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The Religious Roots of Postmodernism in American Culture:

An analysis of the postmodern theory of Bernard Iddings Bell and its continued
relevance to contemporary postmodern theory and literary criticism

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Abstract

This thesis is an examination and reassessment of an early work on postmodernism written by the once prominent American critic, Bernard Iddings Bell, in 1926. Bell's work, *Postmodernism, and other essays*, provides us with one of the earliest documented uses of the term "postmodernism" in the English language. It also anticipates many of the pronouncements of later day critics regarding the development of postmodernism in politics, philosophy, and literary criticism. Despite these facts however, or perhaps because of them, contemporary critics have continued to ignore Bell's work, charging that his thesis is "anti-modern" rather than "postmodern", and otherwise irrelevant to current debates on postmodernism. This thesis will challenge that interpretation.

Here it will be argued that the decision to exclude Bell's work from current debates on postmodernism is based upon Bell's religious predilections and not upon any evidence of anti-modernism expressed in his thesis. In addition to constituting a radical break with the knowledge systems of the past, Bell argues that postmodernism will also be accompanied by a large scale religious revival. This argument runs counter to the dominant critical consensus regarding the relationship between postmodernism and religion adopted by critics from Arnold J. Toynbee in the 1950s, to Fredric Jameson in the 1990s.

Based upon a modern sociological interpretation of religious evolution, for which Max Weber is now largely credited, the latter interpretation argues that as rationalization and intellectualization increase, religious explanations for social and environmental change will decrease exponentially. New sociological evidence gathered since the end of the 1960s, however, allows us to challenge this interpretation and supports a call for the re-evaluation of theses like Bernard Iddings Bell's, which associate postmodernism with religious revival rather than religious disintegration.

The first part of the thesis, comprised of chapters one through four, is dedicated to an analysis of the philosophical influences and historical background to Bell's essay with the aim of comparing and contrasting Bell's ideas with those found in more recent works on postmodernism. Here it will be argued that far from a purely theological analysis of postmodern cultural change, Bell's work is also informed by political, philosophical, scientific, and literary ideas.

The second part of the thesis, comprised of chapters five through eight, examines the possible impact of Bell's thesis on the interpretation of contemporary American literature and literary theory. Rather than focus on a "poetics of parody", or the theoretical implications of "irony and humour", as previous critics have done, we will focus here on how contemporary writers like John Updike, Don DeLillo, and Toni Morrison, have chosen to incorporate the themes of postmodern criticism into a critique of that criticism, especially where this touches on the subject of religion. One theme which will dominate this argument is the literary reaction to modern sociological theories like secularization, particularly that of German sociologist Max Weber, which continues to inform a great deal of contemporary criticism on the role that religion will play in a postmodern social environment.

At the end of such an analysis we conclude that Bell's insistence that postmodernism will be defined by a renewed interest in religion and mystical theology still has merit in the realm of contemporary cultural debates. Postmodern criticism that attempts to exclude religion from this arena does so on the basis of a modern interpretation of religious evolution and secularization, and therefore runs the risk of reiterating an older modernist critique.

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I would like to take the opportunity here to thank my supervisor, Dr. Nick Selby, for his guidance and expertise throughout the course of my study at Glasgow University. His ability to keep me on track and his patience and confidence in my work, have been invaluable.

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Introduction

In 1926 the well-known American educator, social critic, and Episcopal priest, Bernard Iddings Bell, published a book of essays entitled *Postmodernism, and other essays*. The lead essay in this collection, "Postmodernism," represents one of the earliest documented uses of the term in the English language. It also, as it will be argued, anticipates many of the pronouncements of later day critics regarding the development of postmodernism in politics, philosophy, and literary criticism. But while critics have acknowledged other early applications of the term, such as that of the Spanish literary critic Federico de Onís in 1934, and the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee in 1939, they continue to ignore Bell's 1926 thesis, describing it as "anti-modernist," or irrelevant to current debates on postmodernism.¹

To date several factors have contributed to this interpretation of Bell's work and his continued exclusion from debates on postmodernism. The first, and most practical, is time and availability of sources. While Bell's books and articles can still be found in certain libraries in the United States and Britain, most, apart from his last book *Crowd Culture* (reprinted by ISI books in 2001), have been out of print for decades. Another factor contributing to Bell's relative obscurity since his death in

¹ De Onís first defined postmodernism in *Antología de la poesía española e hispanoamericana (1882-1932)*, Madrid (1934), xviii, as a conservative reaction within modernism itself, which rendered habitual and rhetorical every aspect of the previous movement which had distinguished it as revolutionary, and sought to restore all that it had sought to wipe out. Toynbee defined the postmodern in *A Study of History*, 12 vols., London: Oxford University Press (1934-1961), 5:43, 8:338, as an age "inaugurated by the General war of 1914-18", marked by the rise to political power of "an industrial urban working class". Those who cite these works in histories of postmodernism include Charles Jencks, *What Is Post-Modernism?* 4th ed. 1996, Chichester: Academy Editions (1986), 17; Ihab Hassan, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*, Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press (1987), 85; Margaret Rose, *The Post-Modern and the Post-Industrial: A Critical Analysis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1991), 12-13; Thomas Docherty, *Postmodernism: A Reader*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf (1993), 1-2; Lawrence E. Cahoone, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell (1996), 3; Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, London: Verso (1998), 3-4; and Stuart Sim, *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, 2nd ed., London: Routledge (2005), viii. Of these only Cahoone and Sim mentions Bell.

1958, is that no attempt has been made to compile a comprehensive bibliography of his works, and no biography has been written on his life. With no living relatives what remains of Bell's letters and correspondence is only what has been preserved in the collections of his more prominent friends and colleagues like the conservative writer and critic Russell Kirk, and the social scientist Albert Jay Nock. For biographical information on Bell the researcher is often limited to the author's own comments in the introductions to his major published works (a list of which is included in the appendix to this thesis), alongside newspaper reports, and biographical and bibliographical indexes like the *Dictionary of American Biography*, and *Who Was Who Among North American Author's 1921-1939*. Many of these lists however are incomplete and some contain errors and discrepancies with regard to dates of publications as well as to events in Bell's life.

Further complications arise from the fact that, of those who have written on Bell since his death, few make reference to early works like *Postmodernism, and other essays*.² When he is remembered today it is usually in the context of the conservative intellectual movement in the United States after the Second World War. George H. Nash, for example, who wrote one of the first authoritative studies on this movement in the mid-1970s, gives an account of Bell as an outspoken polemicist and opponent of John Dewey's pragmatic approach to education reform in the 1950s. He writes:

One of the earliest examples of what became a minor genre of social criticism in the 1950s was [Bernard Iddings] Bell's *Crisis in Education*.

Published in 1949, this book contained the same themes that would recur

² While Cicero Bruce makes reference to *Postmodernism, and other essays* in his editor's introduction to the 2001 reprint of *Crowd Culture*, this is only in the act of listing Bell's previous publications. An in-depth analysis of Bell's work on the subject is still lacking from Bruce's analysis.

in his later writings: disdain for the common man...disapproval of our 'childish' and vulgar culture, and concern for the education of all children, including a 'gifted few,' in the moral and religious tradition of our civilization.³

The problem with such descriptions is that works like *Crisis in Education*, already constituted Bell's later work—his penultimate work to be precise, of which the last was *Crowd Culture*, published in 1952. Anterior to these two titles is a body of work that includes no fewer than nineteen monographs, the earliest of which was published in 1918 and earned Bell a place on the National Civic Federation's list of political subversives for its positive treatment of Russian Revolutionaries. In a writing career that spanned nearly five decades (approx. 1910-1955), Bell's essays and opinions on topics ranging from contemporary politics and social history, to church history, science, and ecumenism were published regularly in national periodicals and journals like the *New York Times* and affiliated *New York Times Magazine*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Criterion*, *American Scholar*, *Harper's Magazine*, and *Time*, in addition to religious and theological journals like *The Christian Socialist*, *Theology*, *Living Church*, *Biblical World*, and *Christian Scholar*, to name only a few. To narrow such a diverse corpus down to two works therefore seems a bit irresponsible. Nor does Bell's thought always fit into such easy categories. While Nash's observations about Bell are accurate to a point, there is still much in Bell's writings to connect him with more left wing trends in modern political thought. We see this not only in his early writings for the *Christian Socialist* where he advocates

³ George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, New York: Basic Books (1976), 47.

for a socialist revolution in American politics, but also in his later writings where he continues to rail against capitalist greed.

A graduate of both the University of Chicago and Western Theological Seminary (now part of Seabury-Western Seminary), Bell first made a reputation for himself as an outspoken critic of theological liberalism and Laissez-faire capitalism in the lead up to American involvement in the First World War. An active member of the Christian Socialist movement before the war, Bell rose quickly through the ranks of the American Episcopal church attaining the office of Dean by the age of 28, making him by the spring of 1914, "the youngest Dean in the American Episcopal Church".⁴

Like many young theologians engaged in social action and cultural criticism during and immediately following the First World War (many of whom would later be associated with the neo-orthodox and Christian realist movements), Bell eventually abandoned the Socialist movement in 1919. In the same year he accepted an invitation to become President of St. Stephen's College (now Bard College) in Annandale, New York, where he remained until 1933, overseeing the School's merger with Columbia University in 1928 where he also taught a course on religion. From 1933 until the end of the Second World War Bell served as Canon of St. John's Cathedral in Providence, Rhode Island, while maintaining an active schedule as visiting lecturer of religion at colleges and universities in both the United States and Britain. After the war, in 1946, Bell moved back to Chicago where he became educational consultant to the presiding Protestant Episcopal Bishop of Chicago, and

⁴ "Socialist Elected Dean of Fond Du Lac," *The Christian Socialist*, vol. 11, no. 6 (1914), 2.

lecturer on Religious Education and Preaching at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois, a position he held until his death in 1958.⁵

Far from an obscure figure, Bell's friends and colleagues during these years also included several notable individuals including the writer and poet T.S. Eliot. Many of Bell's ideas concerning Christian Sociology can even be shown to predate those that Eliot would himself describe in *The Idea of a Christian Society* in 1939, and were perhaps part of Eliot's motivation for having written them.

Therefore, while the sheer absence of information on Bell's life and work since his death can in part explain the lack of scholarly interest in *Postmodernism, and other essays* in the more recent past, it is by no means sufficient to explain his continued exclusion from debates on the subject. Bell was far too well known and well regarded a figure to have gone completely unnoticed by more contemporary critics of postmodernism, many of whom would have been old enough during Bell's own lifetime to have been familiar with his name, if not also with his works.

Postmodernism, and other essays, moreover, was not Bell's first application of the term postmodernism, nor would it be his last. According to the preface to this work, a sermon on the subject was also preached at colleges and universities throughout the United States during the preceding academic year, 1924-1925.⁶ Included among these institutions were Wellesley College, Amherst College, Williams College, Columbia University, the University of Illinois, St. Stephen's College, and Bell's own *alma mater* the University of Chicago.⁷ Two works also succeeded *Postmodernism, and other essays* and offer attempts at developing its

⁵ "Dr. B.I. Bell Appointed", *New York Times*, Nov. 27, 1945, 21.

⁶ Bernard Iddings Bell, *Postmodernism, and other essays*, Milwaukee, WI: Morehouse Publishing (1926), ix.

⁷ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, ix-x.

thesis further. They are, *Beyond Agnosticism* (1929), and *Religion for Living: A Book for Postmodernists* (1939). All of this suggests a prolonged and considered development of the subject. When we look to explain why Bell has been excluded from more recent studies on postmodernism, we must therefore look beyond his dwindling stature among scholars and critics in the second half of the twentieth century to the critical response to Bell's work, both during his own lifetime and since his death.

Until now criticism of Bell's *Postmodernism* has tended to concentrate on the religious aspects of his thesis with the aim of discrediting it on this basis. A contemporary review of *Postmodernism*, published in *The Journal of Religion* in November 1926, for example, diagnoses Bell's "Postmodernism...on examination, to be nothing else than orthodox Anglicanism, open to modern knowledge about the Bible", and that the only "element of novelty and of shock" is to be found in the title of Bell's book.⁸ More recent critics have been equally dismissive, summarizing Bell's sense of "postmodernism" as either "the recognition of the failure of secular modernism and a return to religion" and therefore of little interest to current debates on postmodernism;⁹ or as "certainly anti-modernist, but not in the sense of the postmodernists of our own day".¹⁰

What is striking about such interpretations—in addition to their tendency to ignore other prominent influences on Bell's work—is that apart from the first reviewer, neither of the latter two critics even refers to the original 1926 text. Lawrence Cahoon's assessment, which displays a more accurate reading of Bell's

⁸ Eldred C. Vanderlaan, "The Modernist Controversy Once More," *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 6, no. 6 (1926), 629-30.

⁹ Cahoon, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 3.

¹⁰ Sim, *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, viii.

thesis, refers to a revised and abridged version of *Postmodernism* which appeared in *Religion for Living* over a decade after *Postmodernism*'s original publication date.¹¹ Stuart Sim, who makes reference to Bell in the introduction to the Second Edition of *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* (2005), although apparently aware of Bell's earlier work on postmodernism in the 1920s, prefers to quote from the 1939 text in which Bell at one point describes the postmodernist as "intellectually humble and spiritually hungry",¹² ignoring more powerful and theoretically relevant statements like "The Spirit of the Living God will create Postmodernism",¹³ as well as those which equate contemporary science with a form of mysticism.

When we expand the discussion on Bell's 1926 thesis to include an analysis of his use of contemporary scientific, philosophical, and literary arguments—in addition to those concerned with modern theology—we find even more evidence to support a re-evaluation of his ideas on postmodernism. Bell's sense, for example, that postmodernism will emerge from a radical break with the knowledge systems of the past, "that our technic [*sic*] for the discovery of Truth, the scientific and rational technic that has been current for a century and a half" is now "inadequate",¹⁴ is echoed in the works of many later critics including Leslie Fiedler, Ihab Hassan, Daniel Bell, Jean-François Lyotard, and Fredric Jameson, as well as those often called upon to justify their claims like the scientist and historian Thomas S. Kuhn whose notion of "paradigm" shifts defined in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), has been used to bolster many subsequent theories of postmodernism. The critique of liberal and Enlightenment philosophy incorporated into Bell's theology, and the

¹¹ Cahoon, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 3, 22.

¹² Sim, *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, viii. The sentence quoted by Sim is taken from Bernard Iddings Bell, *Religion for Living: A Book for Postmodernists*, London: The Religious Book Club (1939), xvi.

¹³ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 54.

¹⁴ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 14-15.

willingness to engage with and critique issues of contemporary politics and culture, also serves to link Bell's thought with this later group of intellectuals, particularly when it comes to his use and critique of the philosophy of Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Therefore, while part of the reason for Bell's exclusion from more recent studies on postmodernism can be attributed to a lack of sources on Bell's life and work, and his subsequent loss of renown among scholars and critics; the main factor contributing to Bell's absence from current debates on postmodernism, it will be argued, is a lack of scholarly interest in religious history and the relationship between modern theology and other forms of modern thought like politics, philosophy, and social science, within current scholarship on postmodernism. While this thesis recognizes that attempts have been made over the past three decades to link the rise of postmodern theory and culture with a return to religion, such as Mark C. Taylor's *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (1984), and David Ray Griffin's *The Reenchantment of Science* (1988), none of these works mentions Bernard Iddings Bell, and all reflect the general critical consensus on postmodernism developed in the latter half of the twentieth century, which regards the subject of religious belief as something both outside of and beyond what has been defined as postmodernism since the Second World War.¹⁵

Beginning with Arnold J. Toynbee's association of postmodernism with a "post-Christian age of faith" in the 1940s and 1950s, prominent postmodern critics, including Leslie Fiedler, Daniel Bell, Charles Jencks, Ihab Hassan, Fredric Jameson,

¹⁵ Other examples of works in this category include: John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell (1990); Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, London: Routledge (1992); Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick, *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion*. London: Routledge (1992); Graham Ward, *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell (1997); and Merold Westphal, *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press (1999).

and others, have consistently and repeatedly denied a role to religions like Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, in what Jameson has termed a “postmodern social universe”.¹⁶ According to this argument,

What makes it as difficult to discuss ‘religion’ in postmodern terms as to locate cognate experiential concepts such as the ‘aesthetic’ or the ‘political’ is the problematization of notions of belief in a postmodern social universe, and the theoretical challenge to such peculiarly self-confirming irrational doctrines in the conceptual area, where it is as though the ‘otherness’ inherent in the doctrine of belief as such marked it out for eradication.¹⁷

When these critics do allow for religious belief, it is usually only in terms of what are dubbed “new religions” or “reiterations” of “traditional” religious views.¹⁸ Jameson, for example, includes what he refers to as “religious fundamentalism” under this category, describing it as a uniquely “postmodern phenomenon”, but one which is inevitably undermined by its claims to spiritual authenticity.¹⁹

Most, including Jameson, also subscribe to a modern theory of religious evolution, which regards religious development as a linear progression from irrational faith to increasingly rational forms of cognitive understanding. According to Arnold J. Toynbee, for example, “the West...abandoned its Christian religious heritage” as

¹⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press (1991), 388.

¹⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 388.

¹⁸ Examples of this type of criticism can be found in: Arnold J. Toynbee, *An Historian's Approach to Religion*, 2nd ed. 1979, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1956), 235-236; Leslie Fiedler, “The New Mutants,” *A New Fiedler Reader*, New York: Prometheus Books (1999), 199; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 386-391; Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion*, 23-25; and Philippa Berry, “Postmodernism and Post-Religion,” *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Steven Connor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2004), 171-172.

¹⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 387-388.

early as the seventeenth century.²⁰ Any “new line of approach,” according to this argument, will have to come from outside the Western tradition, after “Man’s mind has reached the limits of the scientific study of human affairs.”²¹ And while such a “new line of approach” may “work together with the surviving remnant of Western Christianity to re-introduce the discarded religious element into Western Civilization”, argues Toynbee, the eventual outcome of such a marriage will not be Christian.²²

In 1965, in an essay published in the *Partisan Review*, entitled “The New Mutants”, Leslie Fiedler corroborates this view in his description of a new “hedonism” in literature defined by an atmosphere of prophesy and myth, where “transcendence or transformation of the human—a vision quite different from that of the extinction of our species by the Bomb”, has superseded the modern aesthetic of secular apocalypse, and industrial wastelands.²³ Where modern literature can be characterized by its focus upon the “alienation” of the individual subject in modern industrial societies, the new “post-Modern” literature, according to Fiedler, celebrates “disconnection...as one of the necessary consequences of the industrial system which has delivered them from work and duty”.²⁴ Such detachment, according to Fiedler, “carries with it” certain “irrelevant religious, even specifically Christian overtones”.²⁵ But while Fiedler admits that these “post-modernists”, “are surely in some sense ‘mystics,’ religious at least in a way they do not ordinarily know how to confess”, he continues to insist, after Toynbee, that “they are not Christians”,²⁶ holding to the view

²⁰ Toynbee, *An Historian’s Approach to Religion*, 150.

²¹ Toynbee, *An Historian’s Approach to Religion*, 236.

²² Toynbee, *An Historian’s Approach to Religion*, 150.

²³ Fiedler, “The New Mutants,” 192.

²⁴ Fiedler, “The New Mutants,” 199.

²⁵ Fiedler, “The New Mutants,” 199.

²⁶ Fiedler, “The New Mutants,” 199.

then prominent in sociological circles that Christianity (like the other two great monotheisms) is in a state of decline, and has been for some time.

Daniel Bell (no relation to Bernard Iddings Bell) summarized this mood well a decade later when he wrote in sympathy with Fiedler's remarks that, "[t]he post-modernist culture of the 1960s has been interpreted, because it calls itself a 'counter-culture,' as defying the Protestant ethic, heralding the end of Puritanism, and mounting a final attack on bourgeois values".²⁷ Since then Ihab Hassan, Charles Jencks, Brian McHale, and a host of others have all added their voices to this critique, highlighting the demise of the modern sense of "traditional" religious views, understood in terms of nineteenth century liberal Protestantism, and the rise of what Fredric Jameson has described as "religious postmodernisms",²⁸ which amount to little more than "parodies" of historical forms of religious belief. Hassan, while he incorporates religious terminology like "immanence" and "indeterminacy" into his descriptions of postmodernism in the early 1970s, insists that such words, when used in a postmodern context, are denatured of any "religious echo".²⁹ In *What Is Post-Modernism?* (1986), Charles Jencks refers to both the modern and the postmodern worlds as "Post-Christian", where "Post-Christianity implies Christianity evolving on a global scale into some new hybrid philosophy—something that keeps the valuable teachings of Christ, but cuts away incredible beliefs and orients to a cosmic and evolutionary future".³⁰ In *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992), Brian McHale also prefers to interpret the post-World War Two cultural climate as one within which God has been "killed off", and to interpret the appearance of religious iconography like

²⁷ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, London: Heinemann (1976), 55.

²⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 389.

²⁹ Ihab Hassan, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*, Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press (1987), 93.

³⁰ Charles Jencks, *What Is Post-Modernism?* 4th ed. 1996, Chichester: Academy Editions (1986), 15, 24.

angels, “in postmodernist writing”, as “hollow” entities, “parodies of historical angels, “emptied of their otherworldliness and brought ingloriously down to earth”.³¹

The Problem with such interpretations—apart from their use in silencing debate on important contemporary issues like the interaction between religion and politics—is that, rather than a “new line of approach”, Toynbee’s understanding of “traditional” religions like Christianity (as well as Fredric Jameson’s, Leslie Fiedler’s, and Daniel Bell’s), is based upon a nineteenth century critical view of historical “progress” and religious “evolution”, and is more akin to the late Victorian reaction to scientific naturalism when a few prominent intellectuals like Henri Bergson and William James also turned to Eastern religions like Hinduism and Buddhism for a sense of spiritual renewal, than to any asserted or creative effort to re-imagine religion in a *postmodern* social context.³² All of these critics, moreover, owe a particular debt to the specifically *modern* sociology of the German philosopher Max Weber, who insisted at the beginning of the twentieth century that as societies develop rationally and technologically, religious belief will, necessarily, decline in importance among the educated public.³³ Among American critics in this group, this debt is particularly pronounced, owing in part to the impact of Weberian social theory on the development of American sociology after the Second World War, for which Talcott Parsons and C. Wright Mills are now widely held responsible.

New sociological evidence gathered since the end of the 1960s, however, allows us to challenge this interpretation and supports a call for the re-evaluation of

³¹ Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism*, London: Routledge (1992), 200-201.

³² See for example Frank Miller Turner, *Between Science and Religion: The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian England*, New Haven: Yale University Press (1974).

³³ For examples of this argument see, Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, London: Routledge (1948), 139, 155; and “Prefatory Remarks to *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion*,” *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells, New York: Penguin (2002c), 356-372.

theses like Bernard Iddings Bell's, which associate the rise of postmodernism with religious revival rather than religious disintegration. Where religious belief in Western Europe during and immediately following the Second World War may have followed a similar pattern to that projected by Weber at the beginning of the century, elsewhere in the world, particularly in the United States whose culture many agree has provided most of the material for postmodern debate,³⁴ rates of growth—especially among the previously marginal and more conservative branches of American Protestantism and Catholicism—were on the rise and had been for some time.³⁵

According to an increasing number of sociologists, historians, and economists, rather than offering proof of secularization as Weber argued, the disestablishment of religion in the United States has led to even greater levels of religious participation as well as to the rise of more conservative and demanding churches throughout the twentieth century.³⁶ As the sociologist José Casanova notes in *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994), the preoccupation of certain academics and critics in the 1960s with mysticism and cults, was largely misplaced. "What was new and unexpected"

³⁴ Cornell West, "Black culture and Postmodernism," *Remaking History*, Dia Art Foundation Discussions in Contemporary Culture, no. 4, ed. Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani, Seattle, WA: Bay Press (1989), 88; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, xx; Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Oxford: Blackwell (1996), 122; Stephen R.C. Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism*, Phoenix, AZ: Scholargy Publishing (2004), 67.

³⁵ Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion*, New York: Harper & Row (1972), 21; Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion*, 3 vols., Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1986-1996), 2:32-33, 90; Roger Finke, "An Unsecular America," *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis*, ed. Steve Bruce, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1992), 145-169; Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, 2nd ed., New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press (2005).

³⁶ Andrew M. Greeley, *The Persistence of Religion*, London: SCM Press (1972); Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (1972); Jeffrey K. Hadden, "Toward Desacralizing Secularization Theory," *Social Forces*, vol. 65, no. 3 (1987), 587-611; Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1988); Marty, *Modern American Religion* (1986-1996); José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1994); Lawrence R. Iannaccone, "Introduction to the Economics of Religion," *Journal of Economic Literature*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1998), 1465-1495; Finke, "An Unsecular America" (1992); Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, "Religious Economics and Sacred Canopies: Religious Mobilization in American Cities, 1906," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 53, no. 1 (1988), 41-49; Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America* (2005).

during this period, writes Casanova, “was not the emergence of ‘new religious movements,’ ‘religious experimentation’ and ‘new religious consciousness’”, described by Fiedler, “but rather the revitalization and the assumption of public roles by precisely those religious traditions which both theories of secularization and cyclical theories of religious revival had assumed were becoming ever more marginal and irrelevant in the modern world.”³⁷

Rather than constitute a “New Age of Faith” in the sense that Toynbee or Jencks intended it (where the old “traditional” faiths were exchanged for entirely new ones), the 1960s marked a decade of major restructuring for existing, mainstream religions. “In terms of actual participation,” argues Robert Wuthnow in *The Restructuring of American Religion* (1988), so-called “new religions” (i.e. Zen Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation, Yoga, the Inner Peace Movement, *est*, etc.) “scarcely constituted a major reshaping of American religion” since large segments of the population remained relatively unaffected by them.³⁸ What such movements did achieve, however—contrary to Toynbee’s predictions—was to redraw the boundaries of traditional religious and social respectability.³⁹ “Like deviant sects and cults in the past,” writes Wuthnow, “they provided instances of ‘abnormal’ religious behavior that came to be widely discussed even in circles far removed from the centers of religious experimentation themselves.”⁴⁰

With such evidence in mind, we will look in the following argument to challenge the consensus view among postmodern critics that postmodernism and religion are incompatible. We will also seek to demonstrate how many of the ideas

³⁷ Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 5.

³⁸ Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, 152.

³⁹ Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, 152.

