much less "imitate him, since an actual following of Jesus is not possible for us" (p. 60).

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Feminist theology articulates for women a theology of "self-affirmation".

Moreover, it is doubtful Jesus can be a role model for contemporary women because "liberation means the struggle... to free ourselves from all internalized male norms and models". Any tradition that recommends the willing suffering of violence, even when such suffering is allegedly redemptive, must be rejected since it always serves 'kyriarchal' interests.<sup>8</sup> However, Jesus can be a model in the way that he "realized freedom toward Scripture and tradition for the sake of human well being and wholeness (cf. Mark 2:27)" (p. 14).

According to Fiorenza, "the structural sin of patriarchal sexism" is the great evil to be fought against (p. 7). The dominant political, social, economic and theological structures all promote the exploitation and oppression of women. In the midst

7 *Ibid.*, p. 96.

8 Ann Loades, "Feminist Interpretation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 91 — commenting on Fiorenza's arguments in *Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet* (1994).

16 | of struggles for liberation “the pervasive effects of sin and the continuous offer of redemption are disclosed, experienced and articulated”. A ‘feminist conversion’ will thus be experienced differently for women and for men. “[M]en must take the option for the oppressed and become women-identified... *women* must seek to overcome our deepest self-alienation.” Feminist theology articulates for women a theology of “self-affirmation” (p. 15).

A hope-filled eschatological vision

Fiorenza’s redefinition of sin is also inadequate: exploitation and oppression are outworkings of sin, but at heart sin is the very self-centredness that Fiorenza advocates for the conversion of women.

plays a large part in Fiorenza’s theology. She works towards a time when the oppression and marginalization of women will be eradicated forever. Fiorenza’s project can be summed up by these goals: to tap into the hope of women-church in the past and articulate this future vision for women of the present.

Turning to epistemology, Fiorenza’s position can be summarized in the phrase ‘advocacy for’.<sup>9</sup> Her prime insight here is

9 This paragraph based on Fiorenza’s discussion in *Bread Not Stone*, pp. 136–149.

that there is no possibility of an objective, value-neutral stance at any stage in the communication process. This is expounded at two levels for a study of literature. First the author(s) of biblical texts are themselves men with particular socio-political leanings writing into a particular socio-political context. Especially in the case of the Bible, patriarchal presuppositions structure and saturate the text. Second, readers and interpreters of the Bible are themselves working from a particular rhetorical and socio-political context.

These insights have a number of epistemological implications:

(i) All biblical interpreters must be clear and up-front about their own presuppositions and commitments;

(ii) “Inspiration cannot be located in texts...but its process is found in the believing community and in its history as the people of God” (p. 140). Fiorenza especially locates inspiration in the struggles of women-church against patriarchy;

(iii) As readers, we cannot simply strive for “identification” or “empathy” with the text, but must adopt a hermeneutics of suspicion in order to evaluate biblical texts and their worlds of meaning in terms of a critical theology of liberation.

It should be clear by now that Fiorenza is driven by a particular *ethical* vision. The interpretive model she proposes is designed to assist Bible readers to read responsibly, that is, with a view to the political and ethical consequences of their interpretation. “On this view, the moral-

ity of literary knowledge means choosing the reading that is most likely to foster social justice”<sup>10</sup>—and for Fiorenza, peace, freedom and wholeness for women.

## Departures from Scripture

I begin my evaluation by highlighting those areas in which Fiorenza has departed from the Bible’s internal understanding, as developed by a canonical approach to theology. First, her paradigm shift involves a denial of basic gospel teachings. The God of the Bible is not only the helper who comes alongside, but the Sovereign Lord whose Word is to be obeyed. We, sinful creatures, are called to listen and to fall into line with God’s trustworthy Word. Fiorenza’s redefinition of sin is also inadequate: exploitation and oppression are outworkings of sin, but at heart sin is the very self-centredness that Fiorenza advocates for the conversion of women. Rejecting the redemptive sufferings of Jesus as being unhelpful for women removes the possibility of any real reconciliation with the Living God. Even Fiorenza’s glorious vision of a future depatriarchalized world and a “discipleship of equals” pales into insignificance beside the Bible’s portrait of a new heaven and earth where Jesus has dominion over every power and authority.

Second, Fiorenza’s proposal downplays significant aspects of the Bible’s own teach-

ing about Scripture. The God who speaks, moreover who enters into covenant relationship with human individuals, is entirely missing from Fiorenza’s work. Similarly, Jesus’ own ‘verbally inspired’ view of the Old Testament as God’s Word is glossed over, as is his entrusting the disciples with the responsibility to pass on ‘gospel truth’. The theme of *fulfillment* in Jesus would seem to be especially important for her thesis. Passages like Hebrews 1:1–4 and 2 Peter 1:16 teach that while ‘revelation’ had been progressive and incomplete in the past, in Jesus the ultimate (archetypal) revelation has come from God. According to the Bible, revelation is not ongoing in the way that Fiorenza asserts it is.

Finally, and most seriously, Fiorenza’s proposals mean that we are cut off from any real contact with a transcendent Other:

Third, even if we grant women’s experience the highly significant place Fiorenza wants us to, how are we to understand the testimony of those women who claim to experience ‘freedom’ and ‘wholeness’ precisely by reading the Bible with a ‘hermeneutics of consent’? In my experience *many* such women exist! The very texts which Fiorenza rejects as being most oppressive (e.g. the household codes) have brought joy and fulfillment to many women. In light of the real and twisted patterns in our society, it appears that

<sup>10</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text: The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1998, p. 159.

18 | Fiorenza has failed to consider the possibility of a 'benign Fatherhood' or a 'nurturing Lordship'.

Fiorenza's insistence that there is no possibility of an objective, value-neutral stance at any stage in the communication process encourages us towards an appropriate exegetical humility.

Finally, and most seriously, Fiorenza's proposals mean that we are cut off from any real contact with a transcendent Other. The construction and rhetorical purpose of the Scriptures is so thoroughly human (and hence flawed, even 'poisoned' because penned by dominant males) that I cannot even glimpse in them the face of God. Moreover, I am now dependent upon the interpretive judgment of the community of women to appreciate what 'liberation' (and hence indirectly what 'God') looks like. Kevin Vanhoozer notes that arguments like Fiorenza's are logically fallacious: the interpretive result (i.e. liberation for women) is already contained in the interpretive interest (i.e. the normativeness of women's experience). He continues:

To assign priority to the reader's context and interest is to immunize one's interpretive community from the very possibility of criticism by

the text. Reading the text on these terms is like projecting one's image onto the mirror of the text, a hermeneutic strategy that sentences the interpretive community to stare at its own reflection.<sup>11</sup>

The Bible tells us that God has spoken in and through human language and culture. In the gospel teaching that 'Jesus is Lord', God reveals ultimate freedom and wholeness for both men and women. The 'tablets of stone' are in fact loving words from a heavenly Father that nourish and sustain all who trust them. The metaphor is inappropriately damning.

### Lessons for interpreters

So can we learn anything constructive from Fiorenza's proposal? Indeed we can, in at least three ways. To read Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is to enter into the pain and grief of a woman who is rightly outraged at the many injustices men have perpetrated against women. Those who have not experienced such oppression must listen carefully and weigh the seriousness of these wrongs. It is clear that parts of the Bible have been used, and continue to be used, to justify immoral practices. Those who are focused upon individual sin and accountability need to be reminded that sin can also be located in unjust structures.

Second, Fiorenza's unwillingness to

11 Vanhoozer, *op. cit.*, p.182.

accept a calcified doctrinal paradigm or a distant historical paradigm in her determination to claim the Bible as a resource for action today reminds us that God's Word is "living and active" (Heb 4:12). God has spoken by his Spirit and that shapes the way that I speak and act this very day. Although we understand how this works very differently, we stand together in wanting the Bible to have some bearing on modern life.

Finally, Fiorenza's insistence that there is no possibility of an objective, value-neutral stance at any stage in the communication process encourages us towards an appropriate exegetical humility. Our doctrine of sin confirms this—my intellect and motivations remain fallen, even when indwelt by God's Holy Spirit. Our doctrine of eschatology confirms this:

That the meaning and significance of a text are never a present possession, but a partially fulfilled promise, is perhaps sufficient antidote to the poison of prideful interpretation.<sup>12</sup>

Of course having said that, we must also affirm that (i) God is able to use frail human instruments to communicate his saving truth to us; and (ii) we are not so

corrupt that we cannot *adequately* know the truth about God. ☒

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12 Vanhoozer, *op cit*, p. 465.



# Believing in science

*Andrew Ford*<sup>1</sup>

Modern natural science is a fundamental and enormously important part of our contemporary life, especially in the West. There are of course those who would diminish the role of modern science to one of mere technology, no more than fighting disease, and building skyscrapers or vehicles to explore our solar system and beyond. However the scientific enterprise has and continues to do so much more than just these things. For instance, science investigation has given us powerful insight into ourselves and our world. Science has transformed humanity's intellectual landscape; it is difficult even to imagine what our intellectual life would be without it. At the same time, many now see scientific knowledge as having a priority over God's self-revelation in Scripture. This inexorably leads to a diminution of the reputation of the Bible as a true and valid source of knowledge.

This verdict is premature, to say the least. Although the Bible does not present a comprehensive epistemology, its content nevertheless implies a theory of knowledge,

and “even provides important struts for such a theory”.<sup>1</sup> The doctrine of creation demands that the Christian believer take this created world seriously.<sup>2</sup> The observations and deductions of science are of that same world which God has created, and has (and will) redeemed through Jesus Christ. Francis Bacon in his *Advancement of Learning* (1605) could speak of the two books both written by God: the “book of His words” (the Bible) and the “book of His works” (creation). This concept continues to have significant impact on thinking on

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1 C.F.H. Henry, *Towards a Recovery of Christian Belief*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, 1990, p. 107.