⁴⁰ Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, 152.

that inform contemporary attitudes toward religion in a postmodern cultural environment trace their roots to theological and cultural debates formulated during the 1920s.

In Part I, which comprises chapters one through four of this thesis, we will begin by examining the philosophical influences and historical background to Bell's essay, before comparing and contrasting his ideas and influences with those of more contemporary writers and critics. Chapter one, "The Case Against Liberal Theology at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century," will examine "Postmodernism" as a reaction to liberalism in both theology and politics. Here, through a review of Bell's early works, published before 1926, we will argue that in addition to a reaction to liberalism in theology, such works also constitute a larger reaction to liberalism in politics and philosophy as well. We will compare Bell's ideas with those of other prominent theologians of the period like Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, as well as with those of secular philosophers and critics, like Georges Sorel, Filippo Marinetti, and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Chapter two, "Postmodernism and the Challenge of Fundamentalism," will examine Bell's definition of postmodernism in the preface to *Postmodernism, and other essays*, as a reaction to Protestant fundamentalism in the 1920s. Here we will challenge the tendency among more recent critics, like Fredric Jameson, Ernest Gellner, and Philippa Berry, to describe instances of religious revival in the late-twentieth century as "reiterations," or "re-presentations of faith". We will argue that when the same critics describe fundamentalism as "anti-modern," and "irrational," they not only ignore current research on the subject, but reiterate an old modernist refrain which is steeped in issues of geographic, socio-economic, and racial identity, that has less to do with religion, than with issues of cultural orthodoxy. When we

compare Jameson's remarks with those of modern critics like H.L. Mencken and Walter Lippmann, moreover, we find a similar response to these subjects. Bell's critique of fundamentalism, by comparison, while it still has much in common with his fellow modern critics, also conforms to the findings of more recent scholarship on the fundamentalist and the Evangelical movements in the United States, and therefore offers to move a step beyond what more recent scholarship describes as evidence of continued religious decline.

Chapter three, "The Scientific Revolution as a Catalyst for Cultural Change," examines Bell's employment of contemporary scientific and philosophical arguments, including those of Bertrand Russell, Robert A. Millikan, and J. Arthur Thomson, to both challenge and invert the arguments of philosophers like Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Max Weber, who interpreted the relationship between faith and reason in the modern world as fundamentally antagonistic. It will be argued that Bell's choice of the word "Spirit," in the statement, "The Spirit of the Living God will create Postmodernism," is a direct manifestation of this challenge, as well as an inversion of Marx's famous critique of religion in the introduction to "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" (1844), in which Marx famously likens religion to an opiate. When we compare Bell's challenge to similar observations expressed by Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, and Jean-Francois Lyotard, toward the possible reemergence of "traditional" religious beliefs throughout the world in the second half of the twentieth century, we are able to further challenge the exclusion of Bell's work from debates on postmodernism and contemporary culture.

In Chapter four, "Postmodernism and 'the Conservative Revolution'," we will attempt to place these arguments within the context of more contemporary debates on the conservative intellectual movement in the United States after the Second World

War, and charges that postmodernism is a product of the failure of the political left. While Jürgen Habermas, one of the leading exponents of this theory, has attempted to exempt those involved in what he labels the “neoconservative” movement, from any “attempt to mix religion and politics”, we will argue that many of those cited by Habermas in connection with this movement draw their ideas about postmodern social change and, indeed, the rise of post-industrialism, directly from the writings of theologians like Bernard Iddings Bell, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr in the earlier half of the twentieth century. What we are able to conclude at the end of such an analysis is that rather than a description of something that moves beyond a modernist critique, what we often find when we read more recent definitions of postmodernism is a critique of modern culture dressed up in new clothing. Nowhere is this more evident than in the attempts by contemporary critics to exclude the subject of religion from debates on politics and culture, during a period of protracted religious revival.

In Part II, “The Literary Response to Postmodern Disbelief in the Late Twentieth Century,” we will turn to an analysis of the possible implications of Bell’s thesis for contemporary literary studies. Here we will address the role that Max Weber’s secularization thesis has played in shaping the attitudes of many contemporary critics toward the subject of religion in contemporary culture. We will address this subject by looking at how three American authors, all writing in the last decade of the twentieth century, draw upon recent sociological evidence (like that highlighted above) in order to both challenge and invert the postmodern sense of disbelief embodied in metaphors like the “cultural mass,” “secular apocalypse,” and “literatures of silence,” in order to arrive at a similar conclusion to that reached by Bernard Iddings Bell in the 1920s.

In the first of these works, John Updike's novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996), we will argue that Updike's decision to foreground "unorthodox" forms of Christian belief in a novel that opens with the description of a Presbyterian minister's loss of faith, is not only a challenge to Weber's theory of secularization, but to postmodern literary critics like Irving Howe, Leslie Fiedler, Ihab Hassan, Fredric Jameson, Brian McHale, and others, who continue to apply Weber's thesis to theories of postmodernism. Drawing upon the arguments of contemporary sociologists like Dean M. Kelley, Laurence R. Iannaccone, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, Updike approaches subjects like the modernist controversy and the rise of Protestant fundamentalism in the 1920s, not as examples of religious decline, as several of his critics have argued, but as proof of the nation's ever increasing religious diversity and innovation.

Where changes in American Protestantism provide the subject for Updike's novel, changes in American Catholicism, and attitudes toward Catholicism, underlie much of Don DeLillo's narrative in *Underworld* (1997). An examination of *Underworld* and the criticism surrounding it also reveals an unwillingness on the part of critics to consider religious subjects in a postmodern context, and when they do, an ignorance of religious history and the sociology of religion in the United States. Here we will examine DeLillo's use of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting *The Triumph of Death* as a symbol of modern secular apocalypse and DeLillo's incorporation of religious characters like nuns, priests, and monks, as well as Charismatics, Jesuits, and mystics, in order to attest to changes underway since the end of the Second World War tantamount to what some have begun to describe as a "theological turn" in American culture. Rather than an attempt to "mock" or "flatter", as one critic has argued, we will argue that the presence of these characters is meant to reflect and

reinforce the presence of Bruegel's secular apocalypse from the prologue as the apocalypse of secular modernity itself.

In our analysis of Toni Morrison's seventh novel *Paradise* (1997), we will focus on Morrison's use of gnostic and Old Testament "wisdom" texts as a critical response to the notion of postmodern "literatures of silence". It will be argued that Morrison incorporates these texts not only to reaffirm the Africanness of African American Christianity, but also to counteract the corrosive effects of postmodern and poststructural theory on minority discourses within American literature. What many consider to be new theories of postmodern discourse can in this respect, according to Morrison, be traced back to early Christian and Jewish wisdom texts, and to neo-Platonism.

All three novels, moreover, support our argument that the postmodern critical response to religion is based upon inaccurate evidence, and that the decision to exclude works like Bernard Iddings Bell's *Postmodernism, and other essays* based upon its advocacy for religious solutions to modern social problems, is also unsupportable. What all three novels have in common, in addition to each author's attempts to highlight the continuing role that religion will play in a postmodern social environment, is that each work also concludes with a description of religious transcendence and transformation similar to that described by Bell in the conclusion to "Postmodernism." While we do not suggest that these authors derive their ideas about such transcendence directly from Bell's thesis, the fact that they apply such ideas to a critique of what are specifically postmodern cultural phenomena—in order to offer an alternative interpretation of such phenomena—remains highly relevant to our investigation of Bell's work and how it relates to current debates on postmodernism.

At the end of such an analysis we are able to conclude that, while there remain many opportunities to criticize Bell's thought, his notion that postmodernism will be defined by a renewed interest in religion and mystical theology still has merit, especially when one considers the literary and textual theory of the second half of the twentieth century and the works of contemporary novelists like John Updike, Don DeLillo, and Toni Morrison, which challenge the continued relevance of modern sociological theories like secularization, in what has been described as a specifically postmodern social environment.

Part I:

The Postmodern Theory of Bernard Iddings Bell,
Influences and Historical Background

Chapter 1

The Case Against Liberal Theology at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century

From the end of the American Civil War to the beginning of the First World War in Europe, the leading method of theological interpretation in the United States was what was known as liberal or “Modern” theology.¹ This theology, now synonymous with names like Henry Ward Beecher, David Swing, Shailer Matthews and Harry Emerson Fosdick, was nurtured in the nation’s most prestigious universities and seminaries and often mirrored contemporary philosophical and scientific movements like logical positivism, progressivism, and most importantly evolutionary science.² As one prominent apologist defined it in 1924, Modernism “is the use of the methods of modern science to find, state and use the permanent and central values of inherited orthodoxy in meeting the needs of a modern world”, “the results of scientific research” can then be used as “data” by which “to think religiously”.³

One of the problems with such theology, apart from the fact that it often privileged human reason above divine revelation, was that its emphasis upon scientific explanations for religious problems often reinforced social divisions within the churches and led many of its adherents to endorse a social-Darwinian and, at times, eugenic interpretation of contemporary society.⁴ As H. Richard Niebuhr argued in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929), the division of the

¹ William R. Hutchinson, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1976), 3.

² Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion*, 3 vols., Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1986-1996), 1:32.

³ Shailer Matthews, “Fundamentalism and Modernism: Two Religions,” *The Christian Century*, vol. 41 (1924), cited in Marty, *Modern American Religion*, 2:204.

⁴ Marty, *Modern American Religion*, 2:318-20; Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2004), 14-15. Liberalism in the churches was also associated with urbanism and the middle classes, and by association, the calcification of the church. See for example H. Richard Niebuhr’s comments on these subjects in, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, New York: Henry Holt and Company (1929), 184-186; and *The Kingdom of God in America*, New York: Harper & Row (1937), 196-197.

Protestant churches by the opening of the twentieth century, closely mirrored “the division of men into the castes of national, racial, and economic groups.” It drew “the color line in the church of God” and fostered “the misunderstandings, the self-exaltations,” and “the hatreds of jingoistic nationalism by continuing in the body of Christ the spurious differences of provincial loyalties”.⁵

Complicating this picture of division and rivalry was the fact that many of the most prominent defenders of liberalism and tolerance within the churches at the time were also involved in movements aimed at the limitation of human rights and personal liberties. Harry Emerson Fosdick, for example, who preached a famous sermon on toleration in 1922, entitled “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?”, is known to have joined the Advisory Council of the American Eugenics Society in 1927.⁶ Other prominent “liberal” clergymen who endorsed these activities included the Reverend Josiah Strong and the Reverend Walter Taylor Sumner, Dean of the Protestant Episcopal Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in Chicago, where Bernard Iddings Bell would himself come to serve in his later years, after the Second World War.⁷

Bell’s own introduction to the problems posed by liberal theology, however, came much earlier than this, upon his arrival at the University of Chicago in 1903. Born in Dayton Ohio in 1886, the son of a paper manufacturer, Bell enjoyed a comfortable upbringing in what he describes as an Evangelical Episcopal household.⁸ But like many young men who gravitated toward the nation’s industrial centres in the early years of the twentieth century, Bell found previously held convictions challenged by conditions he encountered in his new environment. The Chicago to

⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, New York: Henry Holt and Company (1929), 6.

⁶ Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, 116.

⁷ Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, 16, 53.

⁸ B.I. Bell, *Beyond Agnosticism*, New York: Harper & Brothers (1929), 2.

which Bell travelled in 1903 to begin a degree in history at the University of Chicago, was the Chicago of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, a fetid mixture of immigrants, industrial power and all of the abuses that went with the two. As Bell describes matters in the introduction to his book *Beyond Agnosticism* (1929), by the time he was finished with his freshman year at Chicago, the religion of his childhood "had been demolished", replaced by a profound sense of disillusionment from which he was only able to extract himself through the help of a local priest and by reading G.K. Chesterton's book on *Orthodoxy* (1908).⁹ In this Bell was not alone. Many of his contemporaries—including many of those who would later influence his thoughts on postmodernism—experienced a similar sense of disillusionment followed by the sense of a need for the return to religion.

After Graduating from the University of Chicago in 1907, Bell decided to pursue these ideas in a more practical form by enrolling at Western Theological Seminary (also in Chicago) where he studied for the degree of Sacred Theology. It was between his ordination in 1910 and the founding of the American branch of the Church Socialist League in 1911 (in which Bell played a prominent role), that Bell's earliest essays against theological liberalism began to appear.¹⁰

In his early works Bell combined a flare for provocative language with a desire to incite controversy that would become a trademark of his writing style. In an article entitled simply "War", which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1913, Bell attacked the liberal's sense of "toleration and a desire for peace" as "but other names for spiritual bankruptcy", charging that "[h]e is either a coward or one without wits

⁹ B.I. Bell, *Beyond Agnosticism*, 2-4.

¹⁰ The first branch of the Church Socialist League was founded in England by a group of Fabian socialists in 1906. See, for example, Spencer Miller Jr., and Joseph F. Fletcher, *The Church and Industry: An Account of the Relation of the Episcopal Church and the Church of England with Industry*, New York: Longmans, Green and Company (1930), 93-94.

who has no enemies whom he must fight to the death, and fight, possibly, with bloody tools".¹¹ Here Bell's criticism was aimed at exposing the hypocrisy of business leaders who attempted to disguise industrial abuses behind the cloak of Protestant morality. It was also aimed at the presumption of atheists and agnostics in American universities who had begun to interpret any challenge to liberal theology as a challenge to the Christian religion as a whole. "The fact that men quarrel no more about religion," writes Bell in response to these critics, is not a sign that religion itself has been defeated by the rationalism and technological innovations of enlightenment science, but rather "a sign that their religion has become formal and perfunctory. The fact that men have ceased to war for their ideals is a sure sign that they have not any ideals worth fighting for".¹²

The opinions expressed in early works like "War" reflect a growing trend in both American and European theology to become increasingly critical of the liberal, progressive theology of the previous generation.¹³ Most often associated with the neo-orthodoxy, or "crisis theology", of the Swiss theologians Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, this group also came to include figures like the German theologian Paul Tillich, and the American brothers Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr. All of these men moreover, with the exception of Karl Barth and H. Richard Niebuhr, either studied or taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York City during the same

¹¹ Bernard Iddings Bell, "War," *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 112, no. 5 (1913), 627-628.

¹² B.I. Bell, "War," 627.

¹³ Heather A. Warren provides a useful survey of this generation of theologians in *Theologians of a New World Order: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Realists 1920-1948*, New York: Oxford University Press (1997), 40-55.

period in which Bell served as president of St. Stephan's College and professor of religion at Columbia University in the 1920s and early 1930s.¹⁴

But it was not only young theologians who were involved in the critique of liberalism in the early decades of the twentieth century. Philosophers and artists were also involved in this critique. In 1914 for example, in an article entitled "The Danger of Tolerance in Religion," when Bell described the liberal's sense of "tolerance" as "a destructive force" and the "succeeding intolerance" as "constructive", he was not only criticising enlightenment notions of religious toleration established by John Locke in the seventeenth century;¹⁵ he was also reiterating an argument that had begun to appear in the works of many European critics like Georges Sorel and Filippo Marinetti which sought to challenge liberalism on the basis of its political and ideological failings.¹⁶ Such ideas were also strongly influenced by the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose works were gaining popularity and influence among both British and American intellectuals during the same period, and whom Bell would call upon in future works like *God Is Not Dead* (1945), and *Still Shine the Stars* (1941), in order to highlight the failings of what he had begun as early as 1915 to interpret as "neo-Protestantism".¹⁷

¹⁴ It was also while teaching at Columbia in the early 1930s that Federico de Onís composed his definition of postmodernism, published in *Antología de la poesía española e hispanoamericana (1882-1932)*, Madrid (1934), xviii.

¹⁵ See for example Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus, London: Routledge (1991).

¹⁶ Bernard Iddings Bell, "The Danger of Tolerance in Religion," *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 114, no. 1 (1914), 92; Georges Sorel *Reflections on Violence*, ed. Jeremy Jennings. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1999); Filippo Marinetti, "Manifesto of Futurism," *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, ed. Lawrence Cahoon, London: Blackwell (1996), 185-190.

¹⁷ In the former of these two works, Bell refers to Nietzsche as "one of the great European thinkers of the nineteenth century." One of Nietzsche's most valuable contributions to future thought, argues Bell, was his ability to identify and predict the dangers inherent in modern society, specifically in that character Bell labels the "modern man". According to this argument,

[Nietzsche] was one of the first to express the revulsion which nowadays moves great numbers of people, particularly the young, against a way of life which pursues creature comfort as its chief end, against a way of life which bids man be content if he may be

Karl Barth, who offered a similar critique of liberalism and liberal Protestantism in his 1918 commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, also cited Nietzsche as an ally in the crusade against modern, liberal theology, arguing that “Nietzsche, when he wildly and passionately rejected God, seems to have seen the issue far more clearly than the thoughtless ‘direct’ believers who condemned him”.¹⁸ Barth who, like Bell, saw in the liberal theologians of the previous century the possible destruction of eternal Christianity, saw in Nietzsche’s concept of nihilism a possible creative impulse that offered to cut a wedge between evolutionists and racialists and make room for the acceptance of a creative “spirit” or “will”.¹⁹ With the aid of his friend and colleague Emil Brunner, these ideas were introduced to the Anglo-American world through the description of a theology of “crisis”, which offered to build upon Nietzsche’s description of “chaos” in Zarathustra’s Prologue as a creative force.²⁰ Paul Tillich would later describe the same in terms of a “sacred void” from which new bonds of religion and secular culture could be formed.²¹ But

well-fed, well-clothed, housed in sanitary and well-heated dwellings and competently amused.

The danger in such thinking, warned Bell, was that man would lose his independent spirit—what Nietzsche described as his “will”—and become increasing subject to political coercion and a process that José Ortega y Gasset had described as “dehumanization”. See for example, Bernard Iddings Bell, *God Is Not Dead*, New York: Harper & Brothers (1945), 1-2, 15; and José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1948). Largely a euphemism for theological liberalism, Bell first defined the term “neo-Protestantism” in an article entitled, “Social Service and the Churches,” *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 115, no. 2 (1915), 161. He reiterates the same critique in *Right and Wrong After the War: An Elementary Consideration of Christian Morals in the Light of Modern Social Problems*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company (1918), 20. In *Crowd Culture: An Examination of the American Way of Life*, New York: Harper & Brothers (1952), 81, this term reads, “neo-Christian”.

¹⁸ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, 6th ed., London: Oxford University Press (1933), 349.

¹⁹ An example of Barth’s criticism of nineteenth century theologians like Schleiermacher, Gottfried Menken, Wegscheider, De Wette, and von Harnack can be found in Karl Barth, Introductory Essay, *The Essence of Christianity*, by Ludwig Feuerbach, trans. George Eliot, New York: Harper & Row (1957), xxv.

²⁰ Brunner would eventually compile these ideas into a book entitled *The Theology of Crisis*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons (1929). Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York: The Modern Library (1995), 17.

²¹ Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, trans. James Luther Adams, London: Nisbet & Co. (1951), 67.

not before Bell placed such ideas at the centre of his thesis on postmodernism, arguing that before anyone could become a successful Christian or Postmodernist, he/she must first experience a form of agnosticism, in which everything that the dominant, modern culture has come to accept as reality and Truth would be subject to rigorous questioning.²² In the realm of politics part of this questioning was already underway. It belonged to a school of thought then enjoying the peak of its popularity in the United States, called socialism. And it was to this school that many crisis theologians would also turn, for a time, in order to garner political support for their religious ideas.²³

Bell's early views on socialism can be found in journals like the *The Christian Socialist*, and *The Social Preparation For the Kingdom of God* (mouthpiece of the Church Socialist League in the United States), both before and during the war. The March 15, 1914 issue of *The Christian Socialist* displays a photograph of a young and defiant looking Bernard Iddings Bell beneath the headline: "Socialist Elected Dean of Fond Du Lac". The article gives a brief biography of "Comrade Bell" as a "Socialist party member and minister of the Grace Church, Chicago, Service Forum" and celebrates his appointment to St. Paul's Cathedral Church in Fond Du Lac, Wisconsin as "the youngest Dean in the American Episcopal Church, being not yet 28."²⁴ It is an image that many of his more recent biographers like Russell Kirk and Cicero Bruce

²² Bernard Iddings Bell, *Postmodernism, and other essays*, Milwaukee, WI: Morehouse Publishing (1926), 45-46, 53-54.

²³ For Barth's and Tillich's views on socialism see, for example, Karl Barth, *Karl Barth 1886-1968, How I Changed My Mind*, Ed. John D. Godsey, Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press (1969); and Paul Tillich, *The Socialist Decision*, trans. Franklin Sherman, New York: Harper & Row (1977).

²⁴ "Socialist Elected Dean of Fond Du Lac," *The Christian Socialist*, no. 6 (March 1914), 2.

do not care to remember,²⁵ but as this thesis will argue, it is essential to understanding the development of Bell's thought concerning postmodernism.

In articles like "The 'Wise' and the 'Prudent'", "Labor and War", and "What Is Social Service?", all of which appeared in *The Christian Socialist* between the years 1914 and 1917, Bell first addressed the need for, if not "tolerance" of different views, at least a desire for cultural and spiritual "unity" through the International Labour movement.²⁶ As the swelling industrial economy attracted an increasingly diverse population of workers from countries in southern and eastern Europe as well as from Asia, and as the Mexican Boll weevil decimated cotton crops in the South driving poor African American share croppers to Northern cities in search of work, descriptions of cultural unity would take the place of a critique of liberal "tolerance" in Bell's discourse, just as race riots and strikes would become a common feature of the American urban landscape in the 1910s and 1920s. "We can continue the policy of distrust, of conservatism, of opposition, and destroy the patriotism of the masses," writes Bell, "or we can show them the possibility of democracy in this country that is industrial as well as political, of the shop as well as of the study, writ in deeds and not merely in ink".²⁷ In this, Bell's critique can already be seen to anticipate parts of Jean-Francois Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as a "call to order, a desire for

²⁵ Both Kirk and Bruce gloss over Bell's involvement in the Socialist movement, preferring to remember him for his more positive contributions to the conservative intellectual movement in the United States in his later life. See for example: Russell Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans (1995), 168-172; and Cicero Bruce, "Bernard Iddings Bell, Rebel Rouser," *Modern Age*, vol. 41, no. 3 (1999), 252-262.

²⁶ Bernard Iddings Bell, "The 'Wise' and the 'Prudent': The Bible's Warning Against Compromise," *The Christian Socialist*, no. 15 (August 1914), 1-2; "Labor and War: A Labor Day Sermon," *The Christian Socialist*, no. 2 (1916), 6; "What Is Social Service?" *The Christian Socialist*, No. 10 (March 1917), 4.

²⁷ B.I. Bell, "Labor and War," 6.

unity, identity, security, and popularity (in the sense of *Offentlichkeit*, 'finding a public')", which also takes into account "local difference".²⁸

The problems facing the social life of the nation in the first decades of the twentieth century—like those facing it at the century's end—were problems of integration, of giving people from vastly different religious and cultural backgrounds a reason to participate in democratic government and feel a part of the national community. While liberal church leaders like Fosdick and Sumner were backing measures to limit immigration from countries outside of Western Europe and to control the birthrate of those who had already been admitted into the United States,²⁹ Bell and others like Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr were looking for alternative solutions that would involve direct political action, education, and inclusion, rather than outright exclusion and, in extreme cases, elimination.

For Bell, writing in the 1910s, these problems could only be solved through recourse to socialist solutions. Calls for individualism of the type articulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Frederick Jackson Turner in the previous century were no longer applicable. "The great West, with rewards for the adventurous and the industrious" was no longer, according to Bell, "a vast open territory" in which the individual could escape from his duties to society.³⁰ In the early decades of the twentieth century, faced with the problems and challenges of a modern, industrial world, ideas like those promoted by Emerson and Turner (which also tended to overlook the contributions of women and minority groups to the growth of American

²⁸ Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Answer to the Question, What Is the Postmodern?", *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985*, trans. and ed. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1992), 4; and *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1984), xxiv.

²⁹ Marty, *Modern American Religion*, 1: 37.

³⁰ Bernard Iddings Bell, *Right and Wrong After the War: An Elementary Consideration of Christian Morals in the Light of Modern Social Problems*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin (1918), 27.

culture) only “hindered any adequate grappling with our social problems.”³¹ In the years leading up to America’s entry into the First World War, Bell became convinced that the “bond of common needs” expressed in the international labor movement was “the only cement which can make for international fraternity and peace, and the complete possibility of Christian Living”.³² In Bell’s view, the old ways of a detached, introspective, individualistic culture based upon the tenets of Enlightenment individualism and scientific rationalism, had failed.³³ The inaction of liberal politicians and church leaders towards the plight of the urban poor underlined this point and called for, in Bells words, “the bringing about of a revolution within the Church herself, that God may use her to fill men full of power for combat with the forces of selfishness and the inhibitions of individualism, and to make of the world a place like heaven.”³⁴

The solution Bell describes is not unlike that associated with theories of an undivided Christendom, where different communities and cultures in medieval Europe were supposed to have existed peacefully side-by-side beneath the unifying umbrella of universal religion.³⁵ It is, admittedly, an idealistic view, but one that should be familiar to students of postmodernism who have read similar descriptions in the works of Daniel Bell and Jean-Francois Lyotard. In *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, for example, in which postmodernism is defined as “the psychedelic effort to expand consciousness without boundaries”, Daniel Bell argues that the only solution to the nihilism inspired by the “spiritual crisis” of modernity is “the return in

³¹ B.I. Bell, *Right and Wrong*, 28.

³² B.I. Bell, “Labor and War,” 6.

³³ Bernard Iddings Bell, “Worship and the Reunion of Christendom,” *Biblical World*, vol. 49, no.5 (1917), 290-294; “Laissez-Faire in Religion,” *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 113, no. 5 (1914), 615-619.

³⁴ B.I. Bell, “What Is Social Service?” 4.

³⁵ Benedict Anderson offers an example of this argument and its contemporary application in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed., London: Verso (1991), 11-19.

Western society of some conception of religion.”³⁶ Lyotard describes a similar sense in his “Answer to the Question, What Is the Postmodern?”, where he defines modernism as a “shattering of belief”, and postmodernism as an attempt to reengage the “ineffable”, and restore “the honor of the name”.³⁷

In his first published monograph, *Right and Wrong After the War* (1918), Bell defines his vision of this new world order in terms of an “international State”, one that will furnish Christian ethics its greatest field for operation, and is therefore a thing devoutly to be wished for, prayed for. Brotherhood in Jesus is not a thing of nations, of races, of colors. Brotherhood is international.³⁸

In subsequent works like *The Good News* (1922), Bell repeats this call for the conversion of America,

from commercialism to fraternalism, from individualism to collectivism, from a jingo nationalism to a nationalism which is international in aim....The time is gone by when a man can call himself a Christian and be industrially, politically, and internationally an apostle of self-interest. The time is gone by when we can preach soothing platitudes to our people in the face of Armageddon.³⁹

Descriptions like these of an “international State” that would require high moral standards of all its citizens, industrialists and workers alike, were nothing new to debates on either Christian eschatology or socialist utopia based upon such eschatological interpretations of the final destiny of man. The nineteenth century had produced a wealth of religious cults and socialist experiments like the Shakers, the

³⁶ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, London: Heinemann (1976), 28-29.

³⁷ Lyotard, “Answer to the Question, What Is the Postmodern?”, 14-15.

³⁸ B.I. Bell, *Right and Wrong*, 173.

³⁹ Bernard Iddings Bell, *The Good News*, Milwaukee, WI: Morehouse Publishing (1922), 67-69.

Oneida community, and even the Transcendentalist inspired Brook Farm. While the immediate inspiration for Bell's descriptions can be found in works like *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), where Marx and Engels call for "working men of all countries" to "unite!",⁴⁰ Bell's emphasis upon "the breaking-down of nationalities and the coming-in of the United States of the World",⁴¹ also points toward a different, more domestic, set of traditions. Walt Whitman had described a similar sense of American exceptionalism and manifest destiny in *Leaves of Grass* (1892). In poems like "Salut au Monde!" and "Years of the Modern," Whitman greeted the nations and cultures of the world in the name of an all "penetrating" American spirit.⁴² The same can also be found in American foreign policy initiatives of the period like President Woodrow Wilson's plan for a "League of Nations" and his "Fourteen Points" for post-war recovery. But what distinguished Bell's ideas from those of nineteenth century reformers and progressive democrats like Woodrow Wilson, was an increasingly pessimistic take on the nature and destiny of man. As Reinhold Niebuhr later summarized this mood,

The world is not at all as the eighteenth century hoped it would be if men would only disavow their irrelevant other-worldly hopes and expend all their energies on the perfecting of man and his society....the heaven on earth of modern man turned out to be more incredible than the old heaven; and much more dangerous.⁴³

Bell's vision of an international state was intended less as an expression of universal freedom and equality than as a means of shoring up order and control in

⁴⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. David McLellan, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1992), 39.

⁴¹ B.I. Bell, *Right and Wrong*, 172.

⁴² All references to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* refer to the "Death-Bed" edition, New York: The Modern Library (1993).

⁴³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, London: Faber & Faber (1954), 14.

American society. He would later describe the same in terms of a "Christian *bloc*", "designed to create a *bloc* of informed Christian opinion that is capable of influencing American economic adjustments and determining political action."⁴⁴ A similar program to the one Bell describes was already taking shape in the form of the union between the World Council of Churches and the United Nations during the Second World War. This union would set the agenda for the interaction between religion and politics in the second half of the twentieth century, both in terms of policy and reaction.⁴⁵ But in 1918, when Bell first began to devise such plans, he was still an admirer of the Russian revolutionary experiment. In articles and books like "Labor and War", and *Right and Wrong After the War*, he continued to praise the fortitude of the "Russian people" for shaking off "Kaiserism and militarism" and "emerging a free people".⁴⁶ But as the war drew to a close and the soldiers began to return home from the fighting such praise would prove short lived.

In 1919, when Bell moved east to begin what would become a fourteen-year tenure as President of St. Stephen's College, his wartime remarks drew the attention of the Joint Legislative Committee Investigating Seditious Activities of the State of New York, better known as the Lusk Committee (after its chairman Senator Clayton R. Lusk). Among the charges alleged in this report were "that revolutionary radicals have directed much of their propaganda in New York State toward college students, negroes and union labor."⁴⁷ A college president and card-carrying member of the

⁴⁴ B.I. Bell, *God Is Not Dead*, 97-98.

⁴⁵ One of the British delegates in the Commission on a Just and Durable Peace, which advised on the policies cementing this union, was Arnold J. Toynbee, who would offer his own definition of postmodernism in *A Study of History*, 12 vols., London: Oxford University Press (1934-1961), 5:43, 8:338. For evidence of Toynbee's involvement in the Commission on Just and Durable Peace, see Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order*, 113.

⁴⁶ B.I. Bell, *Right and Wrong*, 184.

⁴⁷ "Reds in our Colleges, Lusk Report Tells," *New York Times*, May 10, 1921, 5.

Socialist Party throughout the war years, Bell was especially vulnerable on all three counts.

According to *New York Times* reports on the incident the charges against Bell were eventually dropped.⁴⁸ But whether Bell had actually changed his mind about socialism or was merely bowing to pressure at this point is uncertain. In all likelihood he was referring to the Church Socialist League's policy on pacifism when, according to a newspaper report, he described its policies as "treasonable", and not socialism in general. For throughout the 1920s and 1930s Bell continued to write on the subject of "Catholic Socialism" and sociology. But where Bell had once insisted that "The [socialist] movement can never be killed" by war or other agents,⁴⁹ by the early 1920s he was more consistently of the opinion that it needed to be killed, that its motives were flawed, and its leaders hypocritical.⁵⁰ In a sermon delivered at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, on May 23, 1920, Bell is reported to have declared:

Just as apparently, with brilliant and noble exceptions, the general idea of our investing controllers of life has long been not to serve humanity but rather to exploit it, seeking ever to gain for personal enjoyment unjustified and immoral profits, so now the general idea of labor inevitably approaching social control seems, with brilliant exceptions, to be not to serve humanity but to exploit it also, seeking ever to gain, for personal enjoyment, unprincipled and immoral wages.

⁴⁸ "Dr. Bell Denies Being A Socialist," *New York Times*, December 14, 1920, 6.

⁴⁹ B.I. Bell, "Labor and War," 6.

⁵⁰ Bell makes allusions to such hypocrisy and his growing disillusionment with his radical past in *The Good News*, 71-72; and again in *Unfashionable Convictions*, New York: Harper & Brothers (1931), xiv-xv.

The true enemies of industrial democracy are not capitalists. They are, rather, those millions of industrial democrats, apparently motivated by no higher or larger ideals than a desire for as much wealth for as little service as can clamorously be obtained.

If the emerging industrial democracy cannot be brought to live for the things which perish not, the things which transcend the material, the industrial democracy is bound for destruction, bound to follow imperialism, feudalism, and capitalism into the limbo of things tried in the furnace and found wanting.⁵¹

By the opening of the 1920s, a decade which saw the final collapse of the Social Gospel movement in the United States,⁵² and the defeat of Wilsonian internationalism at home, there were new enemies on the horizon: Fascists in Italy, National Socialists in Germany, and Protestant Fundamentalists (allied with the anti-Catholic, anti-Communist Ku-Klux-Klan) in the United States. Many of these had also tapped into the national churches in order to buoy support for their causes.⁵³ Bell's answer to this Right wing backlash was both to acknowledge the failures of the left (as many future critics would do in response to similar trends) and to offer an

⁵¹ "Sees Greed Ruling 'New Social Order'", *New York Times*, May 24, 1920, 4. This article is also cited by Edgar C. Bundy as evidence of Bell's support for "the atheism and materialism of the I.W.W. and Bolshevism", in *Apostles of Deceit*, Wheaton, IL: Church League of America (1966), 401. Bundy's report however completely omits the above quotation from Bell's sermon and thereby completely misrepresents his argument. Others implicated by Bundy in the alleged communist infiltration of American universities in the first half of the twentieth century include Reinhold Niebuhr (p. 220), and Paul Tillich (p. 139).

⁵² Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915*, New Haven: Yale University Press (1940), 244.

⁵³ Karl Barth, *Karl Barth 1886-1968, How I Changed My Mind*, ed. John D. Godsey, Edinburgh: The Saint Andrews Press (1969); Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1961), xi, xvi-xvii; Fritz Stern, "Acceptance Speech upon Receiving the Leo Baeck Medal," The Leo Baeck Institute for the study of the history and culture of German-speaking Jews, 10th Annual Dinner of the Leo Baeck Institute [2004?], <http://lbi.org/fritzstern.html>; Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945*, New York: Cambridge University Press (2003).

alternative to Right wing extremism, in what he would label alternatively, “Postmodernism”, and “Catholic Sociology” in the years to come.

In the preface to *Postmodernism, and other essays*, where he commits these views to print, Bell defines this postmodernism as “as yet largely an unexpressed point of view, which manifests itself chiefly in resentment against the absurdities of ‘Fundamentalism’ and the sentimentalities of ‘Modernism’” (by which he also means “Liberalism”).⁵⁴ But while critics of Bell’s work have chosen to focus almost exclusively on the religious connotations of these two terms, describing Bell’s sense of postmodernism as “anti-modernist” or irrelevant to current debates on postmodernism⁵⁵; we will look in the following chapters to an historical and cultural analysis of their application in Bell’s thesis—and other theses on postmodernism—in order to understand what, if anything, Bell’s thesis can tell us about the relationship between religion and postmodernism in the present. More than an exclusively theological treatise, it will be argued, Bell’s *Postmodernism, and other essays* is an example of early twentieth century cultural criticism, that draws its influences from many of the same sources as more contemporary critics. Where it differs from these, however, is in its attitude toward religion and religious involvement in postmodern cultural change.

⁵⁴ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, ix.

⁵⁵ See discussion on this in the introduction to this thesis, pages 10-11.

Chapter 2

Postmodernism and the Challenge of Fundamentalism

While many writing on the subject of postmodernism in the 1980s and 1990s refer to something called “religious fundamentalism” in the process of delineating the theoretical parameters of postmodernism, rarely are such descriptions connected with an historical understanding of this movement’s origins in the intra-denominational battles between American Protestants in the 1920s. The term “fundamentalist,” which has since been applied to anything from religious conservatism to strong views in general, appears in many recent volumes on postmodernism and religion where it is usually defined in terms of “reiterations”, or, “re-presentations of faith” in what is considered by many to be a “post-religious” or, at best, “quasi-religious” social environment.¹ In the conclusion to his widely celebrated work, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Fredric Jameson places fundamentalism under the rubric of “new religions”, and what is described as a uniquely “postmodern phenomenon”.²

Such “religious postmodernisms”³ are held by Jameson and others to be at base “anti-modern” and “irrational,” concerned with “rolling-back...the dearly bought and deeply felt modernist sense of social and cultural difference,” which included gender equality, bourgeois individualism, and “Western scientific reasoning”.⁴ In *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion* (1992), a study that explores the relationship

¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press (1991), 386-391; Philippa Berry, “Postmodernism and Post-Religion,” *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Steven Connor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2004), 171-172.

² Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 388.

³ Among these Jameson includes, indiscriminately, the Islamic fundamentalists of the Iranian revolution and conservative Mennonite clergymen like John Howard Yoder who opposed the Vietnam War in the United States on the grounds of pacifism. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 388-91.

⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 388-389.

between postmodern cultural criticism and the revival of religious belief in parts of the Middle East in the latter half of the twentieth century, British sociologist Ernest Gellner echoes Jameson's thesis in ascribing religious fundamentalism, in this case Islamic fundamentalism, to cultural pluralism and irrational belief.⁵

But despite their willingness to confuse terms like "liberal" and "modern," and to associate various and opposed forms of religious belief—with a disproportionate emphasis on twentieth century forms of political Islam—these scholars also ignore the wider field of research on the subject which flatly disputes such analyses. Self-styled fundamentalists, as the majority of scholars now agree, often merely exchange one form of rational enquiry for another and are no less "modern" in this sense of the term than many theological modernists of an earlier period. As George Marsden writes in *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (1980), Protestant fundamentalists in the 1920s,

reflected many of the popular, sentimental, and sometimes anti-intellectual characteristics of the revivalist heritage. Nevertheless they stood in an intellectual tradition that had the highest regard for one understanding of true scientific method and proper rationality...steadfastly committed to the principles of the seventeenth-century philosopher Francis Bacon: careful observation and classification of facts.⁶

According to Nancy T. Ammerman, this "systematic, rational approach to finding and organizing the facts of Scripture" also "reflects the nineteenth-century scientific world from which the movement emerged", and not some anti-modern desire to rewrite the

⁵ Ernest Gellner. *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion*. London: Routledge (1992), 24.

⁶ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870-1925*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1980), 7.

modern sense of tradition in the name of irrational belief as suggested by Jameson.⁷ Similar observations have also been made in studies focused on fundamentalist forms of Islam and Judaism in the twentieth century.⁸ As Ali Mirsepassi-Ashtiani and Gilles Kepel have argued, those attracted to Islamic politics in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s came from “a broad spectrum of social and class boundaries”, and often from the educated middle classes.⁹ Fundamentalists, moreover, unlike their modern theological counterparts, were among the first to take advantage of new technologies like radio, television, and the internet, and therefore cannot in the strictest sense be classed as anti-modern.¹⁰

When Jameson and Gellner describe fundamentalism as “anti-modern”, and “irrational”, they not only ignore contemporary research on the subject, but reiterate an old modernist refrain steeped in issues of geographic, socio-economic, and racial identity in the United States, which has less to do with religion than with issues of cultural orthodoxy. When we compare Jameson’s descriptions of fundamentalists, for example, with those of modern critics like H.L. Mencken or Walter Lippmann who were writing on similar subjects during the 1920s, we notice a certain community of thought. When Mencken refers to fundamentalists he describes them as “so-called religious organizations” which are, at bottom, nothing more than “conspiracies of the

⁷ Nancy T. Ammerman, “North American Protestant Fundamentalism,” *Fundamentalisms Observed*, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1991), 9.

⁸ Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World*, trans. Alan Braley, Cambridge: Polity Press (1994); Ali Mirsepassi-Ashtiani, “The Crisis of Secular Politics and the Rise of Political Islam in Iran,” *Social Text*, no. 38 (1994), 51-84; Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, *The Glory and the Power: The Fundamentalist Challenge to the Modern World*, Boston: Beacon Press (1992).

⁹ Mirsepassi-Ashtiani, “The Crisis of Secular Politics and the Rise of Political Islam in Iran,” 76-77; Kepel, *The Revenge of God*, 137.

¹⁰ Ammerman, “North American Protestant Fundamentalism,” 33-34; Marty and Appleby, *The Glory and the Power*, 15, 31-32; Kepel, *The Revenge of God*, 124; Stewart M. Hoover, *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications (1988).

inferior man against his betters".¹¹ Lippmann, while by far the more diplomatic of the two, describes fundamentalism in similar terms as largely the product of isolation, inexperience, and a lack of education.¹² Both critics subscribe to a linear, evolutionary interpretation of religious development from irrational to increasingly rational forms of theological interpretation. Anything that appears to deviate from this model, also deviates from "True" religion, or is at best an anomaly.

But explanations like these fail to account for the widespread popularity of the fundamentalist movement after the First World War, and the continued existence of religious movements claiming allegiance to the fundamentals of faith in the latter half of the twentieth century. If it were merely down to questions of education and experience, as Mencken and Lippmann attest, then surely interest in fundamentalism would have decreased as levels of education and urbanisation rose throughout the course of the twentieth century. As the evidence for the growth of these movements suggests, however, this does not prove to be the case. In fact the opposite proves to be true. As levels of education among self-professed fundamentalists rose after the end of the Second World War, the numbers of those professing a belief in the fundamentals of Christian faith, and most importantly in an inerrant Bible, continued to rise.¹³

Despite the popular image of fundamentalists created during news coverage of the Scopes' trial in 1925 (for which Mencken was largely responsible), not all members of this movement could be classified as isolated or uneducated in the 1920s either. Many were drawn from the middle and upper levels of American society.

¹¹ H.L. Mencken, *H.L. Mencken on Religion*, ed. S.T. Joshi, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books (2002), 166.

¹² Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals*, London: George Allen & Unwin (1929), 31.

¹³ Marty and Appleby, *The Glory and the Power*, 14. Kepel, *The Revenge of God*, 123-124.

Some, like J. Gresham Machen, as Lippmann himself was forced to admit, were drawn from the most prestigious universities in the land.¹⁴ And as Martin E. Marty notes in *Modern American Religion*, many of those who contributed to the original series of pamphlets entitled *The Fundamentals* (published between 1910 and 1915), were also in favour of a scientific basis for the interpretation of scripture.¹⁵ Rather than a clear-cut case of “irrationalism” and “survivals,” fundamentalism in the 1920s, like its counterpart conservative Evangelicalism in the 1970s and 1980s, represents a more complex critique of contemporary American culture than many critics trained in modern critical methods are willing to investigate or to recognize.

Those who were attracted to the theology of fundamentalism in the 1920s, moreover, were often those who felt most threatened by increases in foreign immigration and the migrations of African Americans from the South to northern cities like New York and Chicago. As historians of the movement have since noted, fundamentalism, though not exclusive to the Southern and the mid-Western regions of the United States, often came to be concentrated in these areas, which were also those whose populations benefited least from the post-Civil War industrial expansion. In addition to a specific method of theological interpretation, fundamentalism also stood for a specific way of life, bound by a sense of cultural tradition and racial identification often associated with the pre-Civil War South.¹⁶

¹⁴ Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals*, 31-32.

¹⁵ Marty, *Modern American Religion*, 3 vols., Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press (1986-1996), 1: 36-37.

¹⁶ Protestant fundamentalism's ties to Princeton Theological Seminary and the conflict between rural and urban society have led many to make this connection. While the actual point of conflict occurred in northern cities and northern denominations, it was often carried there by those migrating from the rural south. The location of many of the institutional headquarters of fundamentalist and Evangelical organizations today also point to this southern connection. See for example, Kepel, *The Revenge of God*, 106; and Ammerman, “North American Protestant Fundamentalism,” 15-17. As Jose Casanova notes in *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 146, after fundamentalists were publicly humiliated at the Scope's trial and failed to convince their denominations to abandon liberal views on scriptural interpretation, “Most of them retreated to rural and southern areas, where they could create their own

When we look at the rise of conservative and fundamentalist Christian groups in the 1970s and 1980s, we are able to trace such rises to a similar set of reactions. First to a new wave of immigration from Central and Southern America, as well as from Asia, and second from the “successes” of the reform movements of the 1950s and 1960s which focused primarily on issues related to gender and racial equality.¹⁷ Like the fundamentalist movement in the 1920s, which reacted to immigration from countries in Southern and Eastern Europe, and to the threat of communist and Catholic infiltration of what was perceived to be a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant society, conservative Christians in the 1970s and 1980s banded together in order to protect a similar vision of American culture, as white and Judeo-Christian. In this regard, the response of postmodern critics like Jameson to such a critique is similar to that of critics like Mencken and Lippmann in previous decades. But it is not only the modernist response to fundamentalist forms of religious belief that postmodern critics tend to mirror in their definitions of postmodernism.

When we take a closer look at works like Walter Lippmann’s *A Preface to Morals*, which also predicted a steady decline in religious belief among the American public, we are able to identify even more similarities between it and contemporary works like Jameson’s *Postmodernism*, and Daniel Bell’s *The Cultural Contradictions of Late Capitalism*. Lippmann’s assertion, for example, that the modern world came about at the price of an older, more coherent ancestral order, is similar to Jameson’s description of postmodernism emerging from a “radical break” with the knowledge systems of the past.¹⁸ According to Lippmann, the “dissolution” of the pre-modern

separatist archipelagoes or swim almost unnoticed in the sea of conservative evangelical Protestantism.”

¹⁷ Ammerman, “North American Protestant Fundamentalism,” 38-9.

¹⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 1.

order, came at the price of both “meaning” and “value”.¹⁹ The same can be found in Jameson’s and Lyotard’s descriptions of the breakdown of meaning in a postmodern social environment. Jameson, building upon the ideas of poststructuralist critics like Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida, describes this breakdown as a “fundamental mutation both in the object world itself—now become a set of texts or simulacra—and in the disposition of the subject”.²⁰ Lyotard describes it in terms of a “crisis of narratives,” where the “status of knowledge” itself is “altered”.²¹

While Lippmann does not employ the word “system” to describe this dissolution as readily as many postmodern critics do, the sense of this word is however implied in arguments that portray the “modern man” as the helpless pawn of modern social forces. While “he can believe what he chooses about this civilization”, writes Lippmann, the modern man “cannot, however, escape the compulsion of modern events. They compel his body and his senses as ruthlessly as ever did king or priest.”²² Lippmann’s description of the modern man as one who “is unable any longer to think himself as a single personality approaching an everlasting judgment”, that “[h]e is one man to-day [*sic*] and another to-morrow,”²³ also recalls Jameson’s descriptions of the postmodern man as a “schizophrenic”, unable “cognitively to map [his] position in a mappable external world”.²⁴ Jameson’s warning, moreover, that “[i]f we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back

¹⁹ Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals*, 9, 68.

²⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 9.

²¹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press (1984), xxiii, 3.

²² Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals*, 9.

²³ Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals*, 113.

²⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 44.

into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity” and “random difference,”²⁵ also reiterates an earlier fear of cultural stagnation articulated by the nineteenth century English philosopher John Stuart Mill, who argued that “the general tendency of things throughout the world” in 1859 was “to render mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind.”²⁶ Without strong wills and individual characters “to discover new truths, and point out when what were once truths are true no longer,” argued Mill, “human life”, and Western culture, “would become a stagnant pool.”²⁷

If resistance waits till life is reduced *nearly* to one uniform type, all deviations from that type will come to be considered impious, immoral, even monstrous and contrary to nature. Mankind speedily become unable to conceive diversity, when they have been for some time unaccustomed to see it.²⁸

Bernard Iddings Bell makes a similar observation in *Postmodernism* when he poses the question,

Who will pioneer if there can be found no sure approach to Truth? Who cares to blaze new trails if all trails lead alike to nowhere? If we can never know what we are or why we are, how is leadership possible? Who dares lead anybody anywhere if no one may first be sure?²⁹

But where others, including Mill, have tended to present such circumstances as an obstacle, Bell embraces them as the final step before the transformation from modernism to postmodernism, arguing that while the “inevitable result of this

²⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 6. We find a similar definition in Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv, where he describes the possible affects of the breakdown in narratives on the ability to communicate in a postmodern world.

²⁶ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. John Gray, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1991), 73.

²⁷ Mill, *On Liberty*, 71-72, 77-80.

²⁸ Mill, *On Liberty*, 82.

²⁹ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 32.

agnosticism about everything cannot help but be moral cowardice, spiritual surrender, and racial paralysis”, as suggested by Mill, “[n]o one has ever been able to be an intelligent Christian until he has become an agnostic first.”³⁰ It is in this context that Bell offers his critique of fundamentalism, not as a postmodern religion, as Jameson describes it, but as another symptom of outmoded modernism.

Bell’s initial descriptions of fundamentalist theology as “absurd” and “hysterical,” and accusations like, “Only in America is Biblical ‘fundamentalism,’ so-called, undiscredited”,³¹ at first appear to ally him with many modern and, indeed, many postmodern critics who seek to discredit such movements on the basis of a modern, scientific sense of intellectual integrity. To a certain extent this would be correct. Bell is, in effect, approaching this material from the position of a modernist, having been nurtured in the tradition of the Social Gospel movement, which was, ostensibly, a modernist movement. But Bell’s assertions in his conclusions to *Postmodernism* that “[t]o insist upon Fundamentalism is to offend the good sense of the age” and that “Fundamentalism is hopelessly outdated”,³² are based upon the idea—backed up by recent research—that fundamentalism relied too heavily upon the science and theology of the previous century and not that it was in any sense “irrational” as Jameson and Gellner have claimed. If anything, both fundamentalists and modernists, according to Bell, were too reliant upon rational formulas for Biblical and social interpretation.³³ When Bell seeks to counter such claims, it is therefore not only to theological sources that he turns, but to the very science and philosophy that was then proving the greatest obstacle to his modernist and fundamentalist

³⁰ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 32, 45.

³¹ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, ix, 6.

³² B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 53-54.

³³ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 3-11.

adversaries. In doing so he anticipated the pronouncements of future critics, including Ihab Hassan and Jean-Francois Lyotard, who would also associate the birth of postmodernism with the scientific revolution of the early twentieth century.

Chapter 3

The Scientific Revolution as a Catalyst for Cultural Change

Until the beginning of the twentieth century science had long been the ally of Modern, progressive thought. But by the end of the First World War this was all beginning to change. In addition to the various crises brewing within the political realm and within the Churches there was also much talk in the scientific community during this period of a “revolution” in the making. Beginning with the discovery of X-ray radiation in 1895 a stream of discoveries in the physical sciences, including radioactivity and Special Relativity, fundamentally challenged existing scientific assumptions about the nature of the physical universe and the foundations of rational science itself. In the spirit of the various *avant-garde* movements of the day leading British scientists and academics like Julian Huxley, J. Arthur Thomson, and Arthur Eddington, and Americans like the Nobel prize winning physicist Robert A. Millikan, began to reflect a growing distaste for the purely rationalist formulas upon which the scientific determinism and materialism of the previous century had been based.

In the words of Robert A. Millikan—perhaps the least likely irrationalist of them all¹—discoveries like that of radioactivity in 1896, made it possible “to begin to think in terms of a universe which is changing, living, growing, even in its elements—a dynamic instead of a static universe.”² It revealed “the futility of the mechanical” model upon which scientists “had set such store in the nineteenth century” and made it possible once again to “look with a sense of wonder and mystery and reverence

¹ As Robert H. Kargon has argued in “The Conservative Mode: Robert A. Millikan and the Twentieth-Century Revolution in Physics,” *Isis*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (Dec., 1977), 508-526, Millikan is remembered more for his conservative approach to scientific experimentation than anything else.

² Robert Andrews Millikan, *Evolution in Science and Religion*, New Haven: Yale University Press (1927), 13.

upon the fundamental elements of the physical world.”³ Others like Huxley, Thomson, and Eddington, while they would not argue directly as Millikan does that such findings constitute “one of the great contributions of science to religion”,⁴ would nevertheless make room for others to do so, arguing as Huxley does that “Science, like art, or morality, or religion, is simply one way of handling the chaos of experience which is the only immediate reality we know”.⁵ Even Bertrand Russell who had built a reputation for himself as a devout atheist and who was eventually, “stripped...of a visiting professorship at City College, New York” for his views on religion,⁶ would write tracts on the subject during the First World War, describing a need for, in Russell’s words, “a philosophy, or a religion, which will promote life.”⁷

While, to be sure, not all of these ventures into spiritual thinking were to include Christianity as their vehicle—Russell for one insisted that it would not be through “the traditional religion that a new spirit” would “come into the world”⁸—in *Postmodernism* Bell would read into such testimonies evidence of a positive change and hope for the future, insisting that, “while in 1895 practically every first-rate scientist assumed that man is capable by observation and reason of discovering essential Truth about the universe and about himself...there is not a mind of premier

³ Millikan, *Evolution in Science and Religion*, 15, 27.