2 While it would be folly to treat the Bible as a science textbook (for this was not the author's purpose), or the natural order as a systematic theology, nevertheless nature does reveal something of our God, even if it is only knowledge that leads to condemnation and not relationship (cf. Rom 1, Ps 19). The role and validity of natural revelation and natural theology is not the issue of this essay. However, in any thorough-going consideration of the relationship between scientific knowledge and the Bible, this topic should be examined, especially the noetic and epistemological effects of the Fall.

22 | the relationship between science and theology.<sup>3</sup> Despite this Christian perspective it is not surprising that given the diversity of both theological methods and views of the Bible, as well as the plethora of philosophical underpinnings used by science

This perceived distinction in epistemological validity has many points of origin.

across the scientific community, that the ways of relating the two disciplines are so diverse and numerous. Barbour and others<sup>4</sup> have helpfully catalogued the major areas and methods for relating these two knowledge-seeking disciplines into four groups: Independence,<sup>5</sup> Dialogue,<sup>6</sup> Integration,<sup>7</sup> and Conflict.<sup>8</sup> By far the most commonly held view is the last, that science and theology are opposing forces. The title and themes of A.D. White's *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology*

3 A.E. McGrath, *The Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion*, Blackwell, Malden, MA, 1998, pp. 102–103.

4 I.G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*, Harper Collins, New York, 1997, pp. 77–103; J.P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1989, pp. 200–208; A.R. Peacocke (ed.), *Sciences and Theology in the Twentieth Century*, Oriol Press, London, 1981, pp. xiii–xv.

5 Barbour, *op. cit.*, pp. 84–89.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 90–97.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 98–103.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 77–83.

in *Christendom* (1896)<sup>9</sup> have unfortunately set the tone for much modern discussion of the relationship between Christian theology and scientific endeavor, even though in reality rarely have contentious issues seen the two 'sides' in opposition. It has been popularly accepted ever since the Enlightenment that 'properly practiced' science is a calculated, reasoned, wholly dispassionate attempt to ascertain the truth about us and/or our world. This investigation is seen to occur entirely independent of preconceived ideology, moral conviction, religious or theological commitments. On the other hand, the Bible is seen as anything but dispassionate or objective, but value-laden and presuppositional.

This perceived distinction in epistemological validity has many points of origin. One major contribution is the epistemological theory of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant introduced into Western thought (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781), a theoretical bifurcation of reality. As he saw it, reality was divided into the factual realm—Phenomena—and the realm of value—Noumena.<sup>10</sup> Following this epistemological 'division' it has been common to assign the factual realm to science, and the value realm to theology. By separating the protagonists, based on this distinction, it was hoped that conflict could be

9 A.D. White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*, Macmillan, London, 1896.

10 Francis Schaeffer spoke of this in terms of the upper and lower story of reality: *Escape from Reason: Understanding Trends in Modern Thought*, IVP, Leicester, 1995.



avoided, with science keeping to the business of verifying (falsifying) the factual and observable, while theology (and its source information—the Bible) would be limited to the non-observable, non-verifiable.<sup>11</sup>

In practice, this bifurcation has not led to a cessation in the conflict, but rather the rise of a new ideological and philosophical positivism, called scientific materialism, or Scientism.<sup>12</sup> Scientism contends that the

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11 Many theologians have been attracted to this separation idea, as it allows them to separate science and the Scriptures in terms of the object addressed.

12 Positivism intends to convey a warning against the attempts of theology and metaphysics to go beyond the world in order to inquire into first causes or ultimate ends. All genuine human knowledge is contained within the boundaries of science, that is the systematic study of phenomena and the explication of the laws embodied therein. Philosophy may still perform a useful function in explaining the scope and methods of science, pointing out the more general principles underlying specific scientific findings, and exploring the implications of science for human life. But according to the positivist, epistemology must abandon the claim to have any means of attaining knowledge not available to science. Its claim is therefore that whatever question cannot be answered by scientific methods we must be content to leave permanently unanswered.

scientific method is the exclusively reliable source of knowledge. In their underlying metaphysic, however, proponents of this view—such as Richard Dawkins (biologist), Carl Sagan (cosmologist), and Steven Weinberg (physicist),<sup>13</sup> have extended scientific concepts beyond their scientific use to support a comprehensive philosophy. Philosophically, Scientism finds its intellectual antecedents in the materialist

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Scientism contends that the scientific method is the exclusively reliable source of knowledge.

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French Enlightenment, the empiricism of David Hume, and the evolutionary naturalism of the nineteenth century. Although Scientism denigrates the role of any subjective belief in knowledge, or in the formulation of that knowledge, it nevertheless subscribes to two fundamental ‘beliefs’:

(1) The scientific method is the only reliable path to knowledge (i.e. positivism<sup>14</sup>); and

Experiments are the *only* means of knowledge at our disposal. The rest is poetry and imagination.<sup>15</sup>

(2) Matter (or matter and energy) is

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13 Barbour, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

14 *Ibid.*

15 Max Planck: (physicist), quoted in McGrath, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

24 | the fundamental reality of the universe (i.e. materialism).

The first of these is an epistemological assertion about the character of inquiry and knowledge. The second is a metaphysical assertion about the nature of reality. These two assertions are linked by the assumption that *only* the entities and causes with which science deals are real; *only* science can progressively disclose the nature of the reality. It is the epistemological claim of Scientism that we are concerned with here, in particular the claims of exclusivity of knowledge because of the objective nature of scientific inquiry, as opposed to biblical interpretation of divine revelation.



all too aware of the ecological and humanitarian problems that the 'advance' in the natural sciences has brought—modern industry, biological and medical technology, and so on. As well as this, the objectivity and status as 'pure' unbiased exploration that science claims, is being seriously questioned, particularly as the 'postmodern' mind-set impinges on the wider community and science itself. The supposed objectivity of science in discovering features of the 'real' world does not go unquestioned today—for example by those who highlight the role of the interests of society in determining the role of science and the activity of scientists, or the distribution the research dollar based on the pressure of special interests.

As germane as these critiques of scientific knowledge are, they don't seem to extricate the great majority of scientists<sup>17</sup>

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Scientists no longer command the absolute respect that they did twenty years ago.

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From recent surveillance of science and theology, it appears that there are more people crossing the no-man's land between these two 'opposing armies'. Significant changes have occurred in both the work and method of the theologian and also with respect to popular confidence in the 'all-conquering' science and scientists. Scientists no longer command the absolute respect that they did twenty years ago. For the 'commodities' they deliver turn out to be a very mixed bag.<sup>16</sup> The modern West is now

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<sup>16</sup> Peacocke, *op. cit.*, p. x.

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<sup>17</sup> With the possible exception of particle physicists and cosmologists.

from a sceptical and qualified realism.<sup>18</sup> Thus scientific models approximate and the hypotheses genuinely refer to the real state of affairs. Such a sceptical realism is the working assumption of practical scientists,<sup>19</sup> and this is something which in an evaluation of the epistemological methods and validity of science cannot be lightly set aside.

Let us consider the assertion that the scientific method is the only reliable form of understanding. Science starts from reproducible public data. Hypotheses and then theories are formulated, and their implications are tested against experimental observations. Additional coherence, comprehensiveness, and fruitfulness influence choice amongst alternative theories. Of course this idealistic view of science is not without its historical and philosophical critics, as we will see. All the same, under this view of knowledge, revealed knowledge (such as is found in Scripture) is unacceptable as it lacks the equivalent public data (a universally accessible object of knowledge), the experimental validity (reproducibility of that data), and is said not to meet the

same criteria for evaluation. Thus science alone is seen as being objective, open-minded, universal, cumulative, rational and progressive. Religious tradition or even knowledge gained from an objective religious text are said to be subjective, closed-minded, parochial, uncritically reliant on 'faith' and resistant to change.

Thus science alone is seen as being objective, open-minded, universal, cumulative, rational and progressive.

Locke in the seventeenth century fashioned paradigmatic statements of the contradiction between faith and reason, to which many generations have blithely (yet not necessarily rationally) subscribed. As he said in 1692:

Whatever is not capable of demonstration... is not, unless it be self evident, capable to produce knowledge, how well grounded and great soever the assurance of faith may be where with it is received; but faith it is still, and not knowledge; persuasion, and not certainty.<sup>20</sup>

Subsequent to the Newtonian revolution in science, a dualism has been entrenched

18 According to which their models and hypotheses are regarded as candidates for reality—that is, these models are of, and hypotheses are about, a real, but only imperfectly known world.

19 Indeed from my own experience of doing scientific research, I do not think science and those who pursue knowledge through its practice could go on unless they held such a belief. This claim in itself is somewhat subjective. It is not within the scope of this piece to support such an anecdotal claim.

20 John Locke, *A Third Letter for Toleration*, 1692; quoted in T.F. Torrance, 'The Framework of Belief' in T.F. Torrance (ed.), *Belief in Science and in Christian Life: The Relevance of Michael Polanyi's Thought for Christian Faith and Life*, Handsel Press, Edinburgh, 1980, pp. 7–8.