⁴ Millikan, *Evolution in Science and Religion*, 14.

⁵ Julian Huxley, *et al.*, *Science and Religion: A Symposium*, London: Gerald Howe (1931), 17. Huxley’s statement also, of course, owes a great debt to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche whose influence on Bell’s work has already been noted and will be discussed further below.

⁶ Bertrand Russell, *Russell on Religion: Selections from the Writings of Bertrand Russell*, ed. Louis Greenspan and Stefan Andersson, London: Routledge (1999), 2.

⁷ Bertrand Russell, *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, London: Unwin Books (1916), 168.

⁸ Russell, *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, 140-41. Russell’s advocacy of “a religious view of life and the world” that “will give praise to positive achievement rather than negative sinlessness, to the joy of life, the quick affection, the creative insight, by which the world may grow young and beautiful and filled with vigour”, is also in the same work associated with “Patriotism.” It is an idea that proved the direct opposite of the theology of crisis and would eventually find its counterpart in the Fascist and Nazi youth movements in the 1920s and 1930s.

rank in the world in 1925 which believes any such thing.”⁹ Citing the examples of Russell, Millikan, and Thomson,¹⁰ Bell argues that “The scientist is now of the opinion that the scientific technic [*sic*] is not, in itself, sufficient” to answer our questions about ultimate Truth and reality in the universe, and that “Nowadays the greatest scientists are, quite as often as not, the greatest mystics.”¹¹ Indeed, some like Thomson would even adopt the language of mysticism when arguing that scientific method is not the only means by which to arrive at truth, castigating those who fail to press the limits of their intellectual abilities as arrogant and unimaginative.¹²

When we compare these ideas with those of more recent critics like Ihab Hassan and Jean-Francois Lyotard, who argued essentially the same thing, we begin to note a pattern of relation. Hassan’s definition of “The New Science” in his essay “Culture, Indeterminacy, and Immanence” (1977), for example, attempts to link Albert Einstein’s theory of Special Relativity and Werner Heisenberg’s “uncertainty” principle to the beginning of “a new order of knowledge”, which he identifies in the same essay as “postmodern”.¹³ In the conclusion to *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* ([1979] 1984), Lyotard argues similarly that, “Postmodern science....is theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable, and paradoxical...changing the meaning of the word *knowledge*, while

⁹ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 21.

¹⁰ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 24.

¹¹ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 21, 45.

¹² Julian Huxley, *et al.*, *Science and Religion*, 168. In making such statements Thomson echoes the words of the great mystic himself, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, who in the opening paragraphs of *The Mystical Theology* abjured his reader to “see to it that none of this comes to the hearing of the uniformed...to those caught up with the things of the world, who imagine that there is nothing beyond instances of individual being and who think that by their own intellectual resources they can have a direct knowledge of him who has made the shadows his hiding place....who describe the transcendent Cause of all things in terms derived from the lowest orders of being, and who claim that it is in no way superior to the godless, multiformed shapes they themselves have made.” These ideas also trace their roots to Platonism.

¹³ Ihab Hassan, “Culture, Indeterminacy, and Immanence: Margins of the (Postmodern) Age,” *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*, Columbus, OH: Ohio University Press (1987), 62.

expressing how such a change can take place...producing not the known, but the unknown” and suggesting “a model of legitimation that has nothing to do with maximized performance, but has as its basis difference understood as paralogy.”¹⁴ Both critics present the scientific revolution of the early twentieth century as proof of Nietzsche’s prophecy that the ultimate values devalue themselves.

Bell’s use of the new physics to explain a return to “mysticism” is similar to these definitions. But Bell’s contains an added twist. While Bell’s argument can be viewed, in one sense, as an attempt to confirm Nietzsche’s prophecy that nineteenth century science contains the seeds of its own destruction—an idea that Marx and Engels had applied equally to bourgeois capitalism and modernity in general in *The Communist Manifesto*—Bell’s thesis can also be read as a direct challenge to and inversion of that critique, present in both Nietzsche and Marx, that saw the whole of religion on the retreat as well. The word “spirit” in Bell’s thesis statement, “The Spirit of the Living God will create Postmodernism,”¹⁵ can in this sense be read as both a derivation from, and a direct response to, Marx’s famous critique of religion in the introduction to “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” (1844), where he argues that,

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sign of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the *spirit* of a spiritless situation.¹⁶

¹⁴ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press (1984), 60.

¹⁵ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 54.

¹⁶ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *K. Marx and F. Engels on Religion*, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House (1957), 42. My italics.

According to Bell, the same forces that were challenging the old science of absolute certainty could also be channelled against the philosophical discourse used to legitimate a society that had weaned itself from God. In this Bell agreed with Nietzsche that extreme forms of nihilism could provide a possible route back to “a divine way of thinking”.¹⁷ Where he disagreed with Nietzsche was on the role that Christianity would play in that regenerative process.

Like other prominent theologians of the period, most notably the Swiss Karl Barth, Bell interpreted the nihilism described in Nietzsche’s critique (for which he substituted the Greek term *agnosticism*, or “unknowing”),¹⁸ as essential to the future of Christian theology, and Western culture in general, arguing that “[t]he only possible end of the scientific method, unless that method be augmented extra-scientifically, is honest and complete agnosticism about everything”, and that without this “agnosticism” no one was capable of becoming “an intelligent Christian”, or moving beyond what John Stuart Mill described as a “pool” of cultural stagnation.¹⁹ Where nineteenth century philosophers like Marx and Nietzsche were only able to see the degenerative aspects of progress and rationalization and preferred to view religion through a nostalgic lens, Bell saw opportunity for change and regeneration without having to resort to claims of scriptural inerrancy like the fundamentalists. If the

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage (1967), 15.

¹⁸ Bell’s choice of the word “agnostic” to describe his version of Nietzsche’s nihilist is most likely aimed at those like T.H. Huxley who first coined the term in its present use in 1869 to describe one who was unwilling to commit to any one set of religious beliefs, or who was otherwise sceptical of the existence of God. It could also have been intended as a weapon against the theological naturalism of men like Ralph Waldo Emerson, and other ministers turned Transcendentalist philosophers during the previous century.

¹⁹ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 30, 45. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. John Gray, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1991), 71. Others who later argued this point included H. Emil Brunner, who argued in *The Theology of Crisis*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons (1929), 15, that where “man makes himself the judge of all truth, in so doing, he shows himself to be uncritical. For soundly critical reasoning would show this *continuum* of knowledge to be not only imperfectible but also impossible.”

“Spirit of Capitalism”, as Max Weber dubbed it in 1905, was responsible for summoning the modern world from the ruins of the medieval monasteries, then postmodernism would arise from a similar sense of exhaustion and renewal. Only in this case, that which was to be exhausted was the unchecked will of man and the scientific philosophy used to legitimate it. That which was to be renewed, according to Bell, was the “Spirit of the Living God” and the religion which acted as the binding force between that God and man.²⁰

Similar conclusions were reached independently by Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, and Jean-Francois Lyotard—all of whom would come to be associated with the study of postmodernism, in one sense or another—in the latter half of the twentieth century. According to Fanon, one of the marks of a world emerging from colonial rule after the Second World War would be “a falling back toward old tribal attitudes” and “religious rivalries” as ideas of national unity based upon the Western model of progress and cultural evolution were challenged by a generation that sought its own, unique, post-colonial identity purged of anything the West had to offer.²¹ We see this not only in the post-colonial East and in Africa, but also in the United States where young African Americans were also influenced by a post-war environment that encouraged direct, and sometimes violent, political action for the resolution of social problems.

In an interview with Claire Brière and Pierre Blanchet in 1979, Michel Foucault, argued that those involved in the revolution in Iran “were looking to Islam for a change in their subjectivity” in the same way that those attracted to the ideas of Marx at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries had

²⁰ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 54.

²¹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books (1963), 127-128.

looked to socialism and communism for a change in theirs.²² According to Foucault, where Marx was responding to a world in which religious leaders and state bureaucrats were seen to have used religion as a form of social control, and to have engineered the oppression of the masses through religious propaganda and physical coercion, the political situation in the latter half of the twentieth century in many modern societies presented the reverse. Once the liberator, the modern secular state had now become the oppressor, “Islam, in that year of 1978, was not the opium of the people precisely because it was the spirit of a world without a spirit.”²³

One could apply a similar reasoning to the rise of conservative Christian movements in the United States during the same period. Fredric Jameson came close to doing this in 1991 when he included the Mennonite clergyman John Howard Yoder in his list of “religious postmodernisms” in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.²⁴ But like Foucault, who had already accused the West of “having forgotten a ‘political spirituality’ since the Renaissance and ‘the great Crisis of Christianity’ (the Reformation)”,²⁵ Jameson also fell short of recognizing any connection between what critics had begun to describe as a postmodern challenge to

²² Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, New York: Routledge (1988), 218.

²³ Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, 218. Here Foucault is paraphrasing from and inverting Marx’s famous critique of religion in the introduction to *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (1844), in the same manner in which Bell did in *Postmodernism* back in 1926. Like Bell, he would also eventually ascribe such observations to the social transformations of postmodernism, describing the Iranian revolution in an interview with a journalist for the journal *Akhtar* in 1987, as “the first postmodern revolution of our time.” “An Interview with M. Foucault,” (in Farsi), *Akhtar*, no. 4 (1987), 43, quoted in Ali Mirsepassi-Ashtiani, “The Crisis of Secular Politics and the Rise of Political Islam in Iran,” *Social Text*, no. 38 (1994), 51.

²⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press (1991), 388-91.

²⁵ Jeremy R. Carrette, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality*, London: Routledge (2000), 137.

modern, liberal democracies in the later half of the twentieth century, and the rise of conservative Christian movements during the same period.²⁶

For Lyotard, who was responsible for one of the most influential theses written on postmodernism in the 1980s, *The Postmodern Condition* ([1979] 1984), where modernity could be defined as “a shattering of belief”—a phrase he readily admits is “clearly related to what Nietzsche calls nihilism”—postmodernity, is concerned with reinstating “that which in the modern invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself”, which “refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste...and inquires into new presentations—not to take pleasure in them, but to better produce the feeling that there is something unrepresentable.”²⁷ While Lyotard never refers directly to God, or the idea of religious revival in such statements, the ideas are there to be seen and can be inferred from the language he employs to get his point across. It is Lyotard who perhaps comes the closest to reiterating the sense of postmodernism intended by Bell in 1926 in the statement, “The Spirit of the Living God will create Postmodernism”.²⁸ But, like Jameson and Foucault, he still falls short of identifying its religious overtones outright.

What Bell’s thesis offers us is in such circumstances is a point of departure, a means of connecting the ideas of more recent critics to an older, modern, tradition of thought. It is through reading Bell’s work alongside more recent works like those of Hassan, Lyotard, Fanon, and Foucault, that we are able to expose their ideological underpinnings and better understand how such ideas fit in with contemporary political philosophies. In the next chapter we will investigate charges levelled by Jürgen

²⁶ This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

²⁷ Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Answer to the Question, What Is the Postmodern?” *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985*, trans. and ed. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1992), 9, 15.

²⁸ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 54.

Habermas and others concerning the relationship between theories of postmodernism and the rise of more conservative political ideas in the 1970s and 1980s. In the process we will return to questions raised in the introduction to this thesis regarding Bernard Iddings Bell's own involvement in, and possible contributions to, the birth of the conservative intellectual movement in the United States during the inter-war years.

Chapter 4

Postmodernism and “the Conservative Revolution”

In *The Politics of Cultural Despair* (1961), the German-American historian Fritz Stern defined “the conservative revolution” as “the ideological attack on modernity, on the complex of ideas and institutions that characterize our liberal, secular, and industrial civilization”.¹ Such an attack, Stern argued, “began as a criticism of modernity in the minds of some romantics; it received its most radical intellectual expression in Nietzsche and Dostoevski, who deepened the attack on modernity by a radical reinterpretation of man and who concluded with a pervasive pessimism concerning the future of the West. The next stage in the development of this attack was to be the transformation of this cultural criticism into a vague political ideology of the right”, combined with an “extreme nationalism” and an attempt to reclaim a perceived loss of “order” through an appeal to religious unity.²

While Stern’s work is largely focused on the development of German social theory and cultural criticism in the latter half of the nineteenth century, leading up to and culminating in the rise of National Socialism in the 1920s and 1930s; we can also begin to recognize parallels between Stern’s descriptions and Bernard Iddings Bell’s criticism of modernism in *Postmodernism, and other essays*. Stern was also careful to point out similarities between the rise of conservative movements in Germany, and the possibility of their reemergence in places like Stern’s own adopted country, the United States, after the Second World War. For it was specifically in the United States, Stern observed, that intellectuals had lately become increasingly concerned with “the cultural problems of our society, and have substituted sociological or

¹ Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1961), xvi.

² Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, xvi-xvii.

cultural analysis for political criticism".³ One critic cited by Stern in connection with these debates was Daniel Bell, whose name would continue to crop up in theses on postmodernism throughout the remainder of that century.⁴

In 1980, another German, the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, associated a similar ideological attack on modernity with the rise of what some in the realm of art and architecture had begun to label "postmodernity". Like Stern, Habermas traced the roots of this thinking to the nineteenth century world of the romantic idealist, which he defined as "that radicalized consciousness...which freed itself from all historical ties" and focused its creative energies instead on exposing the "abstract opposition between tradition and the present".⁵ According to Habermas, the most cogent, present-day manifestation of this movement could be found in what the historian Peter Steinfels had recently termed "the neoconservatives" in his book by the same title.⁶ Like the radicalized wing of nineteenth century romanticism, Habermas saw the current generation of neoconservative scholars anthologized in Steinfels' work, and epitomized in the figure of American sociologist and cultural critic Daniel Bell, as blurring "the relationship between the welcomed process of societal modernization on the one hand, and the lamented cultural development on the other".⁷ Like Stern's definition of the conservative revolutionary who expressed his discontent with the modern world by means of a moralistic cultural critique, rather than an informed "political criticism", the neoconservative, according to Habermas,

³ Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, xxii.

⁴ Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, xxi.

⁵ Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity," *New German Critique*, no. 22, Special Issue on Modernism (1981), 4.

⁶ Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity," 6-7; Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America's Politics*, New York: Simon & Schuster (1979), 65.

⁷ Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity," 7.

[...] does not uncover the economic and social causes for the altered attitudes towards work, consumption, achievement, and leisure. Consequently, he attributes all of the following—hedonism, the lack of social identification, the lack of obedience, narcissism, the withdrawal from status and achievement competition—to the domain of ‘culture.’⁸

With the impulse of modernity—i.e. liberalism in politics and progress in science and technology—seen to be “exhausted”, the main question on the mind of the postmodernist as on that of the neoconservative, according to Habermas, is one of reconciliation. In other words, queries Habermas on behalf of such critics, “how can norms arise in society which will limit liberalism, reestablish the ethic of discipline and work” and “put a brake on the levelling [*sic*] caused by the social welfare state, so that the virtues of individual competition for achievement can again dominate?”⁹

Many of these ideas, as we have already noted, are also contained in Bell’s essay and are linked with the ideas of men like John Stuart Mill and José Ortega y Gasset.¹⁰ Bell was also concerned with the subject of norms and discipline, and sought to devise ways in which to impose these norms in a culture he perceived to be uprooted and out of control. But while there are many similarities between Habermas’s assessment of postmodernism and Stern’s description of the conservative revolution. What Habermas fails to acknowledge—which Stern does not—is the religious content flowing through many of these discourses. Where Stern highlights the role of the Protestant clergy in Hitler’s Third Reich, citing their shared “hostility

⁸ Habermas, “Modernity versus Postmodernity,” 7.

⁹ Habermas, “Modernity versus Postmodernity,” 6.

¹⁰ See discussion on this in chapter 2, page 49.

to the liberal-secular state and its defenders,”¹¹ Habermas seems to go out of his way to exempt his “neoconservatives” from any involvement with religious ideas and/or organizations.

Where Habermas sees the ideas and ideology of “neoconservatism” in the 1970s and 1980s dominating a contemporary scene “disappointed by Marxism, especially in the social sciences”,¹² he fails, however, to account for a previous generation of scholars like that of Bernard Iddings Bell, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and many of their colleagues in the Social Gospel and socialist Christian movements in the 1920s, who had also become disillusioned with these ideas. Daniel Bell, for example, whom Habermas has described as “the most brilliant of the American neoconservatives”,¹³ acknowledges the contributions of both Tillich and Niebuhr to the development of theories like the “mass society”, and the war against secular ideologies in his book *The End of Ideology* (1960).¹⁴ Indeed Tillich’s descriptions of “late capitalism” in the early 1950s, and the “vast masses” which “Technological innovations and capitalistic economic organization have created” after the Second World War,¹⁵ anticipate many of those that Daniel Bell would himself make in his most significant contributions to postmodern theory in the 1970s, his descriptions of “post-Industrialism,” and the institution of the “cultural mass”.¹⁶ But when Habermas attempts to exempt neoconservatism in general, and figures like

¹¹ Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, xi, xvi-xvii; Fritz Stern, “Acceptance Speech upon Receiving the Leo Baeck Medal.” The Leo Baeck Institute for the study of the history and culture of German-speaking Jews. 10th Annual Dinner of the Leo Baeck Institute. [2004?]. <http://lbi.org/fritzstern.html>

¹² Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press (1987), 69.

¹³ Habermas, “Modernity versus Postmodernity,” 6.

¹⁴ Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, revised ed., New York: The Free Press (1960), 21, 300, 310-11.

¹⁵ Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, trans. James Luther Adams, London: Nisbet & Co. (1951), 223.

¹⁶ Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*. New York: Basic Books. (1973); *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, London: Heinemann (1976), 20.

Daniel Bell in particular, from “the attempt to mix religion and politics”,¹⁷ he not only ignores the influence of theologians like Tillich and Niebuhr on the development of Daniel Bell’s thought concerning postmodernism, he also ignores Daniel Bell’s own comments on the need for a new religious sensibility in the postmodern world.¹⁸

This is also visible in Terry Eagleton’s *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996), where Eagleton attributes the birth of postmodernism to a failure on the part of the political left, and charges that “The West is now bulging at the seams with political radicals whose ignorance of socialist traditions, not least their own, is certainly among other things the effect of postmodernist amnesia.”¹⁹ What can also be attributed to a type of amnesia—postmodernist or otherwise—is the left’s (and left commentator’s like Eagleton’s) failure to note the role played by religion in this early conflict, particularly in the United States where the evidence for postmodern cultural change, as Eagleton himself has attested, has been most prevalent.²⁰

What such criticism also tends to ignore are the reform movements of the 1950s and 1960s, de-colonization, the demands of women and minorities for equality of opportunity, and the involvement of religious institutions and organizations in many of these campaigns for reform. While Habermas and Eagleton are able to identify the shortfall on the Left, they are unable, or unwilling, to acknowledge the stopgap filling this void in many parts of the world.

¹⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians’ Debate*, ed. and trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press (1989), 22.

¹⁸ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 28-29. Donald Meyer has argued that Daniel Bell’s views in works like *The End of Ideology*, represent a shaved down version of Niebuhr’s and Tillich’s attacks on ideologies like Fascism and Communism in the 1940s and 1950s. Donald Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism: 1919-1941*, 2nd ed. 1988, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press (1960), xix.

¹⁹ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Oxford: Blackwell (1996), 22.

²⁰ Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 122. Fredric Jameson argues a similar point in, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press (1991), xx.

A review of Bernard Iddings Bell's thesis, its influences and historical background helps us to place many of these ideas into a wider context: to understand the development of the reform movements which arose after the end of the Second World War, against the backdrop of those which emerged in the 1920s, after the end of the First World War. The political situation in the United States in the 1920s, for example, saw similar demands being made upon legislators regarding women's rights and racial justice, and similar problems with high-level government corruption to those experienced in the 1970s during the Nixon Presidency.²¹ When critics seek to omit or overlook the details of such a history, they do so to the detriment of their own arguments.

When we look back at Bell's essay, we notice many similarities between his critique of contemporary culture and those of more recent critics. Not only can Bell's views on and attitudes toward postmodernism be read as a reaction to religious problems of the time, they can also, as we have argued, be read as a reaction to political problems. The theologians of Bell's generation, like many theologians and church leaders today, were heavily involved in politics. Many of them, including Bell, were also either actively involved in, or had been actively involved in the Socialist movement.

In Bell's critique of modernism, moreover, we find not only a critique of theological modernism, but of secular socialists, fundamentalists, and other reactionary modernist groups, like Fascists and communists. It is not, therefore, as some critics have charged, a purely theological critique.²² For Bell, the term "Modernism" had ceased to describe a new movement in artistic innovation. It now

²¹ The Teapot Dome Scandal which rocked the Harding administration in 1923, offered to define the decade in a similar way.

²² See discussion on Bell's critics in the introduction to this thesis, pages 10-11.

described all that was wrong with the present cultural *milieu*. Modernism in art and literature, like modernism in theology, was, according to Bell, synonymous with “modernity”, and equivalent to the culture of conformity and consumption highlighted by sociologists like Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), and satirized by authors like Sinclair Lewis in novels like *Main Street* (1920), and *Babbitt* (1922).

In addition to Lewis, whose work Bell cites directly in *Postmodernism*,²³ references to American literary personalities like H.L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan, and British writers like H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw, also appear in Bell’s essay. According to Bell these authors were exemplary for their criticism of modern society and culture, but while their critiques were both “healthy and hope-inspiring”, they had “not moved from the cry of revolt to the demand for reconstruction.”²⁴ Shaw, for example, whose name appears in a footnote along with Wells’ in Bell’s second chapter, “How We Turned to Science for the Truth”, is presented as an example of one who is just beginning to break free from the nineteenth century addiction to positivism.²⁵

By comparison, Bell’s descriptions of the Postmodernist as one who is “restless in Modernist company”,²⁶ and who seeks to move beyond “the cry of revolt to the demand for reconstruction”,²⁷ are aimed particularly at men like Shaw and Webb, not only because of their own work on and attitudes toward the subject of social reform, but because of their involvement in movements like the Church Socialist League, and the Fabian Society before the First World War. Like more

²³ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism, and other essays*, Milwaukee, WI: Morehouse Publishing (1926), 19, 43.

²⁴ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 43.

²⁵ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 17.

²⁶ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 9-10.

²⁷ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 43.

recent critics of postmodernism, cited by Habermas and Eagleton as either Left or Right wing reactionaries, it is in many respects Bell's own socialist past that he is attempting to come to terms with in works like *Postmodernism*. His insistence, for example, that faith in the methods of modern science have resulted in the cultivation of "an imitative and a leaderless people, easy victims of crowd psychology, standardized not merely in our ideas but in such fascinatingly human things as dress, and manners, and speech, a generation when men seek the easy and the popular way and few dare walk alone",²⁸ is also aimed at the mass-mind mentality he had encountered toward the end of his days in the Christian Socialist movement, and owes a strong debt to the philosophy of Nietzsche.²⁹ But it also anticipates the pronouncements of many later contributors to the theory of postmodern culture who were also turning away from Marxism and were looking to Nietzsche for the means by which to express their disillusionment.³⁰

In his definition of "mass society", for example, in "Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction," the literary critic Irving Howe describes the contemporary "postmodern" culture of the 1960s in similar terms to those incorporated by Bell into his critique of modernism. According to Howe, the "mass society" described,

a relatively comfortable, half-welfare and half-garrison society in which the population grows passive, indifferent, and atomized; in which traditional loyalties, ties, and associations become lax or dissolve entirely; in which coherent publics based on definite interests and opinions

²⁸ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 31-32.

²⁹ This is especially true of Nietzsche's description of the "last man" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York: The Modern Library (1995), 16-19.

³⁰ Habermas, for example, cites Nietzsche in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, as a main source of postmodernist thought, 83-105.

gradually fall apart; and in which man becomes a consumer, himself mass-produced like the products, diversions, and values that he absorbs.³¹

A similar definition is repeated by Daniel Bell in his definition of the “cultural mass” in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), by Andreas Huyssen in his description of “mass culture” in “Mapping the Postmodern” (1984), and by Fredric Jameson in his definition of “aesthetic populism” in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991).³² The difference between these definitions and Bernard Iddings Bell’s, however, is that where Bell applied his critique to modern culture, the latter critics identified such phenomena with the arrival of postmodernity itself.

Rather than a description of something that moves beyond modernist critique, therefore, what we often find when we read more recent definitions of postmodernism is a critique of modern culture dressed up in new clothing. At no time is this distinction more evident than when it is placed within the context of a period when, according to one critic’s estimation, “it was hard to find any serious political conflict anywhere in the world that did not show behind it the not-so-hidden hand of religion.”³³

In the following section, when we turn to the literary response to these omissions we will focus on the role that modern sociological theories like secularization—specifically those formulated by Max Weber—have played in the promulgation of such ideas, fuelling the critical response to religion in postmodern criticism. Only here, we will argue that while postmodern critics themselves have

³¹ Irving Howe, “Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction,” *Decline of the New*, London: Victor Gollancz (1963), 196.

³² Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 20; Andreas Huyssen, “Mapping the Postmodern,” *New German Critique*, no. 33 (1984), 16; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 2-3.

³³ Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1994), 3.

turned a blind eye to the subject of religion, novelists like John Updike, Don DeLillo, and Toni Morrison, have worked to expose the discrepancies in such theories, making room for alternative ideas about the relationship between religion and contemporary culture like those expressed by Bernard Iddings Bell back in 1926.

Part II:

The Literary Response to Postmodern Disbelief

In the Late-Twentieth Century

Chapter 5

Modern Secularization Theory and the Legacy of Max Weber

When we look to describe how Bernard Iddings Bell's notion of postmodernism impacts upon the work of contemporary American writers and critics, we will be looking not, as previous critics have done, at a "poetics of parody", or at the theoretical implications of "irony and humor", but at how these writers choose to incorporate the themes of postmodern criticism into a critique of that criticism, especially where this touches on the subject of religion. One theme which will dominate this argument is the literary reaction to modern sociological theories like secularization, particularly that of German sociologist Max Weber, which continues to inform a great deal of contemporary criticism on the role that religion will play in a postmodern social environment.

Max Weber's influence on the development of sociology in the United States has been well documented.¹ What is not as well documented is his influence on the development of postmodern theory and attitudes toward religion expressed within that theory.² When we read the criticism of Leslie Fiedler, Daniel Bell, or Charles Jencks, for example—all of whom associate postmodernism with a "post-Puritan" life world³—we note a marked similarity between their descriptions of the role that

¹ See for example, Gisela J. Hinkle, "The Americanization of Max Weber," *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* 7 (1986); Peter Baehr, "The 'Iron Cage' and the 'Shell as Hard as Steel': Parsons, Weber, and the Stahlhartes Gehause Metaphor in the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," *History and Theory*, vol. 40, no. 2 (2001), 153-169.

² One exception to this statement might be Nicholas Gane's work, *Max Weber and Postmodern Theory: Rationalization versus Re-enchantment*, New York: Pelgrave (2002). But while Gane acknowledges a connection between Weber's critique of reason and theories of postmodernism, he continues to assume the validity of Weber's "disenchantment" (secularization) thesis. When Gane does recognize the possibility of "re-enchantment" in a postmodern context, he does not perceive this in traditional religious terms, and like other critics he associates nihilism with postmodernism rather than with modernism.

³ Leslie Fiedler, "The New Mutants," *A New Fiedler Reader*, New York: Prometheus Books (1999), 208; Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, London: Heinemann (1976), 55; Charles Jencks, *What Is Postmodernism?* 4th ed. 1996, Chichester: Academy Editions (1986), 21-40.

religion will play in a postmodern social environment and Max Weber's descriptions of life beyond modernism in the conclusion to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

First published in 1905, *The Protestant Ethic* argues that the "success" of modern Capitalist societies can be attributed to a type of religious asceticism associated with sectarian movements like Puritanism, Methodism, Baptism, Quakerism, and Pietism that arose out of sectarian strife during the sixteenth century and the Protestant Reformation. The emphasis these movements placed on the doctrine of predestination and a "duty in a calling", according to Weber, helped to bolster a rising capitalist economy based upon hard work and humble sacrifice, before succumbing themselves to the worldly temptations of capital. According to Weber,

As asceticism began to change the world and endeavored to exercise its influence over it, the outward goods of this world gained increasing and finally inescapable power over men, as never before in history. Today its spirit has fled from this shell....the idea of the 'duty in a calling' haunts our lives like the ghost of once-held religious beliefs....Where capitalism is at its most unbridled, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, divested of its metaphysical significance, today tends to be associated with purely elemental passions, which at times virtually turn it into a sporting contest.⁴

At the end of this statement Weber offers the prediction that, "no one yet knows who will live in that shell in the future", but that "it might truly be said of the 'last men' in this cultural development: 'specialists without spirit, hedonists without a heart, these

⁴ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells, New York: Penguin (2002), 121.

nonentities imagine they have attained a stage of humankind never before reached””.⁵ This last statement is of course modeled upon Nietzsche’s description of the last man in “Zarathustra’s Prologue”. But while many acknowledge Nietzsche’s role in fashioning the critical response to religion in the twentieth century, when we look to the arguments of postmodern critics, it is not exclusively to Nietzsche that they turn for their reflections on religion.

Leslie Fiedler’s description of a new “hedonism” in literature which he defines as “post-Modernist”, a generation who “have rejected work”, and who actively seek “to disengage” from “the tradition of the human, as the West...has defined it” from “Humanism itself...and more especially, the cult of reason”,⁶ reiterates much of Weber’s argument from the above paragraph. Daniel Bell’s definition of postmodernism as “defying the Protestant ethic, heralding the end of Puritanism, and mounting a final attack on bourgeois values”,⁷ goes as far as to include Weber’s title phrase in his thesis.

We can also detect Weber’s influence in works that associate postmodernism with a “literature of silence” and a “negative transcendence”. Along with Ludwig Wittgenstein, who was writing during the same period, Weber describes the role that religion will play in the modern world as one in which the religious defers to the scientific and the technological (and the theological to the sociological). In his essay “Science as a Vocation” (1918), Weber writes:

To the person who cannot bear the fate of the times like a man, one must say: may he rather return silently, without the usual publicity build-up of renegades, but simply and plainly. The arms of the old churches are

⁵ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 121.

⁶ Fiedler, “The New Mutants,” 192-193, 204.

⁷ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 55.

opened widely and compassionately for him. After all, they do not make it hard for him. One way or another he has to bring his 'intellectual sacrifice'—that is inevitable.⁸

Wittgenstein, whose work experienced a revival among structuralist and poststructuralist critics in the 1960s and 1970s, argues in a similar vein in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), that "[w]hat can be said at all can be said clearly", in other words, as he would later clarify, through "the propositions of natural science"; "whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent".⁹

This "silence", which Wittgenstein associates with the "mystical" realm,¹⁰ in Weber's work also marks a sense of religious separation, echoes of which can be heard in Irving Howe's "Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction" (1963), where Howe describes a sense "that we are moving toward a quiet desert of moderation, where men will forget the passion of moral and spiritual restlessness which has characterized Western society".¹¹ This is repeated by Ihab Hassan in "The Literature of Silence" (1967), where Hassan argues that "silence develops as the metaphor of a new attitude that literature has chosen to adopt toward itself" which "puts to question the peculiar power, the ancient excellence, of literary discourse—and challenges the assumptions of our civilization".¹² Such "antiliterature", as Hassan dubs it, "tends to unsettle critics with a firm humanistic bent and to repel others, Marxists or Socialists, who are

⁸ Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, London: Routledge (1948), 155.

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, ed. and trans. C.K. Ogden, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. (1922), 27, 189.

¹⁰ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 187.

¹¹ Irving Howe, "Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction," *Decline of the New*, London: Victor Gollancz (1963), 207.

¹² Ihab Hassan, "The Literature of Silence," *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*, Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press (1987), 11.

committed to a certain idea of realism".¹³ Jean Baudrillard describes this loss of a realistic referent as both the "hyperreal" and the "desert of the real itself", in which all symbols are faced with deconstruction and "simulation".¹⁴

The problem with Weber's thesis, however, apart from what some have identified as its total lack of empirical evidence and strong anti-Catholic bias,¹⁵ lies in Weber's (and subsequent critics') assumption that religion ceased to exercise any influence over Modern capitalist societies beyond the eighteenth century.¹⁶ This idea draws its inspiration from similar anti-clerical remarks made by Karl Marx in his introduction to "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right", in which he argues that,

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sign of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the *spirit* of a spiritless situation.¹⁷

In the conclusion to *The Protestant Ethic*, where Weber describes this loss in terms of a "haunting", we can also detect Marx's imprint.¹⁸ In the United States, Weber writes, "[w]here capitalism is at its most unbridled...the pursuit of wealth, divested of its metaphysical significance, today tends to be associated with purely elemental passions, which at times virtually turn it into a sporting contest".¹⁹ It is to this sense of spiritless capitalism that Weber refers when he describes the "ghost of once held

¹³ Hassan, "The Literature of Silence," 11.

¹⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press (1994), 1-2.

¹⁵ Gordon Marshall, *In Search of the Spirit of Capitalism: An Essay on Max Weber's Protestant Ethic Thesis*, London: Hutchinson (1982), 67-68; Richard F. Hamilton, *The Social Misconstruction of Reality: Validity and Verification in the Scholarly Community*, New Haven: Yale University Press (1996), 34.

¹⁶ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 120.

¹⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *K. Marx and F. Engels on Religion*, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House (1957), 42. My italics.

¹⁸ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 121. Marx used similar language to announce the impending arrival of Communism in Europe in *The Communist Manifesto*.

¹⁹ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 121.

religious beliefs”, as “haunting” the lives of those destined to live within this environment.²⁰

But far from a “ghost”, as Weber describes it, religious belief and church attendance, according to most recent estimates, were on the rise in the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century, and have remained so throughout the course of that century.²¹ Nor did sectarianism stop with “Radical Calvinists, Baptists, Mennonites, Quakers, Methodists, and the ascetic branches of continental Pietism”, as Weber implied in his follow up to *The Protestant Ethic*, “Churches and Sects in North America” (1906).²² While these movements were indeed becoming more “worldly” and “established” by the beginning of the twentieth century, other movements soon arose to take their place on the front lines, such as, Mormonism, Adventism, Pentecostalism, Fundamentalism, and indeed Catholicism.²³ The role that religion and religious bodies played in independence movements—especially in the civil rights movement after the Second World War—is also well documented. Why then

²⁰ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 121.

²¹ Andrew M. Greeley, *The Persistence of Religion*, London: SCM Press (1972); Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (1972); Jeffrey K. Hadden, “Toward Desacralizing Secularization Theory,” *Social Forces*, vol. 65, no. 3 (1987), 587-611; Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1988); Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion*, 3 vols., Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1986-1996); José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1994); Lawrence R. Iannaccone, “Introduction to the Economics of Religion,” *Journal of Economic Literature*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1998), 1465-1495; Roger Finke, “An Unsecular America” *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis*, ed. Steve Bruce, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1992), 145-169; Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, “Religious Economics and Sacred Canopies: Religious Mobilization in American Cities, 1906,” *American Sociological Review*, vol. 53, no. 1 (1988), 41-49; Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*. 2nd ed., New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press (2005).

²² Max Weber, “Churches and Sects in North America,” *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells, New York: Penguin (2002), 208-209.

²³ Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, 21; As Finke and Starke note in, *The Churching of America*, 122-23, Catholicism in the United States differed from Catholicism in Europe or Latin America during the late nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth century because in the U.S. it represented merely another sect competing for membership.

do so many critics continue to insist after Weber that religion in the postmodern world continues in a state of decline?

Part of this can be explained by what we have already described as a general retreat from liberal forms of Christianity beginning in the 1920s with theologians like Bernard Iddings Bell, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr; and cultural critics like H.L. Mencken, and Walter Lippmann. When *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* was first published in 1905, debates over theological and, more specifically, cultural, orthodoxy were just beginning to heat up again in the United States after a long hiatus succeeding the end of the Civil War. Weber's thesis that the "success" of modern Capitalist societies could be attributed to a type of religious asceticism associated with movements like Puritanism, Methodism, Baptism, Quakerism, and Pietism—all popular and established movements in the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century—sat well with many of those in positions of power, who felt their own views and culture threatened by the insurgence of new immigrant laborers, many of them Catholics, or poor African American sharecroppers from the South. Weber's description of how the modern capitalist world was built on a Protestant emphasis upon a "duty in a calling", flattered the prejudices of many who wanted to view themselves as morally and intellectually superior to these real or supposed newcomers.

A similar sense of cultural elitism lies at the core of most theories of postmodernism and can be traced to comparable economic and social changes accompanying a new wave of immigration in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as with movements already active within the United States promoting equal rights legislation. While postmodern and poststructuralist theories of language claim to offer a voice to the "Other", to navigate the spaces between the lines and within the margins of

universal narratives, such discourses are still, as critics like bell hooks and Cornell West have argued, dominated by white men and white male concerns.²⁴

Critics like Leslie Fiedler who attempt to excuse the Civil Rights movement from any claims to legitimate religious motivations, describing it as a "postmodern social movement" and placing it in the same category as the drug cult, for example, ignore the role that religion played in the organization of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, and the importance of religion in the African American community in general.²⁵ What such criticism reflects is not only a lack of interest in religion and religious history in the United States among non-theologically minded scholars after the Second World War, but a lack of interest in alternative historical perspectives in general during this period among the white, European American intelligentsia.

In an attempt to redress the issue and re-assess Weber's role in what some say amounts to the creation of an American myth,²⁶ sociologists and economists, like Laurence R. Iannaccone, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, have sought to correct this impression by seeking out previous examples of the economic analysis of religion in order to counter Weber's claims. Two works often highlighted within the context of these debates are Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), and Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835). Rather than apply a singular cause and effect analysis of religion Smith and de Tocqueville looked to market forces like competition, monopoly, and government regulation in order to explain why certain

²⁴ bell hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, London: Turnaround (1991), 23-31; Cornell West, "Black Culture and Postmodernism," *Remaking History*, Dia Art Foundation Discussions in Contemporary Culture, no. 4, ed. Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani, Seattle, WA: Bay Press (1989), 87-96.

²⁵ Fiedler, "The New Mutants," 206-207.

²⁶ Jeffrey K. Hadden, "Toward Desacralizing Secularization Theory," *Social Forces*, vol. 65, no. 3 (1987), 588; Rodney Stark, Laurence R. Iannaccone, and Roger Finke, "Religion, Science, and Rationality," *The American Economic Review*, vol. 86, no. 2 (1996), 436.

branches of the faith succeed where others fail.²⁷ In a passage that is of significant interest to our analysis of John Updike's novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, Smith argues that, "the teachers of new religions have always had a considerable advantage" over established faiths in their ability to attract proselytes, because unlike the clergy of established faiths, those of new branches are entirely dependent upon their followers for financial support, as opposed to established faiths which are often supported by the state.²⁸ According to Smith's analysis,

The clergy of an established and well-endowed religion frequently become men of learning and elegance, who possess all the virtues of gentlemen...but they are apt gradually to lose the qualities, both good and bad, which gave them authority and influence with the inferior ranks of people, and which had perhaps been the original causes of the success and establishment of their religion. Such a clergy, when attacked by a set of popular and bold, though perhaps stupid and ignorant enthusiasts, feel themselves...perfectly defenceless....[and] upon such an emergency, have commonly no other resource than to call upon the civil magistrate to persecute, destroy, or drive out their adversaries, as disturbers of the public peace. It was thus that the Roman Catholic clergy called upon the civil magistrate to persecute the protestants; and the church of England, to persecute the dissenters; and that in general every religious sect, when it has once enjoyed for a century or two the security of legal [or social] establishment, has found itself incapable of making any vigorous defence against any new sect which chose to attack its doctrine or discipline.

²⁷ Iannaccone, "Introduction to the Economics of Religion," 1478.

²⁸ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan, 6th ed., vol. 2, London: Methuen (1904), 309.

Upon such occasions the advantage in point of learning and good writing may sometimes be on the side of the established church. But the arts of popularity, all the arts of gaining proselytes, are constantly on the side of its adversaries.²⁹

H. Richard Niebuhr echoed these remarks in 1929, arguing that,

Whenever Christianity has become the religion of the fortunate and cultured and has grown philosophical, abstract, formal, and ethically harmless in the process, the lower strata of society find themselves religiously expatriated by a faith which neither meets their philosophical needs nor sets forth an appealing ethical ideal. In such a situation the right leader finds little difficulty in launching a new movement which will, as a rule, give rise to a new denomination.³⁰

Where Smith (and subsequently Niebuhr) focused upon “the benefits of competition” and “the burdens of monopoly”,³¹ de Tocqueville focused on the advantages of religious pluralism and variation. In contrast to Smith, who still clung to certain tenets of the secularization thesis inherited from the Enlightenment, mainly the belief that Science was “the great antidote to the poison of...superstition”, and that education would offer the cure for religious ignorance,³² de Tocqueville argued that projections for a “gradual decay of religious faith” in the face of intellectual progress, formulated by philosophers in the eighteenth century, and later reiterated by Weber, were too simple.³³ They failed to account for nations like the United States, which de

²⁹ Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 310.

³⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, New York: Henry Holt and Company (1929), 31-32.

³¹ Iannaccone, “Introduction to the Economics of Religion,” 1478.

³² Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 318.

³³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, ed. Henry Steele Commager, London: Oxford University Press (1946), 237.

Tocqueville, writing in the 1830s, describes as “one of the freest and most enlightened nations in the world” and, at the same time, one of the most “fervent” in its pursuit of religion.³⁴ According to de Tocqueville, “the real authority of religion was increased by a state of things which diminished its apparent force”.³⁵

Echoing these remarks more than a century later, Roger Finke argues in his essay “An Unsecular America” (1992), that, “The vibrancy and growth of American religious institutions”, over the course of the twentieth century and particularly in its last three decades, continues to present “the most open defiance of the secularization model”.³⁶ Writes Finke,

As part of an evolutionary model of modernization, the traditional model of secularization was designed to explain decline, not variation. More specifically, it was designed to explain the decline of religion in western Europe. Yet religious change in Europe is not representative of all nations facing modernity and the USA is not the only case that fails to fit the model....When explaining the growth of organized religion in the USA, one of the key variables of interest must be the regulation of religion. Whereas European countries have traditionally had a close tie between Church and State, and continue to regulate religion, the USA has attempted to separate Church and State, and minimize regulation.³⁷

The latter attempts to minimize regulation, according to Finke, have lead to even greater levels of growth over the nation’s two hundred year history, and not the decline projected by Weber in both *The Protestant Ethic*, and in “Churches and Sects

³⁴ De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 237.

³⁵ De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 239.

³⁶ Finke, “An Unsecular America,” 148.

³⁷ Finke, “An Unsecular America,” 161-162.

in North America". Moreover, while Weber highlights the relationship between capitalism and secularization in the former of these two works, he fails to take into account the parallel relationship between capitalism and revival, and the role that Benjamin Franklin, his archetype for the "Spirit of Capitalism", played in the promotion of spiritual ideas, rather than in that of their complete secularization.³⁸ In part two of his autobiography, for example, Franklin admits to having offered financial support to any sect that requested it of him.³⁹ He was also responsible for both publishing and promoting the writings of George Whitefield, leader of the first Great Awakening in the United States.⁴⁰

When we turn in the following pages to John Updike's novel, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, we will argue that Updike's decision to foreground "unorthodox" forms of Christian belief in a novel that opens with the description of a Presbyterian minister's loss of faith, is a direct challenge to Weber's theory of secularization and of critics who continue to apply Weber's thesis to theories of postmodernism. Drawing upon the arguments of contemporary sociologists like Dean M. Kelley, Laurence R. Iannaccone, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, Updike approaches subjects like the modernist controversy and the rise of Protestant fundamentalism in the 1920s, not as examples of religious decline, as several of his critics have argued, but as proof of the nation's ever increasing religious diversity and innovation.

Where changes in American Protestantism provide the subject for Updike's novel, changes in American Catholicism, and attitudes toward Catholicism, underlie much of Don DeLillo's narrative in *Underworld* (1997). An examination of

³⁸ Hamilton makes a similar connection in, *The Social Misconstruction of Reality*, 63-64.

³⁹ Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree et al, New Haven: Yale University Press (1964), 146.

⁴⁰ Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 177.

Underworld and the criticism surrounding it also reveals an unwillingness on behalf of critics to consider religious subjects in a postmodern context, and when they do, an ignorance of religious history and the sociology of religion in the United States. Here we will examine DeLillo's use of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting *The Triumph of Death* as a symbol of modern secular apocalypse and DeLillo's incorporation of religious characters like nuns, priests, and monks, as well as Charismatics, Jesuits, and mystics, in order to attest to changes underway since the end of the Second World War tantamount to what some have begun to describe as a "theological turn" in American culture. Rather than an attempt to "mock" or "flatter", as one critic has argued, we will argue that the presence of these characters is meant to reflect and reinforce the presence of Bruegel's secular apocalypse from the prologue as the apocalypse of secular modernity itself.

In our analysis of Toni Morrison's seventh novel *Paradise* (1997), we will focus on Morrison's use of gnostic and Old Testament "wisdom" texts as a critical response to the notion of postmodern "literatures of silence". It will be argued that Morrison incorporates these texts not only to reaffirm the Africanness of African American Christianity, but also to counteract the corrosive effects of postmodern and poststructural theory on minority discourses within American literature. What many consider to be new theories of postmodern discourse can in this respect, according to Morrison, be traced back to early Christian and Jewish wisdom texts, and to neo-Platonism.

What all of these works have in common, moreover, is a sense of religious transcendence and transformation similar to that described by Bernard Iddings Bell in the closing pages of *Postmodernism*. This not only challenges the consensus view among contemporary postmodern critics that postmodernism and religion are

incompatible, but reflects the findings of contemporary sociological research (like that highlighted above) which interprets religious change in terms of positive restructuring and renewal rather than negative decline and degeneration.

Chapter 6

Confronting Weber's "Ghost": Foregrounding the Unorthodox in John Updike's

In the Beauty of the Lilies

John Updike's novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996), which charts the lives and beliefs of four generations of the Wilmot family from the modernist controversy to the evangelical revival, is as much an indictment of Max Weber's theory of secularization as it is of critics who continue to apply Weber's thesis to theories of "postmodernism". While critics have attempted to associate this work with a sense of religious decline, they have ignored key moments in the text which flatly refute such readings.

In the character of Clarence Wilmot, for example, the Protestant minister who loses his faith on the third page of Updike's novel, we can immediately recognize the figure described by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* as the representative "of an established and well-endowed religion", who, when challenged by "a set of popular and bold, though perhaps stupid and ignorant enthusiasts, feel themselves...perfectly defenseless".¹ "[T]all, narrow-chested...with a drooping sand-colored mustache and a certain afterglow of masculine beauty, despite a vague look of sluggish unhealth", Clarence, at the moment of his "ruinous pang", is standing on the first floor of his parsonage (also referred to as "the manse"), contemplating whether, "in view of the heat he might remove his black serge jacket".² Princeton educated, with a strong background in ancient and dead languages, Clarence is every bit the man of "learning and elegance" described by Smith and earmarked for redundancy,³ his loss of faith as

¹ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan, 6th ed., vol. 2, London: Methuen (1904), 310.

² John Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, New York: Penguin (1996), 5.

³ Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 310.

much a reflection of the architecture of “the manse” (a euphemism for the Presbyterian Church) as it is the disputations of renowned atheists like Robert Ingersoll, “whose *Some Mistakes of Moses* the minister had been reading in order to refute for a perturbed parishioner”.⁴ “The irregular open space of the parsonage” in which Clarence has “paused and been assailed” by this sudden “realization”—that “there is no God”—moreover, is “defined by the closed door to his study, the doorless archway into the dining room, the inner front door with its large decoratively frosted pane framed in leaded rectangles of stained glass the color of milky candies, and the foot of the dark walnut staircase that, in two turnings punctuated by rectangular newel posts whose points had been truncated, ascended to the second floor”.⁵

While descriptions like these can also be read as proof of what Weber has described as the triumph of “the outward goods of this world” over the minds of men,⁶ as well as confirmation of his thesis that attributes architectural feats like “the rational use of the Gothic vault” and the solution to “the problem of the dome”, to the ultimately secularizing influences of classical reason over divine faith,⁷ other descriptions in the novel serve to undermine such a reading. In response to Weber’s charge in “Science as a Vocation”, for example, that all “who cannot bear the fate of the times like a man...return silently, without the usual publicity build-up of renegades, but simply and plainly” to the arms of the church,⁸ Clarence’s silence comes about just when he decides to leave the church, suggesting early on that

⁴ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 5.

⁵ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 6.

⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells, New York: Penguin (2002), 121.

⁷ Max Weber, “Prefatory Remarks to *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion*,” *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells, New York: Penguin (2002), 357.

⁸ Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, London: Routledge (1948), 155.

Updike does not share the view expressed by sociologists and critics in the early part of the century that religion is in a state of decline. Moreover, every time Clarence loses his voice during a sermon or at an official event, someone invariably rises to fill that silence with either a hymn or a prayer.

Those who profess faith in the novel, by contrast, are anything but silent. When Clarence attempts to assuage the fears of a dying laborer (Elias Orr) concerning the question of eternal damnation, advising him not to bother himself about divine punishments but to think instead of "God's infinite mercy",⁹ he is met with both incredulity and a hymn, in this case a verse from Sabine Baring-Gould's "Child's Evening Hymn".¹⁰ Or, when Clarence's voice fails him during a sermon as he attempts to alter Calvin's doctrine on predestination yet further, arguing that, "election is *choice*. Our choice",¹¹ his wife Stella leaps from her front pew, "and in her sweet-pouring unabashed Southern accent" precedes to lead the congregation in the singing of "soldiers of Christ, Arise!",¹² written by Charles Wesley, the founder of Methodism, in 1749.

Both of these hymns trace their origins to an earlier period of evangelical revival in Britain and America which, according to Weber, has been superseded by an age which values the economic and the cultural over the religious.¹³ But as we discover throughout the novel "sectarian zeal" is far from extinguished by a faith in rational science by the close of the twentieth century. The actions of Elias Orr and Stella Wilmot at the beginning of the novel offer confirmation of this. They can also

⁹ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 46.

¹⁰ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 47.

¹¹ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 54.

¹² Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 54.

¹³ Max Weber, "Churches and Sects in North America," *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells, New York: Penguin (2002), 215, 217.

be read as confirmation of Adam Smith's thesis that while establishment might bring secularization, that secularization does not necessarily apply to all segments of the religious population.

One of the novel's strongest proofs against Weber's thesis that religion has ceased to exercise any influence over modern capitalist societies like the United States beyond the eighteenth century can be found in the exchanges between Clarence Wilmot and the members of the aptly titled "Church Building Requirements Committee" in the first chapter of *In the Beauty of the Lilies*. Here the vitality of Trinity Methodist, which has not only "expanded, and reconstructed its entire chancel" but has enough money left in its coffers to support a paid choir, is contrasted with the calcification of the Congregational Church.¹⁴ According to the chairman of the Building Committee, Harlan Dearholt, the latter woke up one day to find itself dead, "[a]ny organization that is not growing is dying".¹⁵ Dearholt's physical and idiosyncratic resemblance to Benjamin Franklin—Weber's archetype for the "Spirit of Capitalism"—is no accident. His observations about the Congregational Church (which was also the ancestral church of the Puritan fathers) echo Franklin's own observations about this Church in his autobiography where he describes the sermons of the local minister as "very dry, uninteresting and unedifying, since not a single moral Principle was inculcated or enforc'd".¹⁶ The Methodist Church by comparison, which Adam Smith described as placing the "arts of popularity" over and above those

¹⁴ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 36-37.

¹⁵ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 36.

¹⁶ Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree *et al*, New Haven: Yale University Press (1964), 147. While Franklin identifies himself as a Presbyterian by birth, an editorial note on page 145 of the above edition argues that, "Strictly speaking, Franklin had been baptized and educated in what was coming to be called the Congregational Church, not the Presbyterian".

of "learning and good writing",¹⁷ is offered as an example of the type of church that would replace it, as it did in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

Other instances of growth and decline can be detected in the various references to the Catholic Church in the novel. Catholicism, along with Methodism, Baptism, and later in the novel, Mormonism and Adventism, constitutes one of the many "voices" to rise up and fill the void left by Clarence's "silence". As the Wilmot family precedes homeward after a dinner at the residence of one of Clarence's wealthier parishioners the silence of this family of "native born Protestants" contrasted with the vociferousness of their immigrant neighbors is almost palpable.