26 | in epistemology. The ubiquitous mechanistic conception of the universe along with a narrow-minded materialistic and positivistic conception of knowledge, rigidly excludes any sphere of intelligibility beyond the evidence of the senses, denigrating it as ‘metaphysical’ or ‘mystical’.<sup>21</sup> Thus in the nineteenth century and following the prevailing trend has been to make the practice of biblical interpretation generally more rigorous by shaping it to the practice of science. This in and of itself is not necessarily wrong. Scientific and revealed knowledge need not necessarily be in conflict, but for many in society (Christian and non-Christian alike) the procedures of science had established themselves as normative, if not epistemologically exclusive, simply because of the denigration of the validity of revelation as a source of true knowledge.

Despite this concentration upon phenomena or appearances, upon the observable and tangible magnitudes, which are quantifiable, the seventeenth-century mathematician Blaise Pascal gave an account of the polar relationship between the *intuitive mind* and the *geometric mind* (or simply the heart and reason). These represented contrary but complementary ways of approaching truth—intuitive penetration and the art of reasoning.<sup>22</sup> More recently, Michael Polanyi has again argued that



positivistic and ‘objectivist’ philosophies of modern science are inadequate; moreover they have given rise to what he called the ‘massive modern absurdity’, the limitation of rational knowledge entirely to what can be tested by reference to observations or logically deduced from them.<sup>24</sup>

Epistemologically, Polanyi critiques modern science for ignoring (or rather suppressing) the fact that knowledge belongs to a human knower, who inevitably participates personally in their knowledge in a way that cannot be fully specified. Polanyi has done much to clarify the foundations of knowledge, which have suffered from an unbalanced attention to impersonal, abstractive and analytical processes of thought. His fundamental hermeneutical contribution is that into every act of knowing, whether via observation or revelation (and correct

21 See Torrance, *ibid.*, pp. 1–7, for a historical account of the rise of this position.

22 T. F. Torrance, ‘The Transcendental Role of Wisdom in Science’, in J. M. Van der Meer, (ed.), *Facets of Faith and Science. Vol. 1: Historiography and Modes of Interaction*, Uni. Press of Am., Lanham 1996, pp. 132–33.

24 M. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-critical Philosophy*, Harper and Row, New York, 1964, p. 9.

interpretation of Scripture), ‘there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known, and that this coefficient is no mere imperfection but a vital component of his knowledge’.<sup>25</sup> Similarly to Pascal, Polanyi has shown that there are two constitutive aspects to every act of knowing. Firstly, an inarticulate aspect (*tacit knowledge*)<sup>26</sup> in which we have to do with the objective reference of the mind to reality, which cannot be specified; and also an articulate aspect (*explicit knowledge*) in which we have to do with the conceptual content of knowledge, which can be specified.<sup>27</sup> The former he called ‘the unaccountable element in science’;<sup>28</sup> that is, the intuitive and heuristic role of the understanding—the very cognitive faculty cast aside by a positivistic theory of knowledge. He argues extensively that it is only through relying implicitly on the ultimate belief or an inarticulate ingredient in knowledge, the content of which cannot be made explicit, that the most rigorous scientific operations are possible. Far from being of peripheral significance, therefore, belief

has to do with the ontological reference of knowledge, and thereby constitutes ‘the central act of knowing’ in scientific activity at every stage from discovery to verification.<sup>29</sup> It is the direct bearing of the human mind upon reality in a basic act of cognitive recognition, or of rational assent to its compelling claims, which is the very ground of knowing. Thus for every heuristic undertaking—for example, in biblical interpretation or scientific experimentation—“we can know more than we can tell” and we can tell nothing without relying on our awareness of things we may not be able to tell.<sup>30</sup>

It is the direct bearing of the human mind upon reality in a basic act of cognitive recognition, or of rational assent to its compelling claims, which is the very ground of knowing.

Thus Polanyi wrote in 1955,

To say that the discovery of objective truth in science consists in the apprehension of a rationality which commands our respect and arouses our contemplative admiration; that

25 *Ibid.*, p. viii.

26 See Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*, pp. 10ff, 137, 145.

27 Thus here in agreement with Pascal, he insists that even in the most rigorous and ‘pure’ mathematical proofs, it is impossible to operate with only explicitly defined terms, for in any definition one set of terms is defined only with reference to another which, within the definition, are left undefined—thus complete axiomatization of geometry is intrinsically impossible. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, pp. 94f., 118f., 192, 259f., 273.

28 Polanyi, *ibid.*, 105–20.

29 T.F. Torrance, ‘The Transcendental Role of Wisdom in Science’, p. 134.

30 M. Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (1966), pp. 3–25, quoted in P. Duce, *Reading the Mind of God: Interpretation in Science and Theology*, Apollós, Leicester, 1998, p. 126.

such a discovery, while using the experience of our senses as clues, transcends experience by embracing the vision of reality beyond the impression of our senses, a vision which speaks for itself in guiding us to an ever deeper understanding of reality—such an account of scientific procedure would be shrugged aside as outdated Platonism: mystery mongering, unworthy of an enlightened age.

Yet it is precisely on this conception of objectivity that I wish to insist.<sup>31</sup>

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Behind, and permeating, all scientific activity... there is an elemental, unshakeable faith in the rational nature of reality, and faith also in the possibility of grasping the real world with our concepts.

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In seeking to recover some of the ground abandoned here by the modern scientific outlook, Polanyi hoped that he would restore the balance between belief and reason on lines essentially similar to Augustine when, like the earlier church

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31 M. Polanyi, 'Faith and Reason', in Fred Schwartz (ed.), *Scientific Thought and Social Reality: Essays by Michael Polanyi*. International Press, New York, 1974, pp.101–2.

fathers, he took his cue from the teaching of Isaiah: *nisi credideritis, non intelligitis*.<sup>32</sup> As with Augustine and Pascal, Polanyi holds that this subtle relationship between the believing and the reasoning mind applies beyond the practice of theology and biblical interpretation. Thus he claims that behind, and permeating, all scientific activity (independent of any religious conviction of the scientist), there is for instance an elemental, unshakable faith in the rational nature of reality, and faith also in the possibility of grasping the real world with our concepts. Therefore Polanyi calls us to recognize fundamental belief or intuitive apprehension as the source of knowledge from which heuristic acts take their rise. For it is in belief that we are in direct touch with reality, in belief that our minds are open to the invisible realm of intelligibility independent of ourselves, and through belief we entrust our minds to the orderly and reliable nature of the universe. Belief of this kind is a commitment to the compelling claims of truth over which we have no control but in the service of which human rationality stands or falls. Faith and rationality, intuition and reason, are from beginning to end intrinsically interlocked

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32 Isaiah 7:9. See for example Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, pp. 266f.; or Polanyi, 'Faith and Reason', pp. 116–30; and T.F. Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. "Augustine used a mistranslation of Isaiah 7:9 as he read: 'unless you believe, you shall not understand', but nevertheless he did not miss Isaiah's meaning" H. Blocher, 'The Fear of the Lord as the "Principle" of Wisdom', *Tyndale Bulletin*, 1977, 28, pp. 3–28, p.28.



with one another.<sup>33</sup> Thus it was not only in the sphere of ‘revealed knowledge’ that the prominent antithesis between faith and reason had a deleterious effect, for, as Polanyi argued, in disrupting the balance of man’s cognitive powers it damaged the very foundation of knowledge, and laid the foundation for the modern rationalism and scientism which have so captured the modern mind.

In his discussion of the doctrine of inerrancy, Feinberg contends that “evangelicals do not usually discuss the matter of methodology, since they are generally more interested in the content of theology”.<sup>34</sup> Thinking methodologically, Polanyi envisages a harmony of method over the vast range of fields of knowledge. His approach

overcomes the Kantian bifurcation of reason and faith. Polanyi’s unifying theme is the personal dimension and participation of the knower in all knowledge. In science the heart of discovery is creative imagination, which is a very personal act. Science requires skills that, like riding a bicycle, cannot be formally specified but only learned by example and practice. In all knowledge we have to see patterns in wholes. In recognizing a friend’s face or in making a medical diagnosis, we use many

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Science has done much to advance the frontiers of knowledge, but unfortunately has often insisted that the indispensable need for faith or belief is essentially pre-scientific.

clues but cannot identify all the particulars on which our judgment of a total pattern relies. Polanyi holds that the assessment of evidence is always a discretionary personal judgment. No rules specify whether an unexplained discrepancy between theory and experiment should be set aside as an anomaly or taken to invalidate the theory. Participation in a community of inquiry is a safeguard against subjectivity, though it never removes the burden of individual responsibility.

Science has done much to advance the frontiers of knowledge, but unfortunately has often insisted that the indispensable need for faith or belief is essentially

33 Torrance, ‘The Framework of Belief’, pp. 9–10.

34 P.D. Feinberg, ‘The Meaning of Inerrancy’, in N.L. Geisler (ed.), *Inerrancy*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1979, p. 272.



pre-scientific. This, however, takes little account of the practice and history of science. For history records numerous incidents where humanity has made discoveries and advanced theories beyond

Polanyi has shown the need to acknowledge that there are some significant aspects of the nature of things which are more deeply grounded than any set of scientific evidence.

what was warranted by the available evidence, under the compulsion of a faith in the sheer intelligibility of nature and in a new vision of its intrinsic order. Often it is these steps of faith that spur on further quest and attainment of knowledge.

Any account of science which does not explicitly describe it as some-

thing we believe in is essentially incomplete and a false pretence. It amounts to a claim that science is essentially different from and superior to all human beliefs that are not scientific statements—and this is untrue. To show the falsity of this pretension, it should suffice to recall that originality is the mainspring of scientific discovery. Originality in science is the gift of a lonely belief in a line of experiments or of speculations, which at the time no one else considered to be profitable. Good scientists spend all their time betting their lives, bit by bit, on one personal belief after another.<sup>35</sup>

Polanyi has shown the need to acknowledge that there are some significant aspects of the nature of things which are more deeply grounded than any set of scientific evidence. Thus there is a certain epistemic awareness of any knower, without which scientific inquiry would not be possible. In the context of a critique of modern epistemologies, Polanyi provides the epistemological framework within which both science and biblical hermeneutics may be placed.