On the long walk home to Straight Street and Broadway, the family was silent, sensing itself to be imperilled. A wagon selling ice chips tinted and flavored by a variety of irresistibly sweet syrups was passed without importunities; a crowd of near-naked working-class children uproariously and defiantly splashing in the puddles around a gushing public faucet aroused no comment or combative exchange from the Wilmot children; the vulgarly vivid plantings of petunias and marigolds that the Italians and Polish had established in their front yards around plaster statues of a blue-gowned Madonna drew their eyes but no remark. These were not fashionable neighborhoods.¹⁸

This last comment, "These were not fashionable neighborhoods", might also be applied to the religion the Madonna in these front yards is meant to represent and cuts to the heart of the problem facing the interpretation of religion and secularization in twentieth century America and, indeed, in Updike's text. While many modern

¹⁷ Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 310.

¹⁸ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 59.

sociologists and cultural critics including Weber were quick to recognize a declining membership in the mainline Protestant denominations, they were slow to recognize the corresponding rise in membership amongst previously obscure groups like Fundamentalists, Adventists, Pentecostals, and Mormons.¹⁹

By the end of the novel in the standoff between the authorities from state and local government and the Adventist sect which Clarence's great-grandson Clark joins in the fourth chapter of the novel, the social worker sent to ensure that the Temple children are not "being brought up as ignorant little fanatics" and to investigate rumors of "irregular sexual morality and physical abuse", is not an atheist or a Deist like Benjamin Franklin, but a Mormon.²⁰ The FBI spokesman, Fred Dix, describes himself as a "hardshell Baptist".²¹ Both of these movements were once the subject of similar "investigations" by, and "ridicule" from, the more "established" faiths of their day. Now it is they who hold positions of authority in the national community. The leader of the sect, moreover, a man by the name of Jesse Smith, can be read as an amalgamation of many religious leaders from America's past. In Smith we find the common sense rationalism of Benjamin Franklin, the Victorian pragmatism and morality of William James, and the cowboy confidence of Teddy Roosevelt combined with the zealotry and messianism of Mormon founder Joseph Smith, Adventist founder William Miller, and his twentieth century counterpart David Koresh.

Updike's efforts to foreground these groups in a novel that opens with the description of a Presbyterian minister's loss of faith challenges not only modern critics like Weber, but critics who began writing on the subject of postmodernism in

¹⁹ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, 2nd ed., New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press (2005), 2-3.

²⁰ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 421.

²¹ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 466.

the 1960s and 1970s, including Irving Howe, Leslie Fiedler, Ihab Hassan, Fredric Jameson, and Brian McHale, who continue the modernist legacy by excluding subjects like religion and theology from debates on contemporary literature and culture. Rather than an example of literary irony, it will be argued, what Updike is attempting to achieve through these representations is a more accurate sociological portrait of changes taking place within the religious structure of American society in the twentieth century. As Martin E. Marty argues in *Modern American Religion*, “[t]he religions that had...looked marginal” at the turn of the century, by 1930 “attracted more new members than did the mainstream ones”.²² A similar trend is also described by Dean M. Kelley in *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (1972), and by Roger Finke and Rodney Stark in *The Churching of America* (2005).

The reluctance on the part of certain academics—literary critics in particular—to recognize these developments or to take the notion of religious belief seriously in the context of their criticism, has lead to grave misreadings of contemporary literature and cultural politics, including texts like Updike’s *In the Beauty of the Lilies*.²³ This reluctance has been especially pronounced in the writings of postmodern literary critics, like those mentioned in the previous chapter, who only recognize as religion those sects which conform to a nineteenth century definition of religion and religious belief laid out by philosophers like Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Friedrich

²² Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion*, 3 vols., Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1986-1996), 2:33. In making such statements, Marty is also citing the results of C. Luther Fry’s analysis of U.S. census data collected between the wars and published in *The U.S. Looks at its Churches* (1930).

²³ This, perhaps, tells us more about the political agendas of the individual critics than those of the authors or texts under scrutiny. It can also be read as a reaction to the conservative politics and religious preoccupations of the New Critics who began to attract so much attention in the halls of American Academe in the 1950s and 1960s, and can in part explain the attempt to label certain branches of conservative Protestantism associated with the South and Southern Agrarianism, such as fundamentalism, as “reiterations” or “throwbacks”.

Nietzsche, allowing said critics to dismiss new sects and so-called “fundamentalisms”, as “reiterations”, “throwbacks”, or “simulations”.²⁴

The critical response to *In the Beauty of the Lilies* is characterized by a similar religious and cultural bias. Writing on the subject of Updike and the American Renaissance, for example, Charles Berryman reads the author’s “reference to Christ in the title of the novel” (referring to the fact that the first word to follow “In the Beauty of the lilies” in Julia Ward Howe’s *Battle Hymn of the Republic* is “Christ”), as a cultural “lament”, meant to call attention to “the current absence in American culture of the deity borne [*sic*] across the sea....to show a decline of religious experience through four American generations”.²⁵ Another critic, Stephen H. Webb, describes *In the Beauty of the Lilies* as “both a literal description of the fall of religion and a kind of allegory about the tragic inevitability of religion’s fate in the modern world”.²⁶ According to Webb, the historical loop which links Clarence Wilmot’s loss of faith on page 5 with his great-grandson Clark’s induction into The Temple of True and Actual Faith in the final chapter of the novel—from “established, mainline Protestant tradition, with all of its rights and benefits” to a fanatical religious cult—“demonstrates the slow and steady descent of religion in America”.²⁷

²⁴ As Marty notes, in *Modern American Religion*, 2:4, this criticism can also be extended to modern history and literary criticism, where those works “which have focused on the Harlem Renaissance, the literary exiles, alienated Jewish writers, university agnostics, the administrative sides of the New Deal, or debates over economics of military preparedness, tend to neglect or suppress the story of religion in a society which instead fairly reeked of religion”.

²⁵ Charles Berryman, “Faith or Fiction: Updike and the American Renaissance,” *John Updike and Religion: The Sense of the Sacred and the Motions of Grace*, ed. James Yerkes, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans (1999), 204. Whether Berryman’s substitution of the word “borne” for “born”, was intentional, or a typo, is unclear. The original version of the hymn, however, contains the word “born”, not “borne”. Updike’s own citation of this verse in the epigram to the novel also remains true to the original.

²⁶ Stephen H. Webb, “Writing as a Reader of Karl Barth: What Kind of Religious Writer is John Updike Not?” *John Updike and Religion: The Sense of the Sacred and the Motions of Grace*, ed. James Yerkes, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans (1999), 157.

²⁷ Webb, “Writing as a Reader of Karl Barth,” 159.

Both critics echo initial reviews of the novel in the *Christian Century* and the *New York Times*, which interpret Updike's opening description of a film set in Paterson, New Jersey, and the juxtaposition of names like David W. Griffith and Mary Pickford with the description of a Presbyterian minister's "loss of faith", as evidence of a cause for such descent. According to James M. Wall of the *Christian Century*, "These two famous names from the era of silent films are invoked to suggest that the movie industry fills the void left by an absent deity".²⁸ In the *New York Times*, Julian Barnes describes Updike's depiction of Hollywood, "with its new and lustrous gods and goddesses", as supplanting and even parodying "old religion".²⁹ But when the above critics attempt to highlight the role that the cinema and the news media have played in the decline of Christianity, all of them ignore the role that such media has played in sustaining the image of God and religion, both in Updike's narrative as well as within the wider culture of the United States.

Movies, we are informed in the second chapter of *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, are there to convince us that life is not serious; it is "an illusion, a story, distracting and disturbing but at bottom painless and merciful".³⁰ Where modern science sought to "demystify" the world through a faith in facts, the film industry seeks to "remystify" it by instilling an alternative faith in the irrational, or at best, improbable. Something about these early films, we learn, made one believe the opposite of what

²⁸ James M. Wall, "Among the Lilies," *Christian Century*, vol. 113, no. 8 (1996), 251-252.

²⁹ Julian Barnes, "Grand Illusion," *New York Times*, January 28 (1996). Part of this interpretation can also be attributed to a reading of Updike's novel against H. Richard Niebuhr's scathing critique of liberal Protestantism in *The Kingdom of God in America*, from which many of Updike's descriptions are undeniably drawn. What the above critics have omitted from their own interpretations is Niebuhr's concluding argument that "At the very time when the paralysis of institutionalization seemed most evident in the Christian movement in America signs were not lacking of a new spirit stirring among the old forms." H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, New York: Harper & Row (1937), 198. See also pages 196-197 of *The Kingdom of God* for similarities between Niebuhr's critique and Updike's opening narrative in *In the Beauty of the Lilies*.

³⁰ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 147-148.

common sense or reason dictated, that fairy tales really can come true.³¹ As Clarence's granddaughter Essie notes in the third chapter, "the movies took you to an edge but left you safe, all shadows sealed shut inside a happy ending, and sent you out into a Saturday where the actual people bumbled along like shapeless animals, blobs against the daylight that puzzled your eyes".³² Such media, as depicted here, encourages not the rational enquiry into natural objects of day-to-day existence implied by Weber in works like "Science as a Vocation",³³ but blind acceptance of supernatural shapes and phantasms, a will to believe in something otherworldly, a turning away from the pragmatic and the empirical as a prelude to a return to faith.

Part of this can be attributed to the successful lobbying of production companies by religious groups seeking to set the standard for morality in film, which culminated in the drafting of the first film Production Code in 1930.³⁴ But part of it can also be attributed to the incorporation of the new film and radio technology by religious groups themselves into the promotion of their own unique interpretations of Christian orthodoxy beginning around the same period. As Nancy T. Ammerman notes, "Fundamentalists had always been anxious to use the technologies of the modern age in the service of the gospel....When radio came on the scene, revival preachers were quick to seize the opportunity."³⁵ The same can be said of the fundamentalist response to the advent of television and the internet. "Always searching for innovation and the constant rationalization of revivalist techniques,"

³¹ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 246.

³² Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 247.

³³ Weber, "Science as a Vocation," 139.

³⁴ Stephen Vaughn, "Morality and Entertainment: The Origins of the Motion Picture Production Code," *The Journal of American history*, vol. 77, no. 1 (1990), 41, 45.

³⁵ Nancy T. Ammerman, "North American Protestant Fundamentalism," *Fundamentalisms Observed*, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1991), 33-34.

writes José Casanova, fundamentalists, “were among the first to recognize and exploit the potential of televangelism” and “[b]y the mid-1970s, business was booming.”³⁶

While Jean Baudrillard and Marshall McLuhan have argued that the production and distribution of information by the modern media apparatus—radio, film, television, the internet—“is directly destructive of meaning and signification”, especially that which grounds intellectual authority in the idea of an immanent God;³⁷ Updike demonstrates how such media, and indeed such criticism, has always necessarily been saturated with religious motifs. In his descriptions of newsreel footage of the Second World War for example, we read that “the voice of God...boomed and scolded, swollen graver and greater than ever in this feast of horror yet enclosing the audience in the ultimate security of an unfaltering American baritone”.³⁸ Where Baudrillard focused on the “kitsch”, the “retro”, and the “porno” qualities of such footage;³⁹ Updike equates these images with the evangelical elements that have always been present in American culture and foreign policy initiatives.⁴⁰

The title of the novel, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, is taken from a similar mixture of religion and reform politics. Julia Ward Howe’s Civil War hymn, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, written after a visit with Union troops defending the outskirts of Washington D.C. in 1861, mixes both Biblical imagery and national myth in a

³⁶ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1994), 146.

³⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press (1994), 79, 3-7.

³⁸ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 255.

³⁹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 38.

⁴⁰ While many recent studies on Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism have focused on recent trends toward political action, they often ignore the historical role that evangelicalism played in colonial America as well as in the nineteenth century. Judith M. Buddenbaum and Debra L. Mason offer an historical account of this relationship between the news media and radical religion in *Readings on Religion as News*. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press (2000).

poem that presents the Northern cause as one of both liberty and manifest destiny.

The epigraph to the novel, which contains the full verse of this stanza, reads:

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
 With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me:
 As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
 While God is marching on.

These last words, “While God is marching on” serve only to confirm and reinforce what we have stated thus far, that, rather than a narrative about the decline of religious belief in the United States, what *In the Beauty of the Lilies* attempts to portray is the continuing march of religion, specifically evangelical Christianity, from the nineteenth century through the twenty-first.

Updike’s decision to focus upon the film industry and the mass media while making this point is not to pass judgment on any matter of orthodoxy as do his critics, but to demonstrate how film and electronic media have both contributed to and transformed the manner in which we receive and interpret the subject of religion in the present. Where Weber insisted that “intellectualization and rationalization”—by which he meant specifically “technology”—will lead to “the disenchantment of the world”,⁴¹ Updike makes the connection between advanced technologies like film, and later in the novel television and the internet, with the resurgence of a specific brand of conservative, or “fundamentalist”, Protestantism in the latter half of the twentieth century.

The decision to open the novel in 1910 with the description of a D.W. Griffith film being shot “on the spacious, elevated grounds of Belle Vista Castle in Paterson,

⁴¹ Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” 139, 155.

New Jersey” is a case in point.⁴² Rather than a sign of media technology usurping the power of religious ideas to capture the hearts and minds of the people, this opening sequence can also be read as a metaphor for the birth of Protestant fundamentalism out of the doctrinal battles between Protestant liberals and Protestant conservatives in the early part of the century.

The decision to open the novel in 1910 is crucial to such a reading. 1910 saw both the death of Julia Ward Howe, icon of the modern “progressive” theology which epitomized the theology of the previous century, and the publication of the first three volumes of *The Fundamentals* (there were twelve in total) from which the twentieth century terms “religious fundamentalist” and “religious fundamentalism” ultimately derive. It was also in 1910 that, in response to liberal theologians who had entrenched themselves at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, the Presbyterian General Assembly, in league with the conservative Southern wing of this denomination, “adopted a five-point declaration of ‘essential’ doctrines” in order to enforce Presbyterian orthodoxy that would later become known as the “five points of fundamentalism”.⁴³

In light of this evidence it is possible to read Griffith’s medieval knights, camped out on the “rolling lawn” of Lambert’s Castle in Paterson, New Jersey, which “commanded a hazy view of New York City, less than fifteen miles eastward”,⁴⁴ as symbols of this change of posture within the mainstream denominations—this laying siege to theological and cultural modernism which the urban centers of the Northeast and their “liberal”, “modernist” seminaries (i.e. Union, Harvard, etc.) had come to

⁴² Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 3.

⁴³ George M. Marsden lists these as: “(1) the inerrancy of Scripture, (2) the Virgin Birth of Christ, (3) his substitutionary atonement, (4) his bodily resurrection, and (5) the authenticity of the miracles”, in *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1980), 117.

⁴⁴ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 3.

symbolize. From the first sentence—if not from the moment the title is announced—the theme of modern apocalypse asserts itself, “In those hot *last days* of the spring of 1910...a motion picture was being made”.⁴⁵ But far from offering confirmation of Weber’s secularization thesis that religious belief will decline as technology increases, this image of apocalypse is swiftly followed by the image of Christian crusade (that such themes so often inspire) as the silent film actress Mary Pickford calls for her knights to “attack the Saracen infidels!”⁴⁶ The title of Griffith’s film, *A Call to Arms*, rather than offer confirmation of a technological *coup de grâce*, seems almost a paraphrase of (or perhaps a rebuttal to) the novel’s title, taken from Julia Ward Howe’s famous Civil War hymn, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”. But whereas the lyrics to Howe’s “Battle Hymn” were written with the intention of rousing Northern troops to battle during the American Civil War, Griffith’s *A Call to Arms*, heralds from the South, and can be read as a tribute to, or even an attempt to resurrect, conservative Southern theology which had been effectively silenced since the Confederate defeat at the hands of the Union Army in 1865. Griffith’s Medieval knights, moreover, bear an uncanny resemblance to the Teutonic knights of Medieval Europe whose members also struggled against a northern foe and represent a recurrent theme in Griffith’s work, one that will eventually cement his fame when he replaces such figures with the riders of the Ku Klux Klan in the box office hit *The Birth of a Nation*, in 1915. Julia Ward Howe’s whispered reminder, “In the beauty of the lilies...”, born out of a passion for progressive social causes like abolition and women’s suffrage in the 1850s and 1860s, seems almost lost among such scenes as

⁴⁵ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 3. My italics.

⁴⁶ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 4.

Griffith, described as “ever the correct Kentucky gentleman”,⁴⁷ gathers his knights on a hillside in Paterson overlooking New York City, then as now the greatest symbol of the modern industrial north.

The contrasts between North and South, modern and medieval, lost faith and a crusade to regain that faith, are notably strong in this opening sketch and provide a running theme in the novel between a Northern minister and his Southern wife, Northern Paterson and Southern Basingstoke. When the action moves out West in the third and fourth chapters this theme can still be detected in the contrast between urban California and rural Colorado, city boys and mountain men, nonbelievers and believers. *In the Beauty of the Lilies* is a novel filled with opposites and polarities, endings and beginnings. But rather than a statement about the decline of religious belief in the United States, what such oppositions continue to testify to is the current of social, economic, and geographic change that has swept the nation throughout the past century and provided the driving force behind what Robert Wuthnow has described as “the restructuring of American religion”, rather than, as many have predicted, its large scale decline.⁴⁸

The vast differences in economic and social mobility represented by the four generations of Wilmots described in the novel mirrors to this sense of restructuring. Within the space of a few years Clarence Wilmot falls from the position of upper middle class respectability to the unemployed. Teddy Wilmot, by a little effort and a lot of luck, manages to climb back up to the middle class while his daughter, Essie, precedes to rocket past him into the ether of Hollywood starlets only to have her son, Clark, end up close to where Clarence left off in the 1920s, barely scraping by as a

⁴⁷ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 5.

⁴⁸ Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1988).

ski-lift operator for his uncle Jared in the rural mountains of Colorado. Nothing, the novel implies, is guaranteed by birthright or economic privilege. All status is susceptible to change and revocation. This is shown to be true not only of people, but of religious institutions as well in Updike's narrative. If a church grows too comfortable and fails to uphold the sense of "faith and devotion in the great body of people", to use Adam Smith's language, it becomes susceptible to the same forces as the individual: impotency and redundancy.⁴⁹

While Stephen H. Webb has made allusions to Updike's debt to the theology of Karl Barth and other twentieth century theologians like Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, insisting that if nothing else this theology confirms the reading of *In the Beauty of the Lilies* as a reflection of Weber's "disenchanted world", what Webb fails to acknowledge is that element in Barth's early theology that depends upon a void of unbelief—what Bernard Iddings Bell described as a nihilistic "agnosticism" that was prerequisite to the recovery of faith in the twentieth century.⁵⁰ Clarence Wilmot is the embodiment of this void, and it is through him that the faith of future generations of Wilmots is distilled.

At one point in the narrative Clarence is even described as a "vacuum" that he and his family are all "moving into",⁵¹ reflecting Paul Tillich's description of a "vacuum of [cultural] disintegration" which "can become a vacuum out of which creation is possible, a 'sacred void,' so to speak, which brings a quality of waiting, of 'not yet,' of being broken from above, into all our cultural creativity".⁵² In *The Epistle to the Romans* (1933), Barth described this "breaking in" as essential to the

⁴⁹ Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 310.

⁵⁰ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism, and other essays*, Milwaukee, WI: Morehouse Publishing (1926), 53-54.

⁵¹ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 59.

⁵² Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, trans. James Luther Adams, London: Nisbet & Co. (1951), 67.

relationship between God and man. "If this 'breaking in' does not occur," wrote Barth, "our thought remains merely empty, formal, critical and unproductive, incapable of mastering the rich world of appearance and of apprehending each particular thing in the context of the whole....Dark, blind, uncritical, capricious, mankind becomes a thing in itself".⁵³ It is this description that has led many to make the connection between Updike's novel and Karl Barth's theology. Both Clarence Wilmot and his great-grandson Clark Lazlo experience a form of this "breaking in" or "breaking loose"⁵⁴ at the moment when Grace is either granted or retracted from each man. For Clarence this action is described as "a visceral surrender, a set of dark sparkling bubbles escaping upward".⁵⁵ For Clark the direction of the bubbles and the description of their color and degree of animation is inverted, the "flock of sparkling dark immaterial bubbles *descended*" into him and "he knew what to do", he was no longer "worried; the living God had laid hold of him, the present-tense God beyond betting on".⁵⁶

The idea that a man like Clarence Wilmot, trained in theological centers like Princeton in the late-nineteenth century, should lose his faith in God when confronted by the criticism of men like Robert Ingersoll, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Karl Marx, should come as no surprise to those familiar with Barth's theology, nor to those cognizant of religious history and indeed religious change in the United States. As

⁵³ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, 6th ed., London: Oxford University Press (1933), 48.

⁵⁴ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 48, 51.

⁵⁵ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 5.

⁵⁶ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 484, 486. My italics. This last description can also be associated with Bernard Iddings Bell's descriptions of the arrival of postmodernism in *Postmodernism, and other essays*, and his characterization of those who would heed the call when it came: i.e. the restless youths of the post-war generation and those who had grown weary of the liberal's calls for tolerance and conformity.

Clarence sits in his study ruminating on his sudden loss, “the spines of his books” appear to him as “a comfortless wall, as opaque and inexorable as a tidal wave”.⁵⁷

There was a tide behind these books that crested in mad Nietzsche and sickly Darwin and boil-plagued Marx. For all its muscular missions to the heathen and fallen women and lost souls of the city slums, the nineteenth century had been a long erosion, and the books of this century that a conscientious clergyman collected—the sermons of Henry Sloane Coffin and the apologetics of George William Knox, the fervent mission reports of Robert Speer and the ponderous Biblical dictionaries of Hastings, Selbie, and Lambert—Clarence now saw as so much flotsam and rubble, perishing and adrift, pathetic testimony to belief’s flailing attempt not to drown.⁵⁸

Clarence Wilmot is the embodiment of nineteenth century liberal, naturalistic theology—all that theologians of the next generation like Bernard Iddings Bell, Karl Barth, and Paul Tillich, worked to eradicate. Clarence’s sermon on free will and predestination after his loss of faith even echoes Ludwig Feuerbach’s thesis in *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* (1830), which rejected the Protestant notion of predestination and personal immortality in favor of “the immortality of reabsorption in nature”,⁵⁹ a theme that Ralph Waldo Emerson would echo in *Nature* in 1836.

When critics like Stephen H. Webb describe Clarence’s loss of faith as a “tragic inevitability”,⁶⁰ they therefore miss the point. It is not as Webb argues, the “inevitability of religion’s fate in the modern world” that such descriptions attempt to

⁵⁷ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 15.

⁵⁸ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 15-16.

⁵⁹ Alexander Loos (trans.), Introduction, *The Essence of Religion*, by Ludwig Feuerbach, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books (2004).

⁶⁰ Webb, “Writing as a Reader of Karl Barth,” 157.

highlight, but as Bernard Iddings Bell and Karl Barth have argued, the “inevitability” of *modern* religion’s fate in the *postmodern* world that Updike is attempting to draw the reader’s attention to in the pages of his novel. The numerous references to the film industry and the entertainment media serve only to reinforce this point.

Based upon the evidence that Updike himself provides, both in his choice of a title and in his placement of Apocalyptic metaphor, the “end” and the “loss” detailed in the first three pages of *In the Beauty of the Lilies* and echoed throughout the novel would seem to belong more to modern rationalism, Darwinian progressivism, scientific positivism, and theological liberalism, than to any overall decline in religious belief. Clarence Wilmot, for example, not only loses his faith in God in the first chapter of the novel, but in modern, positive reason as well. After quitting the ministry he takes to selling encyclopedia subscriptions door-to-door. But he is no more successful at peddling the transcendent power of modern facts at some poor factory worker’s doorstep than at singing God’s praises from the pulpit. In his attempts to convince a skeptical Catholic woman of the importance of factual knowledge, insisting that “*The Popular Encyclopedia* contains nothing but facts, the facts of the world, clearly stated and straightforwardly presented”, he experiences yet another revelation, similar to the first, where “he seemed to be sunk deep in a well of facts, all of which spelled the walled-in dismal hopelessness of human life.”⁶¹ For Clarence, “[t]he world’s books” had become “boxes of flesh-eating worms, crawling sentences that had eaten the universe hollow”.⁶² Encyclopedias attempted to provide “All the information there can be”, but still left “you as alone and bewildered as you

⁶¹ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 94.

⁶² Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 94.

were not knowing anything”.⁶³ By the end of the first chapter Clarence’s faith in the transcendent power of facts is also undermined as he is forced to admit that, “[t]he universe is a pointless, self-running machine” in which humans are reduced to “insignificant by-products, whom death will tuck back into oblivion, with or without holy fanfare”.⁶⁴ His “sense of the emptiness and foolishness at the base of the universe” is described as having “floated like a veil” before Clarence’s eyes, “numbed his tongue in social discourse, and proved so debilitating that he gasped for breath whenever the weather changed or day shaded into night”.⁶⁵

This vision of the modernist nightmare recreated in the disenchanted musings of a fallen minister, haunts the lives of Clarence’s descendants for the remainder of the novel. Clarence’s youngest son Teddy, named after “[Ralph Waldo] Emerson’s hyperactive spiritual descendant Theodore Roosevelt”,⁶⁶ inherits his father’s sense of psychic disjunction. Hardly the picture of romantic individualism tuned in to the frequency of the moment like his older brother Jared, Teddy has more in common with characters from Sinclair Lewis’s, or Sherwood Anderson’s, bleak Main Streets. Far from the strong sense of individualism exuded by his namesake, or the eclectic ingenuity of his postal predecessor, Benjamin Franklin, Teddy seems to possess all of the latter’s folksiness without any of his genius or drive. “Watching his father’s horrifying collapse had left Teddy with a number of aversions....He didn’t want to have to compete”,⁶⁷ was “willing to leave the aspiring to others”,⁶⁸ and is happiest in the company of women. Rather than a fast-paced life in the modern city, Teddy prefers the slower pace of the country-side; serving up ice cream sodas in the local

⁶³ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 101.

⁶⁴ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 74-75.

⁶⁵ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 87.

⁶⁶ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 16.

⁶⁷ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 139.

⁶⁸ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 140.

drug store to collecting rents from impoverished immigrants in urban slums. Even his girlfriend, Emily Sifford, whose family comes from a “branch of Methodism” that has only recently “lifted the ban on theatre-going and dancing”,⁶⁹ is imperfect and un-modern in both a physical and a social sense.

Teddy in many ways personifies what critics like Leslie Fiedler describe as the postmodern man—anticipated by Weber in his descriptions of life beyond modernism in *The Protestant Ethic*. In “The New Mutants”, Fiedler even describes this “post-man” as part of “a larger retreat from masculine aggressiveness to female allure”, instigated by the decline of Western bourgeois imperialism and the alternative rise of nonviolent resistance movements like the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s.⁷⁰ But it is Teddy’s grandson Clark Lazlo who completes Fiedler’s description with his predilection for drug use and pornography.

Clark, the spoiled son of a Hollywood starlet, college dropout, drug addict, and failed Hollywood PR man, who in 1987 “while working as a ski-lift operator for his great-uncle Jared in central Colorado, fell under the spell of a very religious mountain-man called Jesse Smith and joined his supposedly utopian commune, called the Temple of True and Actual Faith”,⁷¹ is a quintessentially postmodern character according to Fiedler’s descriptions. He embodies both Fiedler’s and Irving Howe’s notion of a group of drug fuelled hedonists who inhabit a new postmodern literary landscape in the 1960s,⁷² and Daniel Bell’s definition of the “cultural mass”,

⁶⁹ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 171.

⁷⁰ Leslie Fiedler, “The New Mutants,” *A New Fiedler Reader*, New York: Prometheus Books (1999), 205-206.

⁷¹ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 360.

⁷² Fiedler, “The New Mutants,” 207; Irving Howe, “Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction,” *Decline of the New*, London: Victor Gollancz (1963), 196.

comprised predominantly of those in the knowledge and communications industries.⁷³ But in fulfilling this stereotype Clark also embodies the characteristics of the individual who would be attracted in droves to the more conservative branches of Protestant and Catholic Christianity in the latter half of the twentieth century outlined in studies like Dean M. Kelley's *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (1972), Nancy T. Ammerman's "North American Protestant Fundamentalism," and Gilles Kepel's *The Revenge of God* (1994). As Kepel notes, for instance, many of those attracted by this more conservative Christian message in the 1970s and 1980s were "poor whites"....who were excluded from the networks of political, cultural and social power" and whose problems were left unaddressed by the reform movements of the previous two decades.⁷⁴ This is perhaps best illustrated in the conflict that arises between Clark and his Native American colleague Johnnie Ponyfoot regarding the safest speed at which to run the ski lift. Rather than address the actual question of passenger safety, over which the conflict had arisen, Clark's Uncle Jared's response is to side with Ponyfoot, regardless of which side of the argument he resides because Native Americans now hold a stronger lobby in American culture than young white males of a certain economic background. The fact that Clark is a blood relative—a detail that would have made a difference in a previous age—matters little within the present political climate of 1980s America.⁷⁵

⁷³ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, London: Heinemann (1976), 20. A similar definition is offered by Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1984), 14; where Lyotard describes how in a postmodern social environment the traditional class of "decision makers" will be replaced by "a composite layer of corporate leaders, high-level administrators, and the heads of the major professional, labor, political, and religious organizations."

⁷⁴ Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World*, trans. Alan Braley, Cambridge: Polity Press (1994), 134.

⁷⁵ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 370.

Therefore, at the same time that Clark's character can be said to conform to many of the stereotypes of critics like Leslie Fiedler, Irving Howe, and Daniel Bell, regarding the subject—or lack of a subject—in postmodern fiction, his actions also serve to contradict elements in their theses which continue to treat religious belief as irrelevant in the modern and, indeed, the postmodern world. While, in keeping with this thesis, Ralph C. Wood and Julian Barnes have attempted to explain away the moment of Clark's transcendence at the end of the novel as an indictment for “spiritual passivity”,⁷⁶ or as a “cliché of action movies” that “insists that the compromised hero retain our sympathy by killing the bad guy and then dying himself”,⁷⁷ there is no mistaking Updike's intention in the novel, that the giver of grace is none other than the “living God” himself.

In addition to personifying the postmodern critical sense of the “cultural mass”—defined in various forms by Arnold J. Toynbee, Irving Howe, Daniel Bell, Andreas Huyssen, and Fredric Jameson, as an essential feature of postmodernism⁷⁸—Clark also embodies the figurative sense of the “mass man”, or what in Christian terms is known as the “Eucharist”, or “Latin Mass”. This alternative sense of the “cultural mass”, centered on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, permeates *In the Beauty of the Lilies* to the point that it can even be read in the chapter arrangements, from the *Kyrie Eleison*, or “[Lord] Have mercy”, repeated in the final words to the first chapter,⁷⁹ to the *Agnus Dei*, which concludes the second and the third chapters

⁷⁶ Ralph C. Wood, “In the Beauty of the Lilies,” *Christian Century*, vol. 113, no. 14 (1996), 452-455.

⁷⁷ Barnes, “Grand Illusion.”

⁷⁸ Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 12 vols., London: Oxford University Press (1934-1961), 8:338; Irving Howe, “Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction,” *Decline of the New*, London: Victor Gollancz (1963), 196; Daniel Bell *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 20; Andreas Huyssen, “Mapping the Postmodern,” *New German Critique*, no. 33 (1984), 16; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press (1991), 2.

⁷⁹ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 108.

with an alternate sense of both pain and sacrifice—the “pain” for the child who symbolized earthly “perfection”,⁸⁰ and the sacrifice of the child who symbolized everything that the first did not, “Off her hands, and into God’s. So be it. Good riddance.”⁸¹ The presence of this “Mass”, and the sacrifice it symbolizes, coupled with that of the “cultural mass” described by Daniel Bell and others serves as a challenge, not only to the postmodern critical sense of the cultural mass, but to the modern sociological interpretation of religious evolution which informs the great majority of postmodern theory and criticism treating the interaction between religion and culture in twentieth century America.

Rather than returning “silently, without the usual publicity of renegades” into “[t]he arms of the old churches”, as Weber urged in his 1918 essay “Science as a Vocation”,⁸² Clark’s reply to the modern sociological establishment is both vocal and defiant. Instead of returning to the liberal church of his great-grandfather, Clark takes the skills he has learned in a society shaped by the views of men like Weber and applies them to the promotion of an obscure Christian sect located outside a town called “Lower Branch”, down the road from “a struggling unpainted non-denominational church”.⁸³

Rather than confirmation of Max Weber’s secularization thesis, therefore, Clark’s transcendence at the end of the novel serves as a challenge to Weber’s theory, and to contemporary critics who continue to apply his thesis to theories of postmodernism. It also offers support for the ideas of theologians like Bernard Iddings Bell, Karl Barth, and Paul Tillich who argued that if a resurgence of religion

⁸⁰ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 226-227.

⁸¹ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 360.

⁸² Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” 155.

⁸³ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 435.

were to occur in a postmodern future it would emerge from the void created by the modern sociological sense of disbelief. Nowhere has this idea manifested itself greater than in the population described by postmodern critics as the “cultural mass” and designated for further spiritual decline.

When we look in the next chapter to an analysis of Don DeLillo’s novel *Underworld*, we find a similar critique of the postmodern critical sense of the cultural mass. Only where Updike chooses most of the metaphors for his critique from the fundamentalist-modernist debates, DeLillo focuses on the roots of this theory in the essays of Charles Baudelaire and the Renaissance paintings of Pieter Bruegel the Elder. His subsequent inversion of these ideas and images in *Underworld*, serve as a challenge the modern sociological interpretation of secular apocalypse, and replace it with the image of the apocalypse of secular modernity itself.

Chapter 7

“The Painter of Modern Life” and the *Triumph of [Modern] Death*: Charles Baudelaire, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, and the Theme of Modern, Secular

Apocalypse in Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*

The Renaissance painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525-1569) has been described as many things, but rarely if ever as the painter of Modern life. Known best for his depictions of peasant life in the Netherlands in the middle of the sixteenth century, Bruegel’s work at first seems a far cry from Charles Baudelaire’s description of modern art and the modern artist in his often quoted essay “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863). It was not until after Baudelaire’s death in 1867, for example, that Bruegel even began to be taken seriously by art historians as more than “the naïve artist Pieter the Droll and Peasant Bruegel”,¹ so it is doubtful that Baudelaire had the old Flemish master in mind when he wrote his essay.² But when the two are brought together in the prologue to Don DeLillo’s novel *Underworld* (1997), through the conduit of J. Edgar Hoover, “the nation’s number one G-man”³—a clever inversion of Baudelaire’s “Monsieur G.”—it becomes clear that DeLillo at least has the old master in mind.

The opening fifty pages of *Underworld* present the reader with many images, all of which combine to form the description of a crowd at a baseball game in 1951. But it is around the figure of J. Edgar Hoover standing in the aisle behind the home team dugout, fitting together two sides of “a color reproduction” of Pieter Bruegel’s

¹ Perez Zagorin, “Looking for Pieter Bruegel,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 64, no. 1 (2003), 73.

² Short of describing Bruegel as a “modern” artist, Baudelaire does seem to have viewed his work as a sort of cultural or aesthetic marker, equivalent to both the spread of an ideological “contagion” and the “pursuit” of “The baroque ideal.” Charles Baudelaire, *The Mirror of Art: Critical Studies*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne, London: Phaidon Press (1955), 186, 188.

³ Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, London: Picador (1997), 17.

sixteenth century masterpiece, *The Triumph of Death* (from which the prologue also receives its title), that all of these images seem to radiate like a wheel on its axis. The painting, we are told, is literally “crowded with medieval figures who are dying or dead”.⁴ Those still alive are seen fleeing from “skeleton armies” while others are “impaled on lances, hung from gibbets,” or “drawn on spoked wheels fixed to the tops of bare trees”.⁵ On one side a group of skeletons dressed “in winding-sheets” reminiscent of Roman togas stand before the sign of the cross and blow long golden horns while on the other, “Legions of the dead” form up “behind shields made of coffin lids”, and “Death himself” is featured “astride a slat-ribbed hack...his scythe held ready as he presses people in haunted swarms toward the entrance of some helltrap,” described as “an oddly modern construction that could be a subway tunnel or office corridor”.⁶

But Hoover has made a critical error in reading Bruegel’s painting that the reader is not meant to make, not if he or she has picked up on the clues that the author has left for them in the text. These are not “medieval figures” that are being herded to their destruction in DeLillo’s “reproduction” of Bruegel’s work, but modern figures—as modern as the fans in the stadium that day, there to witness the third and deciding game of the National League playoffs between the Giants and the Dodgers. The helltrap is described as a “modern construction”. The pages that fall from the upper deck, torn from “the current issue of *Life*”⁷ in a parody of Christ tearing the seals from the book of Life in Revelation, advertise “Baby food, instant coffee,

⁴ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 41.

⁵ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 41.

⁶ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 41.

⁷ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 32.

encyclopedias and cars, waffle irons and shampoos and blended whiskeys”,⁸ all modern products. Included in this list is Bruegel’s painting. The “dazzle of a Packard car”, we are told, “is repeated in the feature story about the art treasures of the Prado” from which the two page reproduction of Bruegel’s *Triumph of Death* has been extracted. “Rubens and Titian and Playtex and Motorola”, are “all part of the same thing”,⁹ modernity—what Charles Baudelaire described in 1863 as “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable”.¹⁰ And what is the crowd doing with these images but throwing them away, casting them from the upper decks of the stadium like so much trash.

DeLillo’s decision to place J. Edgar Hoover at the centre of this action, holding these two ideas together like a paperclip, is no accident. Hoover’s affinity with Baudelaire’s description of the modern artist as “the man of the crowd” (after the title of a short story by Edgar Allan Poe¹¹), as well as with Breugel’s depiction of Death at the centre of his painting, allows for some interesting parallels to be drawn between Baudelaire’s idea of “The Painter of Modern Life”, and Bruegel’s *Triumph of Death*. Of such an artist Baudelaire writes,

The Crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes.

His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd.

For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy

to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of

⁸ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 39.

⁹ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 39.

¹⁰ Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch, New York: W.W. Norton & Company (2001), 796.

¹¹ Poe’s conception of “the man of the crowd” can also be traced to an early modern motif involving the idea of the “everyman”, or “average man”, represented by Bruegel (and in Netherlandish art in general) as “*Elck*”. For a detailed analysis of this motif in Bruegel’s paintings see Ethan Matt Kavalier, *Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1999), 77-98.

movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world—such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a *prince* who everywhere rejoices in his incognito.¹²

This description, in addition to offering a definition of the modern artist which would provide the model for future generations, captures the essence of DeLillo's description of J. Edgar Hoover, seated with Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason and Toots Shor "[n]ear the Giants' dugout" in *Underworld*'s opening sequence. Sinatra, who is also featured in the current issue of *Life* "sitting in a nightclub in Nevada with Ava Gardner",¹³ refers to Hoover as "Jedgar", a name that Hoover enjoys because it sounds "medieval and princely and wily-dark".¹⁴ Like Monsieur G., this G-man is also likened to "a *prince* who everywhere rejoices in his incognito". "Fame and secrecy are the high and low ends of the same fascination," the narrator intones, "the static crackle of some libidinous thing in the world, and Edgar responds to people who have access to this energy. He wants to be their dearly devoted friend provided their hidden lives are in his private files, all the rumors collected and indexed, the shadow facts made real".¹⁵ And if this weren't enough to link Hoover with Monsieur G. and Baudelaire's idea of the modern artist as a "man of the crowd", the reader is asked to ponder what the "G" in "G-man" stands for? "Is it G for Giants?" Sinatra

¹² Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," 795.

¹³ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 39.

¹⁴ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 29.

¹⁵ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 17.

prods.¹⁶ In intelligence slang we know that it stands for “Government man”, or “Government agent”. But it could also be an attempt by DeLillo to link Bruegel’s painting—which is at one point described as physically “stuck” to Hoover’s body¹⁷—directly with Baudelaire’s idea of the painter of modern life through this intercessor with a shared consonant in his secret name (“G-man” is the mirrored translation of “Monsieur G.”).

Pieter Bruegel the Elder was also, of course, a master of the crowd. His first biographer, Carel van Mander, even depicted him in his *Schilder-Boeck* of 1604, as a member of that very crowd, chosen “from among the peasants, as the delineator of peasants”.¹⁸ Included in van Mander’s description of the painter is an anecdote about how Bruegel, along with one of his wealthy patrons, a merchant by the name of Hans Frankert, used to gatecrash local parties and weddings in order to gather material for Bruegel’s paintings.

With this Frankert, Brueghel [*sic*] often went out into the country to see the peasants at their fairs and weddings. Disguised as peasants they brought gifts like the other guests, claiming relationship or kinship with the bride or groom. Here Brueghel delighted in observing the droll behaviour of the peasants, how they ate, drank, danced, capered or made love, all of which he was well able to reproduce cleverly and pleasantly in watercolour or oils.”¹⁹

While there has been much speculation as to the accuracy of van Mander’s account, his description of Bruegel bears a certain similarity to both Baudelaire’s

¹⁶ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 29.

¹⁷ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 41.

¹⁸ Fritz Grossmann, *Pieter Bruegel: Complete Edition of the Paintings*, London: Phaidon (1955), 9.

¹⁹ Grossmann, *Pieter Bruegel*, 9-19.

descriptions of Monsieur G., as well as to DeLillo's depiction of J. Edgar Hoover, who later in the novel is featured gate-crashing Truman Capote's Black and White Ball.²⁰ But in addition to Bruegel himself there is also the figure of Death to consider. At the centre of the painting in Hoover's grasp Death is also featured among the crowd, "ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert", scythe in hand, looking for that quality called "modernity".²¹ Rather than Baudelaire's optimistic portrait of "The Painter of Modern Life", DeLillo presents us with something quite different, which would seem to suggest the *Triumph of [Modern] Death* itself.

The prominence given to Bruegel's *Triumph of Death* in the Prologue to *Underworld*, has given many reviewers and critics room to speculate on its possible symbolism and the renewed relevance of the artist's work in a contemporary—or even a postmodern—context. Both the title of the prologue, "The Triumph of Death", and much of the text, reflect action and imagery depicted in Bruegel's painting, in addition to elements from the wider genre of ancient and medieval apocalyptic literature. As Hoover scrutinizes the two-page reproduction of Bruegel's painting, for example, the people around him begin to mimic—or "reproduce"—the action in the painting. There are "screamers and berserkers",²² people "climbing over seats, calling hoarsely toward the field".²³ Men "dangling from the wall in right-center field",²⁴ adopt the attitudes of figures in the painting who are either hung from gibbets or gallows. Hoover we are told finds the "static drama of the dangled

²⁰ Both Truman Capote and J. Edgar Hoover are also described as "children", as is Monsieur G. "a man-child".

²¹ Quotations are taken from Baudelaire's definition of modernity in "The Painter of Modern Life," 796, where he compares the imagination of the modern artist to one who is "ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert...looking for that quality which you must allow me to call 'modernity'".

²² DeLillo, *Underworld*, 51.

²³ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 49.

²⁴ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 54.

body...compelling".²⁵ There is "something apparitional" in the streaky lengths "of limbs and hair and flapping sleeves",²⁶ which "hit the ground and crumple and get up slowly".²⁷ Just as those in the painting grapple with skeletons or climb rocks and trees in feeble attempts to escape from their pursuers, those in the crowd leaving the stadium climb lamp posts and "toot car horns".²⁸ Some, we read, are even engaged in "fistfights on the subway going home".²⁹

But while many critics are quick to note the painting's relationship to other ancient and medieval apocalyptic literature—to the thinly veiled references to "the book of Life" in Revelation and the parallels which can be drawn between the number seven in that book and the seventh inning stretch—they are slow to recognize the painting's significance to the modern world and, indeed, to Baudelaire's famous description of the modern artist as the "man of the crowd". Most choose rather to confine their critiques of this scene to the purely banal and superficial aspects of the painting, interpreting it as just another medieval (as opposed to modern) representation of apocalypse, or what the text describes as "a landscape of visionary havoc and ruin" inspired by the bomb.³⁰

When Hoover interrupts his scrutiny of the painting in order to reflect upon the scene of "a lonely tower standing on the Kazakh Test Site"³¹ where the Russians have recently completed their second successful test of the nuclear Bomb, for

²⁵ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 54.

²⁶ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 55.

²⁷ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 54.

²⁸ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 59.

²⁹ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 51.

³⁰ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 41. Michael Dirda, "The Blast Felt round the World", *Washington Post*, 28 Sept. 1997, 1, 10; John N. Duvall includes Bruegel's *Triumph of Death* under the rubric of both "previous representations of apocalypse" and "foreshadowings of nuclear annihilation" in his essay, "Excavating the Underworld of Race and Waste in Cold War History: Baseball, Aesthetics, and Ideology", *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*, ed. Hugh Ruppersburg and Tim Engles, New York: G.K. Hall & Co. (2000), 258-281;

³¹ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 50.

example, the instinct of many critics has been to take this reference as a clue to how to read the painting's significance in the novel.³² Leonard Wilcox, for example, interprets the scene as suggestive of "an uncanny 'return of the real.'...a shock of recognition, a disturbance in the symbolic world of the subject....akin to the Lacanian *tuché*".³³ For Wilcox, as for the majority of critics, the *Triumph of Death*, despite its prominent placement, plays a subordinate role in the narrative and is only meant to reflect and support "the belated traumatic effects of the bomb, both individually and socially in postwar America".³⁴

But Wilcox's suggestion that the bomb heralds a "return of the real" is a bit hard to swallow when one considers that as soon as Hoover has received word that the Soviet Union has completed its second successful test of the nuclear bomb, the same bomb is then immediately likened to "some thunder god of ancient Eurasia".³⁵ Or, a few pages later, when it is described as "a restoring force" in response to "a moral wane" that, according to Hoover, "is everywhere in effect".³⁶ If anything "the real", in its modern pragmatic sense, is precisely what is placed under threat in *Underworld*—specifically by the bomb. Religious imagery and symbolism increases with each mention of the bomb and nuclear warfare in general. "Facts", we are told,

³² Part of this can be attributed to the fact that in interviews DeLillo has himself continued to make this connection. But it is not the only connection that can be made. In many ways DeLillo could just be telling the interviewer what he/she wants to hear. On other occasions DeLillo has remarked on "an element of contempt for meanings" in his prose, a desire "to dare readers to make a commitment you know they can't make". "Making things difficult for the reader", he argues in an interview with Thomas LeClair, "is less an attack on the reader than it is on the age and its facile knowledge-market". In a world where "Everybody seems to know everything", DeLillo at one point describes himself as a writer who is "driven by his conviction that some truths aren't arrived at so easily, that life is still full of mystery". Quotations from Thomas LeClair, "An Interview with Don DeLillo," *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 23, no. 1 (1982), 19-31.

³³ Leonard Wilcox, "DeLillo's *Underworld* and the Return of the Real," *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2002), 121.

³⁴ Wilcox, "DeLillo's *Underworld* and the Return of the Real," 122.

³⁵ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 23.

³⁶ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 28.

possess a “collapsible” quality, they can be “folded up and put away”.³⁷ To this we could apply another Lacanian principle, the mirror principle, in which the subject is deceived by what he perceives in the mirror’s reflection.³⁸

What is collapsing in the prologue to *Underworld* is precisely the modern sense of the real, based upon Newtonian physics (which privileged the examination and interpretation of facts based upon observable phenomena) and what Max Weber characterized as the dual properties of the modern world: “rationalization and intellectualization”.³⁹ Hoover, while at one point described as “bible-school” indoctrinated⁴⁰ (indicative of a Protestant upbringing), is seated with two Catholics (Frank Sinatra and Jackie Gleason), and a Jew (Toots Shor); all symbols of the old, esoteric, pre-Reformation religions. After the seventh-inning stretch—described as “our own little traditional thing”⁴¹—the tone of the game (and the crowd observing it) begins to change. “A hollow clamor begins to rise from the crowd, men calling from the deep reaches, an animal awe and desolation”.⁴² And just as the crowd begins “to lose its coherence, people sitting scattered on the hard steps,” we are told that, “a

³⁷ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 34.

³⁸ According to Arnold J. Toynbee the bomb provided the perfect metaphor for the decline of modern, science centered societies, and the return to some sense of religion in the postmodern world. In *An Historian's Approach to Religion*, 2nd ed. 1979, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1956), 235-236; Toynbee expands upon his initial comments in *A Study of History*, predicting a “revulsion of feeling against Science and Technology”, like that against religion in the seventeenth century, that “may re-open an avenue leading to Religion along a new line of approach which, if humbler, will be spiritually more promising.” While Toynbee does not see this sense of religion conforming to the older, traditional, monotheism of a religion like Christianity; he does see the bomb providing the major catalyst for such changes.

³⁹ Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, London: Routledge (1948), 155.

⁴⁰ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 29.

⁴¹ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 30.

⁴² DeLillo, *Underworld*, 32.

priest with a passel of boys" is seen "filing up the aisle".⁴³ "Everything is changing shape, becoming something else",⁴⁴ the narrator informs us, but what exactly?

In a recent monograph entitled *Don DeLillo: Balance at the Edge of Belief* (2004), Jesse Kavadlo has argued that what is "changing shape" in the prologue is modernity itself. According to Kavadlo, the date given in the prologue and epilogue as "fall 1951", "suggests a modern fall from a modern Eden".⁴⁵ But while there is plenty of evidence to support this claim, that it is indeed modernity that DeLillo is referring to, there is little evidence to support Kavadlo's conclusion that *Underworld* can therefore be read as "a testimony to the power of faith", or that the novel "echoes the possibility of a caring, sparing God".⁴⁶

The problem with both Kavadlo's and Wilcox's interpretations, and the majority of criticism that touches upon this section of DeLillo's narrative is that, in addition to their lack of familiarity with religious history in the United States during the Cold War years, both critics completely ignore art historical interpretations of Bruegel's painting and how such interpretations may otherwise relate to a reading of DeLillo's novel. It has often been noted by art historians, for example, that what makes Bruegel's *Triumph of Death* stand apart from prior triumph of death, dance of death, and apocalyptic motifs is the sheer lack of Christian religious iconography contained within its composition. While some have attributed this to evidence of Bruegel's sympathy or lack of sympathy for the Protestant cause during the Reformation, there is a third option explored by Peter Thon and the renowned Bruegel scholar Walter S. Gibson that I believe DeLillo is attempting to draw our attention to

⁴³ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 33.

⁴⁴ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 33.

⁴⁵ Jesse Kavadlo, *Don DeLillo: Balance at the Edge of Belief*, Modern American Literature Series, vol. 40, New York: Peter Lang (2004), 106.

⁴⁶ Kavadlo, *Don DeLillo*, 126.

in *Underworld* through the juxtaposition of descriptions of the painting with theories of modern art and literature like that found in Charles Baudelaire's essay "The Painter of Modern Life".

While Thon acknowledges that "The theme of the Triumph of Death appears in many forms in medieval and Renaissance art", Bruegel's *Triumph of Death* differs from these in its gruesome attention to detail and in the sheer scale of the brutalities depicted.⁴⁷ Rather than one or two figures confronted by Death, as in previous representations of this theme, Bruegel's painting contains an entire army of the dead come to inflict torture and murder upon the living.⁴⁸ It is literally crowded with death. So much so, argues Thon, that the violence "even threatens to obscure the conventional Christian message" of its theme.⁴⁹

Walter S. Gibson takes this idea one step further describing the painting as "a secular apocalypse".⁵⁰ "Traditionally", writes Gibson in a separate work, "the final episode of human history was represented as the Last Judgment, where in the company of saints, Christ determines the eternal destiny of each human soul, and Heaven and Hell wait to receive their own".⁵¹ Bruegel's *Triumph of Death*, however, "lacks both a divine judge and the Christian theme of salvation. No one, in fact, is saved. Even the cross, repeated frequently throughout the composition, seems to mock any hope on the part of the victims for the mercy of God".⁵² Equally absent, is the "usual Christian concern for sin and punishment."⁵³ Such absences, according to

⁴⁷ Peter Thon, "Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death* Reconsidered," *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1968), 290.

⁴⁸ Thon, "Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death* Reconsidered," 292.

⁴⁹ Thon, "Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death* Reconsidered," 292.

⁵⁰ Walter S. Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Two Studies*, The Franklin D. Murphy Lectures XI, The Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas (1991), 60.

⁵¹ Walter S. Gibson, *Bruegel*, London: Thames and Hudson (1977), 109.

⁵² Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder*, 57.

⁵³ Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder*, 57.