Gunton summarizes the essential character of Polanyi's work:

Polanyi developed a relational rather than an objectivizing conception of

<sup>35</sup> Polanyi, quoted in Torrance, 'Ultimate and Penultimate Beliefs in Science', p. 155.

the knower and the known; that is to say, he stressed that our relationship to a person or a thing is primary to our knowing them... Because we are acquainted with our universe as its inhabitants, and because we are in concrete relation to it, we begin to develop, by the use of our intellectual and other faculties, some account of our knowledge... The crucial concept is one of indwelling. We do not contemplate reality from the outside, from a godlike distance—'objectivism'—but we indwell the world as part of it. All knowledge arises out of and is a function of relation.<sup>36</sup>

The apparent divide between the epistemological validity of revealed knowledge and scientific knowledge is not as apparent as Locke and Kant, along with those following the bifurcation of reality, might contend. This is especially so with respect to the alleged basis of objectivity of the scientific knower compared to the Christian interpreter of the Bible. As we have seen, however, many have answered this fundamental challenge to the epistemological authority of revealed knowledge which modern science and scientism mounts. This is not to say that these two forms of knowledge are

identical, for patently they are not. Importantly, the Bible makes supreme claims about its own self-authenticating authority. Unlike the objects of science the Bible is not a *passive* object, but an *active* object, since God, who speaks in and through it, is the active subject.<sup>37</sup> On one level the object of hermeneutical study is not God himself, but his self-revelation in Scripture. The more closely and adequately Scripture is studied and allowed to determine the form and content of theology, the more adequately will interpretation conform to the truth about God himself. The more we revere and study the Book of God's word, the more we know its Author. As such this differs from the way we 'read' and know the book of God's work, creation. ☒

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36 C. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982, quoted in Duce *op. cit.*, pp. 135–6.

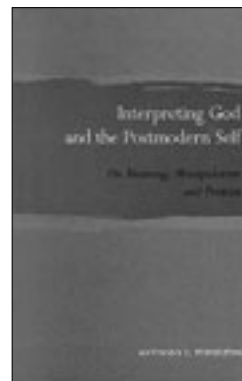
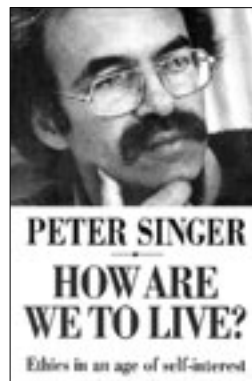
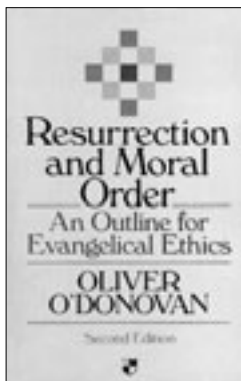
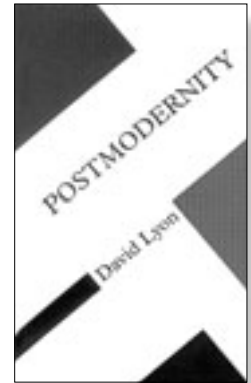
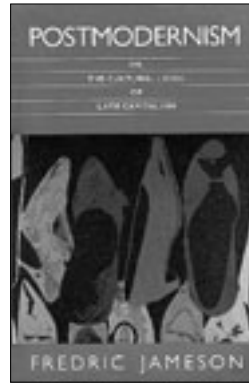
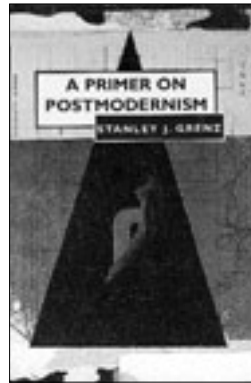
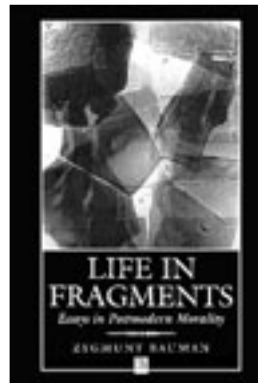
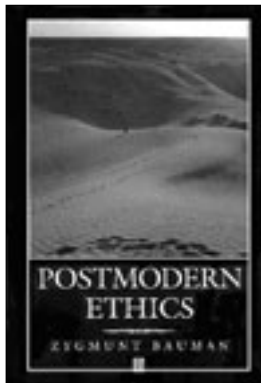
37 J.I. Packer, *God Has Spoken*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1988, p. 343.

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A large, light gray ampersand graphic serves as a background for the text. It is a classic, elegant font style with a large loop on the left and a smaller loop on the right.

Books  
&  
Ideas



# ‘Reality TV’ and postmodern ethics

Greg Clarke

Gazza and Cherie have known each other for six hours. Gazza’s in the bathroom of the resort hotel in which he, Cherie and a few other ‘couples’ are staying—courtesy of a commercial television station. He’s preening himself while Cherie lolls on his bed in her bikini, wondering to camera whether Gazza is “worth it”.

“I dunno. He’s cute and he makes me laugh, but geez I dunno if I can trust him. He’s an accountant, you know, so you’d think he could be trusted. But he said a few things down there on the beach that made me wonder. You know, things about hating his sister and stuff. I’m not sure.”

Gazza emerges, towel-wrapped, from the bathroom with a salacious grin on his face. Cherie looks to the camera again, “Whadda *you* reckon?”



Topping my all-time favourite oxymorons list is the term ‘reality television’. It refers to the kind of show that has been ‘gracing’ our screens for the past few years—shows like *Cops*, *Survivor!*, *Real TV* and *Ibiza*. Such shows endeavour to depict their victims—I mean stars—in ‘real life’ scenarios, such as entering the scene of a crime and dealing with the consequences, trying to live in a community on a distant island, or meeting a potential partner, as in the case of Gazza and Cherie.

What is 'real' about this kind of television? Almost nothing. The situations are entirely contrived; for instance, the group on the island. Everyone is aware that they are playing a game that will be carefully edited to increase dramatic tension, for the viewer's pleasure. There is no sense of reality at all when a man pops the question to a woman and a voiceover is then heard, "Will Gazza and Cherie go all the way

to work. That's not to say it isn't enjoyable—there's a lot of pleasure to be gained from a good illusion. And the fact that we *know* it is illusory, that we know that Gazza and Cherie are being paid by the program producers to put on a good show, doesn't seem to quell our enjoyment.

There is certainly an addictive quality to these shows, possibly based on our interest in gossip, conflict and sexuality. We love being flies on the wall. However, it may also reveal an enduring human fascination with ethical dilemmas. Is it right or wrong for Cherie to sleep with Gazza on their first date? Should it matter that he is cruel to his sister? How do you decide who would make a good partner? Is there anything wrong with just picking up the person you are most attracted to out of a group of four? These kinds of questions intrigue and preoccupy the human mind, for they make up the kind of decision-making issues facing most of us.

### The (re)turn to ethics

In the age of postmodernism,<sup>1</sup> it is common to say that there is no longer any clear basis for moral decision-making, and that such decisions are relative to a wide

<sup>1</sup> In this article, I am not getting into the debate over defining postmodernism. It is a fairly fruitless debate which results in everything and nothing being labelled 'postmodern'. I am also hoping that in this article the adjective 'postmodern' is read as neither a swear word nor a stylish or highbrow endorsement. I am merely using the word as a catch-all term to describe the late 20th century onwards, particularly in Western nations.

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There is certainly an addictive quality to these shows, possibly based on our interest in gossip, conflict and sexuality.

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tonight? We'll find out after this message..." It is, instead, a great simulation of reality—a *simulacrum*, as the social theorist Jean Baudrillard has described postmodern life. Baudrillard observed the way the electronic media blur the distinction between reality and media representations of it such that people begin to believe in the abstract representation rather than what they encounter away from the media. The couple's relationship on screen becomes more real than any relationship in life outside the media. It becomes 'even better than the real thing', as U2 sang.

In fact, what is real about TV at all? It's based on illusion through and through, even down to the technology of convincing the eye that we are in fact seeing movement instead of screens of pixels changing at a very rapid rate. The audiovisual medium requires an illusion in order



range of factors which cannot be considered more or less significant than each other. However, at the same time, there is a definite emphasis upon ethics in postmodern thought and media for its expression, such as television. Reality TV is based upon ethical dilemmas. Sometimes they are life and death decisions, such as in *Cops* when a drug deal is being busted by armed policemen. But, more often, the ethical decisions are to do with the etiquette of postmodern relationships—how we negotiate with each other in an age where there is no institution such as church or tradition from which we can draw instructions as to right and wrong.

It is fascinating that postmodernism has *not* resulted in a global decline into Niet-

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It is fascinating that postmodernism has not resulted in a global decline into Nietzschean nihilism.

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zschean nihilism, where all morality has been undermined, judgement avoided, and the most powerful rule over the rest (it almost did in Nazi Germany). Some may object to this analysis, claiming that things are far worse morally now than they were 50 years ago, citing such features as sexual promiscuity, the breakdown of the family, drug use and a culture of violence as evidence. However, there have been

concomitant ethical concerns such as environmental improvements, human rights advances, economic justice and cancelling third world debt. Ethical issues haven't been abandoned; they have been relocated to less traditional areas. Philosopher Zygmunt Bauman, who writes on postmodern ethics, says "the great issues of ethics—like human rights, social justice, balance between peaceful co-operation and personal self-assertion, synchronization of individual conduct and collective welfare—have lost nothing of their topicality".<sup>2</sup> Peter Singer, the Australian ethicist infamous for suggesting that some animals may have more right to life than some human beings, is a paragon of the postmodern situation. He believes in the

simply suggests that we live ethical lives because they will make us feel worthwhile:

Most important of all, you will know that you have not lived and died for nothing, because you will have become part of a great tradition of those who have responded to the amount of pain and suffering in the universe by trying to make the world a better place.<sup>3</sup>

After centuries of trying to disprove 17th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant's belief in "the mystery of the morality inside me", the postmodern era has come to accept it as almost true. It accepts that human beings are not apathetic about ethics—they just won't set limits to ethical conduct. We might think of postmodern ethics as a reaction against the perceived evils of modernism, that is, the attempt to progress society towards some sort of ideal, be it a religion, a perfect science, a totalitarian society, or a pure art form. Such modern projects came under scrutiny in the middle of the 20th century and were often rejected on ethical grounds. For instance, some of the large housing projects aimed at employing technology to create a utopian environment for the benefit of us all (such as the infamous Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St Louis, Missouri in the 1970s),<sup>4</sup>

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We might think of postmodern ethics as a reaction against the perceived evils of modernism.

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'unselfish gene' theory, by which we are programmed to care for others, especially our biological offspring. He argues that we must "reinstatate the idea of living an ethical life as a realistic and viable alternative to the present dominance of materialist self-interest". However, he has no undergirding metaphysical or religious doctrine for this claim, and it does not disturb him. He

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3 Peter Singer, *How Are We To Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest*, Text, Melbourne, 1993, p. 235.

4 See Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1996, pp. 11–12 for a discussion of this project as a marker of the shift away from modernism in America.

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2 Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1993, p. 4.

were abject failures. The inhabitants felt imprisoned; they lashed out against their environment with graffiti and vandalism. The most flamboyantly evil modern project was perhaps Hitler's Third Reich, with its blinkered utopian ideals that translated into torture, tyranny and mass murder. Reacting against such attempts at Progress and calling them evil, is part of what being postmodern is about.

### **Ethics and inconsistency**

There is, however, no consistency within postmodern thinking as to what ethical values a society ought to exercise and encourage. In fact, the word 'ought' is a vexed one in the postmodern lexicon. Nevertheless, ethics is foremost in postmodernist thinking. It is just that we are now suspicious of any attempt to set rules and conditions on what can and can't take place. Take, for

instance, the end of the movie *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. The male lead (Hugh Grant) proposes that the female lead (Andy McDowell) *not* marry him, in order that they live together happily ever after. During the movie, McDowell has stunned Grant

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with her track record of lovers, numbering them off as she describes the encounter to him. Despite this 'open' approach to sexuality, they are still expecting to enter an exclusive relationship of some sort. The special union of two people is still the goal; no-one is giving up on that. The reality TV



shows I have mentioned operate on the principle that viewers will be able to judge the ‘real people’ on the show, and assess their actions as either acceptable or unacceptable. There are usually stock characters who appear: the lecherous male; the tarty female; the shy boy who needs to be brought out of his shell; the flatterer who tells lies to get what he wants. The existence

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... it’s a question of what kind of morality we should have in an era where no authority figure can tell us the answer.

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of some nebulous moral make-up in the viewer is an assumption behind the shows.

There is still a strong sense that there are right and wrong actions in particular situations. The TV sitcom, *Seinfeld*, led the field in dwelling on such questions of postmodern ethical etiquette. In a celebrated episode, Jerry and George (two main characters) are mistakenly taken to be a gay couple. Their reaction is horror, but they sense that this is not an acceptable reaction and finish their comments about homosexuality with the qualifying clause “not that there’s anything wrong with that!” In another episode, Elaine achieves what the show views as the morally questionable feat of ‘converting’ a gay man to heterosexuality. The range of questions facing these smart, single thirtysomethings in New York City is truly fascinating:

- if you are short on birth control devices, how do you assess whether a man is ‘spongeworthy’?
- can you sleep with your best friend now and then if you both agree that you are just adding ‘this’ (sex) to ‘that’ (friendship)?
- is it OK to steal cable TV because the big TV stations are exploiting the ‘little people’?
- for how long is it acceptable to park in a handicapped zone?
- what constitutes a lie? (George Castanza’s definition of truth: “It’s not a lie if you believe it.”)

Such questions provide both the humour and the human interest of the show: it’s a question of what kind of morality we should have in an era where no authority figure can tell us the answer.

Zygmunt Bauman likens the ethical environment of postmodernity to two faces, alternately turning away from each other and then turning towards each other. He labels these the *tribes* and the *rhetors*:

Postmodernity has two faces: the ‘dissolution of the obligatory in the optional’ has two apparently opposite, yet closely related effects. On the one hand, the sectarian fury of neotribal self-assertion, the resurgence of violence as the principal instrument of order-building, the feverish search for home truths hoped to fill the void of the deserted agora. On the other, the refusal by yesterday’s rhetors of the agora to



judge, discriminate, choose between choices: every choice goes, providing it is a choice, and each order is good, providing it is one of many and does not exclude other orders. Tolerance of the rhetors feeds on intolerance of the tribes. Intolerance of the tribes draws confidence from the tolerance of the rhetors.<sup>5</sup>

Other popular names for these two faces are the Fundamentalists and the Liberals, the Right and the Left, the Conservatives and the Progressives, the Neo-Moderns and the Post-Moderns. Whatever we name and misname these responses to the

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The postmodern era appears to have rediscovered the idea that people have moral natures.

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morally obligatory becoming the morally optional, we are left with a society in deep conflict. But note that both sides are seeking to address a moral question: what kind of response to the behaviour of others is acceptable? Can we let people do what they like, or must we react against certain behaviours?

The postmodern era appears to have rediscovered the idea that people have moral natures. If they are let loose from structures of morality (such as adherence

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5 Bauman, 1993, p. 238.

to the Bible's commands, or obedience to society's laws), they do not embrace anarchy and amorality. Instead, they discover themselves making ethical choices every day, unavoidable ethical choices that are simply part of being human. They may not have a meta-narrative to which they can refer their decision-making: no, their decisions are less systematic than that. But they are nevertheless aware that such decisions have to be made, that human beings do not exist alone but in interaction with each other, and this leads to ethical choices.<sup>6</sup>

Zygmunt Bauman goes so far as to claim that the postmodern era, in which institutionalized morality is no longer acceptable, allows for a greater reality in facing the moral nature of the human being. Instead of being a passive element of a moral system (e.g. a nominal Roman Catholic who attends the church and absorbs its moral principles unquestioningly), the postmodern individual is an active agent in its moral encounters, for which there is no fixed reference point. They must make their choices on their own. Bauman writes:



One might say that postmodernity is an 'era of morality' in one sense only: thanks to the 'disocclusion'—the dispersal of ethical clouds which tightly wrapped and obscured the reality of moral self and moral responsibility—it is possible now, nay inevitable, to face the moral issues point-blank, in all their naked truth, as they emerge from the life experience of men and women, and as they confront moral selves in all their irreparable and irredeemable ambivalence.<sup>7</sup>

Bauman's argument is that in the postmodern era the human moral soul is naked, stripped of the clothing of institutionalized morality. Whether or not it is true that as a result postmodern individuals have a finer sense of moral responsibil-

6 Barrington Moore Jr, in the book *Injustice: The Social Basis of Obedience and Revolt*, George, Allen & Unwin, 1979, has argued that human beings don't have a developed model of justice in their minds, a kind of utopian idea of what is right. They do, however, have a strong sense of *injustice*, and will react to this situation by outrage and a desire for retribution or compensation. This analysis seems to fit with a Christian view of ethics, where perfect ethics can only be seen from God's perspective and human beings simply sense the reality of wrongdoing. The law is given to restrain this wrongdoing that we detect rather than to develop a just society.

7 Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essay in Postmodern Morality*, Blackwells, Oxford, 1995, p. 43.

ity than moderns or premoderns, it is clear that ethical decisions remain a basic part of human experience and the social and intellectual upheavals of postmodernism have not altered this fact.

On reflection, there are two notable social facts that may have contributed to this interest in ethics and acted as 'reality checks' for postmodern people.

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His development of the idea was a deliberate project to subvert what he saw as a damaging Christian idea from centuries ago.

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### **I. The AIDS epidemic and the consequences of the sexual revolution.**

The news of the late twentieth century was that you can't just have sex however you want with whomever you want without there being some consequences. A new 'ethics of sex' developed around the risks associated with sexual contact, particularly homosexual relations.

Michel Foucault, one of the key philosophers of the postmodern era, is central to the discussion of today's sexual ethics. He developed a philosophy that dissolved the idea of the individual 'self'. Foucault believed that the view of an integrated being as the starting point for philosophy (it was Descartes' starting point) was wrong. There is no autonomous knowing subject who develops by observa-

tion and reason a coherent view of the world. Rather, human beings wield knowledge like a weapon in order to exercise power over others. They don't really 'know' the world; they just construct a kind of knowledge that enables them to benefit. They aren't really autonomous 'knowers'; rather, they are social constructs whose sense of being derives from their surrounds. In other words, the individual is devalued in relation to the community.

Foucault found expression of this view of the self in the gay bathhouses of San Francisco where he engaged in sado-masochistic sex, eventually contracting AIDS and dying of related illnesses in 1984. "Self destruction was the aim of the undertaking, since the idea of the self enslaved man to an enfeebling illusion."<sup>8</sup> Foucault did not see sexual engagement in terms of the interactions of selves, but as an experience of pleasure and an understanding of how it occurs.<sup>9</sup> His development of the idea was a deliberate project to subvert what he saw as a damaging Christian idea from centuries ago.

Whilst many have agreed with Foucault that the enlightenment view of the self as an autonomous rational subject needs re-evaluation, they have also seen that Foucault's apocalyptic approach to the subject is not the only one and may have arisen as much

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8 Peter Conrad, *Modern Times, Modern Places: Life and Art in the 20th Century*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1998, p. 636.

9 Michel Foucault, *The Uses of Pleasure. Vol 2. The History of Sexuality*, trans. R. Hurley, Vintage, New York, 1986, p. 254.



from his personal circumstances as from his philosophy. The reality of sexual disease, and the suffering that accompanies it, can be strong inducements to rethink one's philosophy of sexual liberation. It is hard to describe a philosophy as "liberating" when its physical and social consequences are so often destructive. Some Christian critics recently wrote, "Foucault incites us to a voyage in search of freedom with neither compass nor star to navigate by and only bruised experience at the helm."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Jon Hinkson & Greg Ganssle, "Epistemology at the Core of Postmodernism: Rorty, Foucault, and the Gospel" in D.A. Carson (ed), *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2000, p. 85.

## 2. The reaction to late capitalism.

Frederic Jameson described postmodernism as "the cultural logic of late capitalism", by which he meant that it is impossible in the West for culture to avoid the influence and power of our economic system. Capitalism *produces* our culture, and that culture has not proved as liberating as was hoped. The notion of the 'free market' has led to different forms of slavery, such as saturation advertising and unlimited choice. An example of the complex decisions facing today's consumers is choosing between telephone plans. There are so many options and combinations of phone use (home/mobile, charge rates, distance rates, frequency rates, etc) that the producer is able to manipulate the decision-making of all but the most savvy of customers. Some postmodern people have reacted against the market-based society by looking for a simpler approach to life or by preferring a localized community to the choices of the larger market (i.e. a return to the values of the village). It must again be stressed that there is no consistency among postmodernists here, for the same 'new villagers' are likely to also own shares in technology stocks.

Another feature driving some postmodern people to revise their ethics is the increasingly visible downside of capitalism. The wealth and happiness of some visibly results in the poverty and distress of many. The gap between the haves and have-nots widens, and this makes us re-think our attitude towards economic progress (witness the recent global campaign to relieve world debt—Jubilee 2000). The reaction against

modernist excess is hardly universal, but there is a strong theme of increased social responsibility in postmodern thinking.

## The Other

So, if my thesis is true that postmoderns are interested in ethics, how does this affect the way Christian thinking and the gospel itself might be presented to postmodern people? After all, it is one thing to be interested in living a good, ethical life, and quite another to come to terms with Jesus Christ, the perfect man and the Son of God. There are a few valuable answers to this question,<sup>11</sup> but I wish to focus on one particular idea here: the notion of the Other. This frequently used term in postmodern discussion can be off-putting, but it need not be aversive. It refers to the fact that human beings do not live in social isolation—we are less akin to Robinson Crusoe than to the boys in *Lord of the Flies!* Some postmodern thinkers have recognized that to act ethically means to think of the effects of your actions upon others:

To take a moral stance means to assume responsibility for the Other;

to act on the assumption that the well-being of the Other is a precious thing calling for my effort to preserve and enhance it.<sup>12</sup>

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Christianity offers a theological explanation for this ethical emphasis on the Other in the doctrine of the Trinity.

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The two ‘reality checks’ mentioned above—the consequences of the sexual revolution and the consequences of capitalist-fueled selfishness—both re-assert the value of the Other. We also see such thinking in some green issues and the interest in marginalized cultures.

Christianity offers a theological explanation for this ethical emphasis on the Other in the doctrine of the Trinity. This has been explored in detail recently in the work of theologians of ranging beliefs, such as Wolfhart Pannenberg, Colin E. Gunton, Jurgen Moltmann and others.<sup>13</sup> These writers have focussed in different ways on

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11 Another important one is explored in Oliver O'Donovan's *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, Apollos, Leicester, 1994, 2nd ed. O'Donovan argues that we can only understand what is ethical by viewing our decisions from the point of view of the resurrection of Christ and the inauguration of the Resurrection Age. This generates an ‘ambiguity’ about the meaning and consequences of our decision-making, but within the framework of confidence that, if we love in the way God loved, as revealed in Christ, our decisions become part of God's plan for the world.

12 Bauman, 1995, p. 267.

13 The views of these theologians on the nature of perichoresis differ. E.g. W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 1 (T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1991); Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1991) and *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993); J. Moltmann, *History and the Triune God*, Crossroad, New York, 1992 and *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, SCM, London, 1992.

what it means for God to be ‘mutually indwelling’ (*perichoretic* is the Greek technical term often employed), for his being not to be singular but triune—three persons in one God. This central fact and mystery of the Christian faith provides a strong basis for ethics. It means that God is, at the very core, a set of relations rather than a singular entity. This is a valuable response and parallel to the postmodern emphasis on the Other. The God of the Christian faith has such an emphasis upon the Other in his

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To emphasize the Other is something that ultimately makes sense within a Christian world view.

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very being. This makes sense of the claim that “God is Love” (1 John 5:16). Anthony Thiselton writes, “A love in which a self genuinely *gives* itself to the Other *in the interests of the Other* dissolves the acids of suspicion and deception.”<sup>14</sup> And, as Miroslav Volf points out, the unique aspect of Christianity is that the triune God “made space” for human beings who had, through sin, become God’s enemies:

That same love that sustains nonself-enclosed identities in the Trinity seeks to make space “in God” for

humanity. Humanity is, however, not just the other of God, but the beloved other who has become an enemy. When God sets out to embrace the enemy, the result is the cross. On the cross the dancing circle of self-giving and mutually indwelling divine persons opens up for the enemy; in the agony of the passion the movement stops for a brief moment and a fissure appears so that sinful humanity can join in (see John 17:21). We, the others—we, the enemies—are embraced by the divine persons who love us with the same love with which they love each other and therefore make space for us within their own eternal embrace.<sup>15</sup>

To emphasize the Other is something that ultimately makes sense within a Christian world view. It therefore has some correspondence with postmodern thinking on the importance of the Other and provides a theoretical framework for discussion and challenge.

Once again, however, there is no consistency within postmodernism, for we are just as likely to see abuse of the Other emanating from ethical decisions. Perhaps the outstanding instance of this is the acceptance of abortion, where the rights of the mother are seen to overwhelm any responsibility to the embryo or foetus (the Other in this situation). And it would be

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14 Anthony Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1995, p. 160.

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15 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1996, pp. 128–9.

a dire misunderstanding of what I am saying to conclude that in the postmodern era people are more likely than before to make good ethical choices. Nevertheless, the focus on the Other is there as a strong idea, even when the application is lacking. It is the idea behind the catch-cries of tolerance, pluralism and the global village.

The challenge for Christians is to take seriously the high value of the Other, and demonstrate to postmodern people that Christianity does this far more powerfully and successfully than any other world view. When postmodernism talks about caring for AIDS victims, but its politicians continue to reduce funding because the issue is a hot potato, Christians must show their care beyond politics, imitating our Lord and Saviour, who dined with lepers, prostitutes and, yes, even tax collectors, loving them whilst at the same time condemning the sin that had made them what they are. The Christian stance against abortion is an important instance of the priority we give to the Other, especially when this Other is completely defenceless and vulnerable.

### **TV again**

Another way in which Christians can show the importance of the Other within the postmodern context is to separate fantasy and entertainment from real historical existence. On one level, 'reality TV' shows where couples 'hook up' with each other over a weekend in a hotel might seem harmless—shameless voyeurism, but harmless in the sense that they are just



TV entertainment. People just watch them, have a laugh, and then return to their lives. This is true if (and this is a big 'if') the viewer can separate fantasy and reality. But it is not at all clear that viewers can do this. In fact, advertisers try very hard to blur the distinction between fantasy and reality because fantasy is by far the easier to sell. Because when the activities of actors on these shows are interpreted as 'real life', the consequences for human beings are dire. They lead to a philosophy of manipulation, abuse, trivialization of love, misunderstanding of sex, unrealistic expectations of happiness and all manner of other disappointments and sins. When Gazza and Cherie act as models or exemplars of ethical decision-

making in relationships, the human race is in a depressingly degraded condition. The conditions for genuine love just aren't present. Rather than being about finding love or truth, these kinds of reality TV shows are assaults upon the value of the Other. They exploit human relationships in the real historical realm for the sake of pleasure in the realm of entertainment. The right order of values has been reversed. We must continue to oppose and dismantle the notion that Baudrillard summarized as "TV is the world". It is rare, rare, rare, that TV is actually the world. It is usually something quite different.

Postmodern people are often worried about the decisions they know they have to make, and regretful about some of the decisions they have already made. The collapse of moral authority has left them on their own. The doctrine of God in three persons is a valuable way to approach the ethical issues that are fascinating people in these postmodern times. The reason the Trinity provides a basis for human ethics is because it's true, but if postmoderns won't accept that, they may at least see that it works, that it is an extremely satisfying idea, that it puts an end to manipulation and power struggles,

and that it offers a unique kind of freedom—the freedom of being loved. ☒

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### READING LIST

Stanley Grenz • *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1996)

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## *SIX MODERN MYTHS*

*CHALLENGING CHRISTIAN FAITH*

*PHILIP J. SAMPSON*



# Believing in myths

*Barry Newman*

Philip J. Sampson

*Six Modern Myths—Challenging Christian Faith*  
Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 2000

**T**he film *The Matrix* centers on a world where most people are oblivious to the false foundations of their existence. Only a few see the world as it really is. In his *Six Modern Myths*, Sampson argues that our western world lives with a number of major myths. Although the majority, like the helpless humans of *The Matrix*, believe the myths to be true, reality is far different.

These myths are not recognized as such, because they adorn themselves with scientific or historical garb. Their pseudo-authenticity, however, is only possible because the science, historical and factual matters are badly distorted. Furthermore, the myths are readily embraced, read and reported as important aspects of reality, firstly because they come to us as good stories (and everybody loves a good story) and secondly because they snipe at and ridicule Christianity.

If you want to make life difficult for Christians, read this book. You will first, however, need to understand the issues that the author describes as ‘myths’, challenge his arguments and produce more plausible accounts. You may think that the author has surely gone too far. On the other hand this may be simply your own justification for continuing to believe the myths.

As a Christian, if you don’t want to squirm quite so much when your opposition derides your beliefs with finger-pointing at the atrocities of Christianity and the unenlightened views of its proponents, then you also ought to read this book. It might give you heart. You should not automatically accept its theses, but try and see them from a non-Christian perspective. Ask yourself the following questions. Does he argue his case well? Which of the many authors that he quotes are to be believed?

Has he overstated the case or do you yourself believe the myths?

Ultimately, the question for all of us is: What is the truth? Is there a type of unwitting world-wide conspiracy against the truth? Has there almost always been such a conspiracy? Why? Do the Old and New Testaments provide the answers to such questions? Christians and non-Christians alike ought to read these documents to search for possible answers.

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Sampson's ultimate concern is with modern myths, particularly those that challenge Christian faith, and the modern story that enables these myths to be propagated.

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Sampson presents "stories" as simplistic accounts used by both ancient and modern societies to propagate values and beliefs about the world. In order to expound such ideas as though they were history or fact, myths use and shape stories. "The story may be the medium but the myth is the message." The myths of today, just like their stories, are not the myths or stories of yesteryear, because beliefs and values change and the story elements that are available vary throughout time. The stories that gain the attention of and acceptance by societies must have clear and simple plots, starkly portrayed heroes and villains, historical and geographical settings that are easily understood, and props such

as telescopes, comets or court rooms to give them that additional aura of accuracy.

Sampson's ultimate concern is with modern myths, particularly those that challenge Christian faith, and the modern story that enables these myths to be propagated. He often refers to religion, but he has in mind Christianity, whether Protestant, Roman Catholic or any other type.

To be credible, Sampson argues, the modern story must make an appeal to history. More often than not, the big stories will also make an appeal to science. The modern myths arise out of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and cling to notions of progress, humanism, liberation and the sufficiency of reason. There are many such stories with their myths, but the ones he deals with relate to "the nature and meaning of life, the origins of humanity and the nature of good and evil".

Sampson's treatment of the six modern myths form a continuity but the chapters are basically self-contained, with his purpose "solely to show that modern stories are not a transparent window onto history but richly textured accounts which support modern myths."

A book of this character is bound to deal with the notion of the warfare between science and religion, and this theme underlies much of the work and forms the central feature of his introduction, with references to Draper and White<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nineteenth-century popularizers of the "science vs religion" myth.

and more modern purveyors of this view. The evil, ignorant but powerful church and its priests oppose the courageous, enlightened and truth-seeking minority.

Sampson also comments on the persistence of such a myth in an era where Western societies are now supposedly less superstitious and religious, and the church less influential. He argues that the myth of science and rationalism being humanity's salvation has failed to provide us with anything like the utopia originally envisaged. In order to distract us from seeing its failures it must provide us with a whipping boy—to wit, Christianity. Besides, religion may appear to be at death's door but the rise of zealous fundamentalist attitudes, beliefs and practices make the attacks upon religious notions all the more imperative for the myth-makers.

The myth of Galileo, persecuted hero of science, informs us that humanity is not all that important, given that we are not located at the center of the universe. It also teaches us that although truth was suppressed by religious authorities, in the end it won through. This myth is false in detail and false overall, argues Sampson. Galileo, for example, did not invent the telescope. More importantly, it was his colleagues in astronomy committed to Aristotelianism that were his original concern; not the church, with which he had cordial relations. His poorly judged portrayal of the Pope (by implication) in his 1632 treatise may well have been the cause of his downfall—not religious persecution.

From the story of Darwin, a story of origins, we understand that man is just a

present-day end-product of evolving living systems, arising as a consequence of competition and survival. Whatever the reader's views on the plausibility and credibility of some form of a biological evolu-

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This myth [of Galileo] is false in detail and false overall, Sampson argues.

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tionary theory, the author argues that it is the wider issues of the theory as a powerful 'creation-myth' that are the main concern. He argues that much of the detail of the history of the Darwin debates is in error, error created to support a powerful metaphor for the purpose of denying and



replacing Christian perspectives. Even the peppered moth account is flawed (they don't even rest on tree trunks). Much of the encounter between Thomas Huxley and 'Soapy' Sam Wilberforce is legendary.<sup>2</sup> Supporters of cultural and individual supremacy have unfortunately found much to support their position in Darwinism. The myth is an extremely powerful one.

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Christian missions in their bigotry led to the oppression of native peoples and their cultures, the fourth myth claims.

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The third myth charges Christianity with our current exploitation of nature. Christians, the myth states, unlike members of other religions, see themselves as having to master the world. Sampson argues on the contrary that historically, when not flirting with Hellenistic ideas, biblically-minded people could only see themselves as being stewards of their world. It was the Greeks who considered goddess Nature as something to be ravished. While Reformation figures argued for a deep sensitivity towards creation, it is certain aspects of the Enlightenment that are significantly responsible for the neglect of our natural world.

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2 For an account of this event and the myths arising from it, see David Starling, 'Thomas Huxley and the 'warfare' between science and religion: mythology, politics and ideology', *kategoria*, 1996, 3, pp. 33–50.

Christian missions in their bigotry led to the oppression of native peoples and their cultures, the fourth myth claims. Sampson recognizes that missionaries have not always been innocent in this regard. It is, however, the transfer of the bulk of blame from traders, explorers, colonists, military expeditions and Western civilization in general to Christian missionaries that he argues against. Missionaries and those to whom they came are generally stereotyped and the truth about the benefits of missions suppressed.

The myth of the Christian's view of the sinful flesh is the fifth Sampson lists. Again he recognizes that the Christian church's attitude towards the body over two thousand years of history cannot always be endorsed. Nonetheless, as with the other myths, the real position is grossly exaggerated. Traversing topics such as body-hating, sex-denying and whoring women, Sampson explains the origins of the almost all-embracing myth, refers to the misreadings of the writings of the New Testament writer Paul, and explains the amalgamation of Greek and biblical views that has led to distorted views of gender and sex. There seems to be almost complete ignorance of the effect of the Reformation with its clear understanding of the value of the human body.

The last myth concerns the persecution of witches brought about by religious fanaticism. The victims in this myth are lone women in their millions. Contrary to popular views, Sampson argues that careful



studies of the phenomenon reveal that the number of witchcraft prosecutions has been greatly exaggerated, that in some cases those maligned for their involvement in the activity were responsible for moderating the behaviour. Furthermore, it was often the actions of individuals, mostly women, rather than any church, that brought about witchcraft trials. Any exaggeration, it seems, is justified if it puts Christianity in the worst possible light.

Sampson's concluding chapter focuses upon modern myths in postmodernity. Returning to the central theme of the supposed warfare between science and religion, he again asks why the myth is so persistent. As an addition to his earlier responses he contends that doctrinaire rationalism, where having the truth means

stamping out error, has come to seem less plausible today (unfortunately for modernity). As a consequence, in postmodernity, modern myths are more and more commonly being used in a complex way to support more mystical and less rational belief systems and values. Neither tradition nor religion is rejected out of hand, while the rationalist's view of there being only one truth is denied. Nature worship, female spirituality, male oppression and a oneness with the earth may feature in the complexity of the myth-carrying stories. In fact, identifying distinctive postmodern myths is difficult because of the inclusiveness of so many disparate elements.

Sampson rightly warns, however, against seeing these new developments as simply releasing us from the false perspectives of modernism. Postmodern and modern systems alike distort reality, each for its own gain. Additionally, postmodernism is likely to devalue important concepts such as justice and truth, which modernism at least claimed to embrace.

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Postmodern and modern systems alike distort reality, each for its own gain.

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Sampson's final plea is for the reader to consider another story—the Biblical narrative, one in which history, humanity and the world in which humanity finds itself are given the utmost significance, all within the framework of truth. Indeed, the

contemporary mind has inherited much of the biblical narrative and been shaped by it, although readily distorting and misusing its motifs to bolster beliefs and values foreign to its account. For example, postmodernity “has recovered a sense of empathy with creation replacing modern ideas of exploitation and progress, although in the process ‘creation’ has been impoverished and secularized into the environment”. It is the Creator of the creation to which he suggests we must finally turn, engaging with the biblical story of which he is the central figure, a story rich with promise and warning, a story which “does not merely inform, in the Enlightenment mode, nor entertain, in postmodern style”.

ouring to convince his readers that a cherished central position ought to be abandoned, he has largely side-stepped the sins and errors of both genuine and pseudo-Christians. The book does indeed have that flavour about it. A generous appraisal might maintain that a more balanced approach would only cloud the issue. Yet in the interests of clarity and forcefulness, Sampson may be somewhat guilty of the type of sin he wishes to condemn. Sampson might argue in response that he has simply stated things as they are, and that it is the almost stranglehold of the myths that prevent some readers from seeing his work from that perspective.

It would be unfair to say, as one predictable criticism may, that Sampson is simply propagating his own myths to give credence to his own beliefs and values. The authority the reader is prepared to give to the various authors Sampson cites in support of his views might be the telling feature at this point.

What other myths abound that mislead modern or postmodern humanity and to what extent do they mislead? Might there not be a significant modern myth concerned with gender issues? There are elements of such a suggestion in his last two chapters. Could there be another myth associated with the ideas that seem to underlie much of the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence? Does our understanding of the nature of possible living systems, the conditions for them to arise and be sustained, the way they can communicate, the nature of planetary, galactic and other systems and the possibilities for communica-

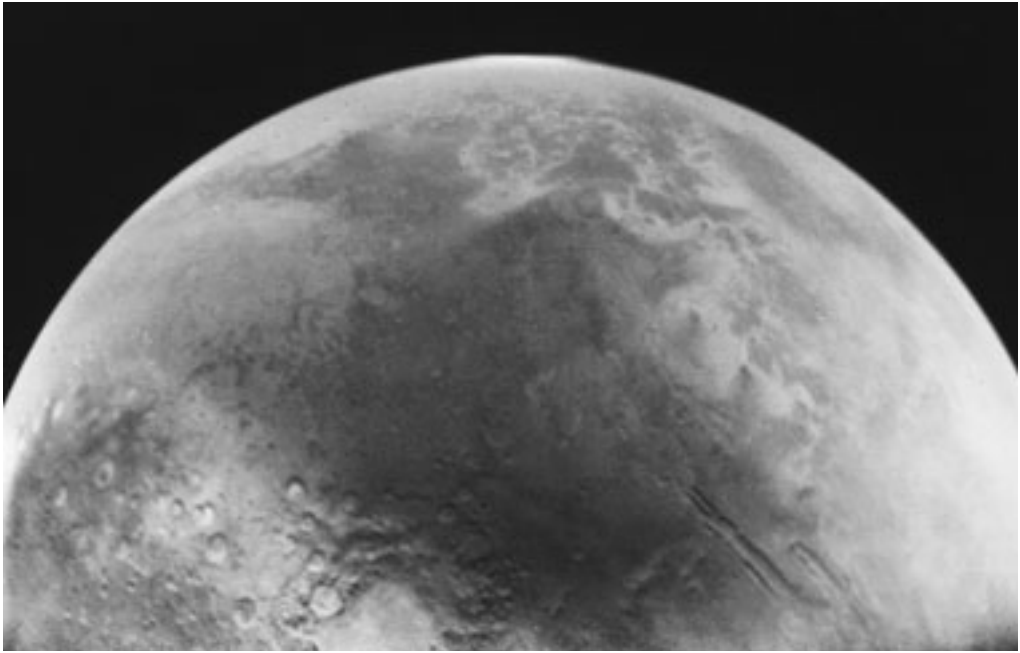
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What other myths abound that mislead modern or postmodern humanity and to what extent do they mislead?

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To sustain his arguments, Sampson is liberal with his more than 80 notes and a bibliography containing over 300 references. One is left with a few comments.

Firstly, has Sampson argued the case well enough to convince? The myths he strives to counteract are ones welcome to the modern mind. They will not be easily given up. Secondly, to what extent is there some truth to that which Sampson seeks to debunk? It could be argued that in endeav-



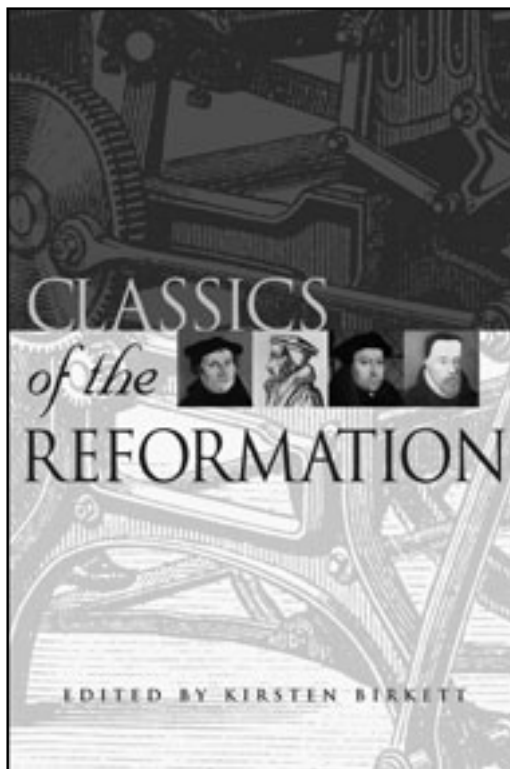
tion to occur, justify sustained search on any grand scale for such intelligence? If, at the moment, the answer is “No” (and some would argue this), why do we so desperately search? For some it may be better to engage with an alien than a creator to whom we are not foreign, under whom we are responsible, to whom we owe everything, but whom we cannot repay, and who is concerned for justice beyond our wildest nightmares, yet abounding in kindness beyond our most treasured dreams.

One aspect of the biblical narrative contends that so-called rational, objective and truth-loving humanity is in fact not all that able to be any of that. If the Bible is right that we are not free from our-

selves with our views and practices, not free from our society with all that it proposes and models, and not free from a satanic figure that controls humanity, then we are in great difficulty unless the great creator enlightens us. Horror, horror, how could any modernist believe in such! As Sampson puts it, “Naturalism, the belief that the supernatural is either non-existent or powerless, is a plot feature common to all modern stories.” Myths, especially the most influential kinds, die hard. ☒

Barry Newman is a retired senior lecturer in science education at the University of New South Wales.

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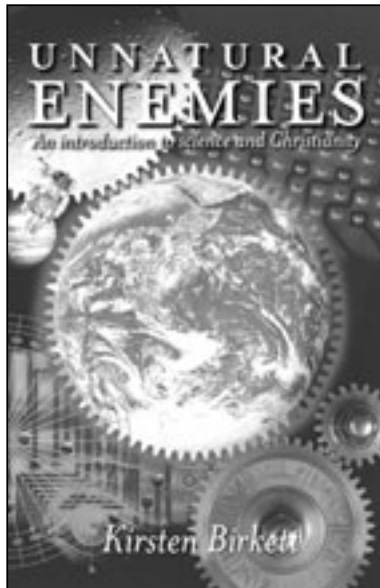
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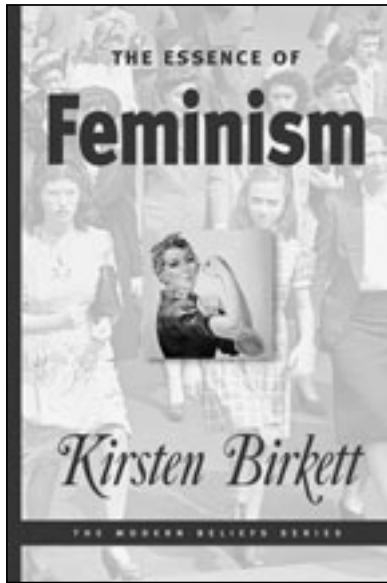
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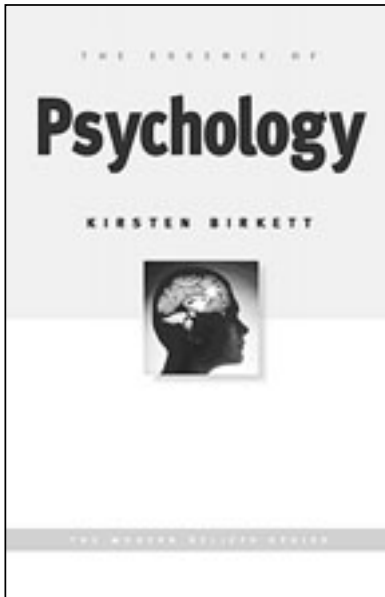


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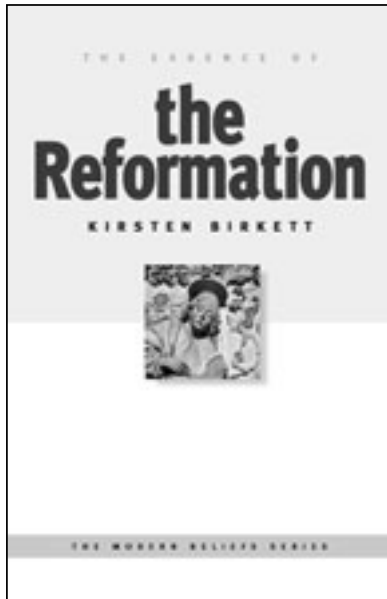
As the new millennium dawns, the psychologist has replaced the clergyman as the dispenser of wisdom and peace in our confused and troubled world. When we are depressed or anxious or our marriages are in trouble, it is to psychology that we routinely turn for insight and therapy. It is hard to believe that psychology hardly existed a century ago, and that its prominent place in modern life has only come about in the last generation.

In this short book, Dr Kirsten Birkett offers a concise and readable summary of the essence of psychology—what it is, how it came about, and how it

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This penetrating analysis of the insights and claims of psychology makes for fascinating reading. It will be of particular benefit to those who struggle with their own mental health, as well as those who support them.

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