Gibson, constitute an entirely “new subject” in the history of art, “with Hell reduced to inconsequence and Heaven apparently banished altogether [Bruegel’s] *Triumph of Death* is, in effect, a secular apocalypse.”⁵⁴

It is this interpretation, I believe, that informs DeLillo’s decision to “reproduce” the painting in *Underworld*. Only instead of merely an apocalypse with a modern secular theme, the image I believe DeLillo is after in his decision to juxtapose descriptions of the painting with references to Baudelaire’s idea of the modern artist as the “man of the crowd”, is the apocalypse of secular modernity itself. This is why Bruegel’s masterpiece and all of the other symbols of modern consumer culture mentioned in the prologue are cast out and rejected in the opening scene of the novel. “Rubens and Titian and Playtex and Motorola”,⁵⁵ are all symbols of different stages of modernity falling from the sky, cast out like rebel angels (the subject of yet another painting by Bruegel).

What DeLillo seeks in other words, through his reproduction of Bruegel’s *Triumph of Death*, is an inversion of the painting, in the same way that Hoover’s nickname “G-man” offers an inversion of Monsieur G. and Baudelaire’s idea of “The Painter of Modern Life”. In fact, the entire novel can be read as an attempt at inversion: “Things are changing shape, becoming something else”, “facts are collapsing”.⁵⁶ They might also be said to be reversing like a reel of film run backwards, or like the order of chapters in the novel which, beginning from the first chapter, run backwards from 1992 to 1951 with short breaks inserted in between like individual frames of film spliced in in order to create a *subliminal* text: the story of a

⁵⁴ Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder*, 60.

⁵⁵ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 39.

⁵⁶ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 33-34.

Black boy and his baseball for instance, or of the black and white of the Catholic Church, of the nun's habit and the priest's vestments.

The focus upon religion in these spaces is also instructive. Walking home after the game, in possession of the game winning baseball, Cotter Martin's eyes alight on "The Power of Prayer Sign" which prompts him to carry the ball in his right hand, indicative of holiness.⁵⁷ The voice of the sidewalk preacher insisting that "Nobody knows the day or the hour", while it repeats the old modernist refrain of skepticism in the face of scientific certainty, also offers to invert such skepticism as a challenge to critics who continue to cling to modernity's sense of cultural and religious elitism. Critics like Wilcox and Dirda, for example, who focus on the central importance of the Atom bomb in DeLillo's text, ignore the sense of inversion implied in the Bomb's supporting machinery and what such mechanisms can tell us about the fate of modern "reality" (based upon mathematics and science) in DeLillo's novel.

Atomic science has often provided metaphors for theories on modernism, especially literary modernism, from Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "splitting atoms and playing ball games with the cosmos", to T.S. Eliot's description of the poet's work as a "fusion of elements."⁵⁸ The former of these two descriptions confronts the reader at the same moment that Baudelaire's notion of the modern artist is fused with Bruegel's *Triumph of Death* in the Prologue. It is repeated in Part Six, the morning after Bobby Thomson hits his famous home run, when the science teacher Albert Bronzini unfolds his newspaper and finds von Hofmannsthal's synopsis realized on the front page of

⁵⁷ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 51.

⁵⁸ Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, *Modernism: 1890-1930*, London: Penguin Books (1976), 71; T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch, New York: W.W. Norton & Company (2001), 1096.

the *New York Times*: "To his left the Giants capture the pennant...to the right, symmetrically mated, same typeface, same-size type, same number of lines, the USSR explodes an atomic bomb".⁵⁹ But rather than a sign of how science—particularly the "non-verbal languages" of "mathematics"—has eclipsed religious notions of spiritual transcendence and emancipation described by Ihab Hassan in "The Literature of Silence",⁶⁰ what such metaphors achieve in *Underworld* is an inversion of that theory.

Bronzini, for example, a man of science, is unable to "understand why the Times would take a ball game off the sports page and juxtapose it with news of such ominous consequence".⁶¹ When he begins to read the account of the Soviet test, he cannot keep the image of a cloud "from entering his mind, the cloud that was not a cloud, the mushroom that was not a mushroom—the sense of reaching feebly for a language that might correspond to the visible mass in the air".⁶²

Bronzini's confusion is magnified by the fact that it assumes a metaphysical character. It mirrors a similar sense of confusion described by Ludwig Wittgenstein in the "Lecture on Ethics" (1929), and Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* ([1979] 1984). In the former of these two works Wittgenstein argues that, "the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion [is] to run against the boundaries of language". Those who wish "to go beyond the world" in this way—which is to say, "beyond significant language"—also wish to thwart the rules of scientific logic and, subsequently, reality itself.⁶³ This, according to Wittgenstein, can only lead to the formation of "nonsensical" conclusions, and should

⁵⁹ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 668.

⁶⁰ Ihab Hassan, "The Literature of Silence," *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*, Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press (1987), 19-20.

⁶¹ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 668.

⁶² DeLillo, *Underworld*, 668.

⁶³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Lecture on Ethics," *The Wittgenstein Reader*, ed. Anthony Kenny, Oxford: Blackwell (1994), 296.

therefore be avoided.⁶⁴ Lyotard echoes these ideas in *The Postmodern Condition*, when he describes a world beyond the modern as virtually inconceivable by the means ordinarily employed to comprehend it. In such a world the narrative function of language is itself compromised,

It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements—narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on...Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. However, we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable.⁶⁵

What is striking about both accounts is that each—to the point of employing similar metaphors—closely mirrors medieval mystics' descriptions of apophatic theology and the negative nature of God. One such mystic, who is also mentioned within the pages of *Underworld*, is renowned for having described the path toward God as “a cloud of unknowing”.⁶⁶ The fact that a priest enters at the moment when Bronzini experiences a similar metaphysical confusion while contemplating the mushroom cloud—“coming in a flurry, Andrew Paulus S.J.”⁶⁷—and that Thomson's homerun ball is recovered by an African American child, serve to underline the notion of inversion contained in DeLillo's inversion of Bruegel's secular apocalypse in the Prologue.

The role played by African American Protestants and Catholic intellectuals in American cold war politics has been well documented. As Thomas Borstelmann writes in *The Cold War and the Color Line* (2001), “Racial issues and the management of racial change were central to the American experience of the early

⁶⁴ Wittgenstein, “Lecture on Ethics,” 296.

⁶⁵ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1984), xxiv.

⁶⁶ This is the anonymous English mystic and author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* cited in *Underworld*, Part 3, chapter one, 295-97; and Part 5, chapter 3, 540-42.

⁶⁷ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 668.

Cold War”,⁶⁸ and African American churches were often at the center of this debate. Cotter Martin’s act of prizing the baseball from the hands of his much older, white male companion can be read as a reflection of this change, as can the sidewalk preacher’s efforts to highlight the continued sense of inequality in American society in the shadow of the Russian’s second successful test of the nuclear bomb. The Sidewalk Preacher’s emphasis on the manner in which African Americans were being left out of the national debate, that “right now, this here minute, while I’m talking and you’re listening” officials are “making plans to build bomb shelters all over this city”, except in Harlem, and that “Every one of those people standing in those shelters while the bombs raining down is a white person”,⁶⁹ reflects the manner in which Civil Rights leaders would take advantage of the cold war propaganda machine in order to advance the national debate on issues of racial equality.

In addition to African American clergy, the American branch of the Catholic Church was also emerging as a key player in post-war American politics. In *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America* (1993), Patrick Allitt describes the postwar period in similar terms to those already applied by Robert Wuthnow in *The Restructuring of American Religion* (1988), as witness to “a fundamental rearrangement of religious forces in the United States” from which emerged an unprecedented “alliance between conservative Protestants and conservative Catholics” on issues ranging from school prayer to anti-communism.⁷⁰ We can see this “alliance” reflected in the first pages of *Underworld* in DeLillo’s decision to seat the Protestant Hoover with two Catholic entertainers and a Jewish nightclub owner.

⁶⁸ Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (2001), 48.

⁶⁹ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 353.

⁷⁰ Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950-1985*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press (1993), 7.

We see it again in Part 4 when Matt Shay, the younger brother of the novel's main protagonist Nick Shay, recounts how his years as a Catholic grammar school student prepared him for a future in covert operations working at a top-secret research facility code named "The Pocket".⁷¹ He had always "liked the idea of people leaving everything behind to pursue an idea", ever since the sixth grade when Sister Edgar would talk "about desert saints, pillar saints, stylites, and she hoisted herself up on her desk and crossed her legs under the habit, a saint lotused on a column in the Sinai, and spoke to the class in snatches of Latin and Hebrew".⁷² And yet, when critics speak of DeLillo's treatment of religious subjects and religious characters in his novels, most choose to follow Brian McHale's lead in diagnosing any reference to religious characters in contemporary fiction as acts of religious "parody".⁷³ In this, *Underworld* can be said to suffer from the same critical bias as John Updike's *In the Beauty of the Lilies*.

In a review of *Underworld* for the Catholic journal *Commonweal*, for example, Paul Elie argues that DeLillo's use of religious characters in his novels is meant to reflect "the notion that skeptical moderns look with a kind of gratitude to religious people, who serve as surrogate believers, keeping open the possibility of belief for those who themselves cannot believe".⁷⁴ He gives the example of previous works by DeLillo like *White Noise* (1984) and *Mao II* (1991) in which "rational and educated" characters like college professor Jack Gladney and photographer Brita Nilsson seem to require "surrogate believers" to act out "impulses we don't dare act on in our own lives" such as poverty, chastity, obedience, and the willingness to die

⁷¹ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 412-413.

⁷² DeLillo, *Underworld*, 413.

⁷³ Here we refer to Brian McHale's descriptions of angels in *Constructing Postmodernism*, London: Routledge (1992), 200-201, which will be discussed further below, pages 130-131.

⁷⁴ Paul Elie, "DeLillo's Surrogate Believers," *Commonweal*, vol. 124, no. 19 (1997), 19.

for the sake of one's beliefs.⁷⁵ In *White Noise*, for example, the reader is introduced to the order of German nuns who only, as the narrator informs us, "pretend to believe" in order that others may continue not to.⁷⁶

'As belief shrinks from the world, people find it more necessary than ever that *someone* believe. Wild-eyed men in caves. Nuns in black. Monks who do not speak. We are left to believe...Those who have abandoned belief must still believe in us. They are sure that they are right not to believe but they know belief must not fade completely. Hell is when no one believes. There must always be believers. Fools, idiots, those who hear voices, those who speak in tongues. We are your lunatics. We surrender our lives to make your nonbelief possible. You are sure that you are right but you don't want everyone to think as you do. There is no truth without fools. We are your fools, your madwomen, rising at dawn to pray, lighting candles, asking statues for good health, long life.'⁷⁷

Brita Nilsson, the photographer in *Mao II*, echoes this sentiment when she confides in Bill Gray over dinner that she wants "others to believe" for her.⁷⁸ This is why she "clings" to believers through her work as a photographer, "hundreds of running men" in Catania "pulling a saint on a float through the streets", people crawling "for miles on their knees in Mexico City on the Day of the Virgin, leaving blood on the basilica steps....The Day of Blood in Teheran...Many believers everywhere", because "Without them, the planet goes cold".⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Elie, "DeLillo's Surrogate Believers," 20.

⁷⁶ Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, New York: Viking (1984), 318.

⁷⁷ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 319.

⁷⁸ Don DeLillo, *Mao II*, London: Vintage (1991), 69.

⁷⁹ DeLillo, *Mao II*, 69.

According to Elie, DeLillo revives this theme in *Underworld* through characters like Sister Edgar, who are less characters than pure symbols of religious surrogacy. "No less than the German nuns in *White Noise*," writes Elie, "Sister Edgar is a surrogate believer, whose visible presence and apparent faith are meant to reassure the faint of heart and keep the planet from going 'cold'".⁸⁰ James Wood seconds this notion, arguing that Sister Edgar represents "a kind of game" whose sole purpose in the narrative is to "flatter" J. Edgar Hoover's "paranoid vision".⁸¹

But rather than an elaborate ruse designed by the novelist to reflect the declining significance of faith in the contemporary world, the decision to represent Edgar "in the old garb", as Elie puts it,⁸² can also be read as a challenge to the modern sociological thesis that the spirit of God has fled from the world. While Elie criticizes DeLillo for attempting to duplicate satirical characters like the German nuns from *White Noise*, "in a realistic novel" like *Underworld*—for wanting readers to accept "this walking symbol [Sister Edgar] as a complicated human being",⁸³ and while James Wood criticizes DeLillo for what he sees as an endorsement of "political paranoia" (a term which is never adequately defined in Wood's essay); both critics could benefit from a lesson in the political history of the United States, and the role that religion, and religious "characters", have always played and continue to play in that history.

The connection between the United States intelligence community and Catholic interests during the Cold War years, for example, is not as Wood has

⁸⁰ Elie, "DeLillo's Surrogate Believers," 22.

⁸¹ James Wood, *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief*, London: Jonathan Cape (1999), 216.

⁸² Elie, "DeLillo's Surrogate Believers," 22.

⁸³ Elie, "DeLillo's Surrogate Believers," 22.

suggested, merely a clever metaphor for “political paranoia”;⁸⁴ or what Elie has referred to as an “‘underworld’ culture of quasireligious ritual and self-expression” engendered by “the long nuclear standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union”.⁸⁵ It is rather a testament to the historical involvement of organized religion—specifically the American branch of the Catholic church—in American politics throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. J. Edgar Hoover, for one, is known to have “recruited heavily at Catholic colleges” during his time as the head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation,⁸⁶ and it is most likely to this that DeLillo is alluding in his decision to juxtapose Hoover with Sister Edgar in the concluding pages of the novel.

The real “surrogate believers” in *Underworld* are characters like Sister Grace, who is identified by the fact that she and other nuns in her order have adopted “secular dress”.⁸⁷ When Sister Grace criticizes the inhabitants of “The Wall”, a deprived area in the Bronx where local graffiti artists spray-paint “a memorial angel” every time a child in the neighborhood dies, arguing that “A fourteenth-century church” is where one goes if one wants to see angels, not a ruined building in the inner city;⁸⁸ she reiterates a common thesis among postmodern literary critics which assumes that the same rules set out by sociologists and mathematicians like Max Weber and Ludwig Wittgenstein regarding the place of religion and religious iconography in contemporary culture, continues to apply to the present. It is an argument that Brian McHale repeats in *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992), when he marvels at the “strange kind of come-back” angels have been making “in

⁸⁴ James Wood, *The Broken Estate*, 216.

⁸⁵ Elie, “DeLillo’s Surrogate Believers,” 20-21.

⁸⁶ Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America*, 20.

⁸⁷ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 238.

⁸⁸ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 239.

postmodernist writing”.⁸⁹ Rather than consider such angels as a reflection of religious resurgence in American culture and, indeed, in the world at large, McHale chooses to interpret their presence in contemporary fiction as a sign of further religious decline; as “hollow” entities, “parodies” of historical angels, “emptied of their otherworldliness and brought ingloriously down to earth.”⁹⁰

Far from a “surrogate believer” in the sense intended by Elie, Sister Edgar challenges many of these views—most importantly those expressed by her modern counterpart, Sister Grace, regarding the interpretation of angels and their place in the contemporary world. For Sister Edgar,

It was the drama of the angels that made her feel she belonged here. It was the terrible death these angels represented. It was the danger the writers faced to produce their graffiti. There were no fire escapes or windows on the memorial wall and the writers had to rappel from the roof with belayed ropes or sway on makeshift scaffolds when they did an angel in the lower ranks.⁹¹

If anything, Edgar’s role in the novel is to challenge the readings of critics like Paul Ellie, James Wood, and Brian McHale who continue to apply a modernist reading to what is, essentially, postmodern subject matter. It is not Edgar who wonders if the nuns’ presence in the neighborhood makes a difference, Edgar is only giving a voice to Sister Grace’s thoughts,⁹² like the German nuns in *White Noise* who give a voice to the thoughts of a college professor who (like many postmodern critics) specializes in contemporary culture. In other words, it is not the nuns who are being mocked and

⁸⁹ McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism*, 200.

⁹⁰ McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism*, 200.

⁹¹ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 239-240.

⁹² DeLillo, *Underworld*, 811.

parodied in these examples, but critics like Elie and their fictional counterparts, Jack Gladney and Sister Grace, who insist on interpreting the world through a modern sociological paradigm when all of the evidence would seem to point in the opposite direction. The nuns are not the object of the satirical gaze, they are the mirror. Here it is the moderns themselves who are the subject of ridicule.

When Edgar expresses interest in traveling to the site of a miracle in the Bronx, where people have reported seeing the image of a dead girl on a billboard, Grace objects arguing that miracles are “the worst kind of tabloid superstition....the local news at eleven with all the grotesque items neatly spaced to keep you watching the whole half hour....something for poor people to confront and judge and understand and we have to see it in that framework”.⁹³ Sister Grace’s is a modern interpretation based upon a modern psychological and sociological perspective.

But when we examine the setting of the miracle, located “in the bottommost Bronx where the expressway arches down from the terminal market and the train yards stretch toward the narrows, all that old industrial muscle with its fretful desolation”,⁹⁴ we discover a different angle from which to interpret the nuns’ reactions to the appearance of angels and visions in *Underworld*. This is the modern wasteland, the wasteland of modern industry and industrial power. It is from this modern waste—the same modern waste described in the prologue and associated with “Rubens and Titian and Playtex and Motorola”⁹⁵—that the possibility of miracles and spiritual revival would arise, according to the predictions of Bernard Iddings Bell, Karl Barth, and Paul Tillich.

⁹³ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 819.

⁹⁴ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 818.

⁹⁵ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 39.

While Jesse Kavadlo takes the alternate view that it is the presence of the nuns, especially Sister Edgar in her habit, which “allows people to believe in the possibility of a miracle”,⁹⁶ there is little actual textual evidence to support this thesis either. Sister Edgar does not allow these people to believe in anything. They are already believers when she arrives at the scene. What she does offer is a sense of legitimacy and authority to the belief that the people already possess. “Her presence”, we read, “is a verifying force—a figure from a universal church with sacraments and secret bank accounts and a fabulous art collection”.⁹⁷ If anything, it is *their* will to believe that breaths life back into the organized religion to which Edgar and her veil belong. When Sister Edgar “sees Esmeralda’s face take shape” as the headlights from a passing commuter train strike a billboard advertising Minute Maid orange juice, “She yanks off her gloves” and begins to embrace those around her including representatives of rival sects, and suspected homosexuals with AIDS.⁹⁸ Her gesture is a statement in itself, as if to say, “the gloves are off”, the age of sanitized religion is over.

Rather than “mock” or “flatter”, the presence of Catholic nuns, priests and monks in *Underworld*—combined with other religious characters like the sidewalk preacher, the Charismatics, the Jesuits, mystics, etc.—attest to changes underway in American culture since the end of the Second World War tantamount to what Arthur Bradley has described under different circumstances as a “theological turn”, and what Robert Wuthnow and Patrick Allitt have attributed to the complete “restructuring” of

⁹⁶ Kavadlo, *Don DeLillo*, 12.

⁹⁷ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 822.

⁹⁸ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 822.

American religion in the second half of the twentieth century.⁹⁹ Characters like Sister Edgar reflect and reinforce such changes. They also reinforce the image of Bruegel's secular apocalypse from the prologue as a representation, or re-presentation, of the apocalypse of secular modernity itself. This is why Sister Edgar is twinned with Edgar Allan Poe and J. Edgar Hoover in the final pages of the novel. Not because she represents "a kind of game", but because she closes the gap between Hoover's initiation of Pieter Bruegel as the painter of modern death, and the realization of the apocalypse of secular modernity that her translation into cyberspace at the end of the novel is meant to represent.

As in Updike's narrative, references to science and technology in DeLillo's novel point not to disenchantment but to re-enchantment. Cyberspace—what Graham Ward has described as "the ultimate in the secularization of the Divine"¹⁰⁰—serves, in *Underworld*, as a metaphor for the "spiritual void" identified by Bernard Iddings Bell and others as a prerequisite for the revival of faith in the postmodern world. The images of the H-Bomb stored on the internet mirror those depicted in the Prologue where they are twinned with Bruegel's *Triumph of Death* and the apocalypse of secular modernity itself. The technology of the bomb, which underlies the technology of the computers that now store its memory, is the same technology that leads to re-enchantment: the final "fusion taking place" beyond the cyberspace visions of the H-Bomb. In this respect, the "single seraphic word" which appears "in the lunar milk of the data stream" after the description of these images, which can be summoned "in

⁹⁹ Arthur Bradley, *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy*, London: Routledge (2004), 1; Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1988); Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America*, 7. In the former work, Bradley argues the "Religious themes, questions and problematics abound in current continental thinking from deconstruction to phenomenology and from genealogy to psychoanalysis in a way that would have been thought unimaginable even a decade ago."

¹⁰⁰ Graham Ward, *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell (1997), xvi.

Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and Arabic, in a thousand languages and dialects living and dead”,¹⁰¹ is not the final word of the novel, “Peace”, but the unwritten, untranslated word which, according to mystics, precedes the translation of the human soul into the celestial community—in other words, “faith”.¹⁰² In Hebrews this word is defined as, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”.¹⁰³ A similar definition appears on the first page of the Prologue where we read that “Longing on a large scale is what makes history....the unseen something that haunts the day.”¹⁰⁴ But something has happened between that opening paragraph and the end of the novel where we find Sister Edgar fusing with the H-Bomb in cyberspace. History has been replaced by something else, something less “rooted” and tangible.

Rather than continue the legacy of what modern writers and critics have defined as the role of the poet and the scientist in the modern world—“to halt at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism”¹⁰⁵—the path that DeLillo seems to favour in choosing to place Sister Edgar in cyberspace at the end of the novel, is that advocated by Bernard Iddings Bell and Jean-Francois Lyotard, whose respective definitions of postmodernism contain both a contradiction of past writers and critics regarding the place of the ineffable in contemporary fiction, and a challenge to the writers of the future to move beyond “the cry of revolt to the demand for reconstruction”.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 826.

¹⁰² A similar translation can be found in the final words of T.S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land* where the words “Shantih shantih shantih” are translated as “The peace which passeth understanding”. See T.S. Eliot, “The Waste Land,” V.433, in T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ed. Michael North, Norton Critical Edition, New York: W.W. Norton & Company (2001), 20, 26.

¹⁰³ Heb. 11.1-12.2.

¹⁰⁴ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 11.

¹⁰⁵ Eliot, “Tradition and the individual Talent,” 1097; Wittgenstein, “Lecture on Ethics,” 296.

¹⁰⁶ Bernard Iddings Bell, *Postmodernism, and other essays*, Milwaukee, WI: Morehouse Publishing (1926), 43; Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Answer to the Question, What Is the Postmodern?” *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985*, trans. and ed. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1992), 15.

When we turn in the next chapter to an analysis of Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise*, we find similar references to the "unspeakable," and the presence of the past in contemporary discourses of African American identity. Only instead of Catholic mysticism, Morrison turns her sights on the emancipatory powers of gnostic "insight," and the role that Africans and African Americans have played in the translation of Christianity from antiquity to the present.

Chapter 8

“Unspeakable Words, Unspoken”: Postmodernism, Race, and Religion in

Toni Morrison’s Paradise

Pick up any study or anthology of works on postmodernism published within the last thirty years and you find that discussions on the compatibility of postmodernism and race are just as rare as discussions on the compatibility of postmodernism and religion. And yet discussions on postmodernism emerged during a period in United States history (the 1960s-1970s) when issues of race and religion should have been at the forefront of cultural debate.

bell hooks summarized the problem well in her essay “Postmodern Blackness” (1991), when she observed,

It is sadly ironic that the contemporary discourse which talks the most about heterogeneity, the decentered subject, declaring breakthroughs that allow recognition of Otherness, still directs its critical voice primarily to a specialized audience that shares a common language rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge.¹

While postmodern and poststructuralist theories of language claim to offer a voice to the “Other”, to navigate the spaces between the lines and within the margins of universal narratives, the same discourses, argues hooks, are still dominated by white men and white male concerns.² As Cornell West asserts in “Black Culture and Postmodernism” (1989), these discourses remain “ironically...Eurocentric”, both exclusivist and excluding, projecting the notion that after the “master” narratives of the Enlightenment have been dismantled there is nothing left to say, much less worth

¹ bell hooks, “Postmodern Blackness,” *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. London: Turnaround (1991), 25.

² hooks, “Postmodern Blackness,” 24-25.

saying.³ To borrow a phrase from Wittgenstein, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent".⁴

This is the logic that stands behind most theories of postmodern literature as a "literature of silence" that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s to lay claim to the title "postmodern literature". It also, however, coincided with a period in US history after the heyday of the Civil Rights movement when African American and other minority voices were being increasingly and institutionally silenced. If Leslie Fiedler's lumping of the Civil Rights movement with the drug cult in his essay "The New Mutants" was any indication of how this literature was to include African Americans, it is no wonder that many African American critics have turned away from postmodern theory in the interim.⁵

But while Fiedler chose to marginalize the political impact of the African American clergy during the 1960s, and his colleague Daniel Bell chose to label as "gnostic" anything that deviated from his understanding of "traditional religion" (as white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant),⁶ religious historians and sociologists of religion in the last thirty years have interpreted matters differently. As Robert Wuthnow notes in *The Restructuring of American Religion* (1988), "[t]he civil rights movement turned out to be one of the more consequential developments for the churches in the 1960s."⁷ Where before this point, argues Wuthnow, the attitude of many church leaders had been to attempt to influence society more indirectly; the direct political

³ Cornell West, "Black Culture and Postmodernism," *Remaking History*, Dia Art Foundation Discussions in Contemporary Culture, no. 4, ed. Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani, Seattle: Bay Press (1989), 88.

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, ed. and trans. C.K. Ogden, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. (1922), 189.

⁵ For Fiedler's comments on this subject see: Leslie Fiedler, "The New Mutants," *A New Fiedler Reader*, New York: Prometheus Books (1999), 206.

⁶ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, London: Heinemann (1976), 52.

⁷ Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1988), 145.

action of African American clergy like Martin Luther King, Jr. was to change all of that.⁸ It not only influenced the direction of discussions on race, which spilled over into movements for gender equality, and anti-war protests in the 1960s,⁹ it also taught the burgeoning Christian Right a thing or two about the interaction between religious special purpose groups and politics.¹⁰

But King also had mentors. In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," for example, King challenged the white liberal establishment in a similar fashion to that employed by theologians like Bernard Iddings Bell and Reinhold Niebuhr against those involved in labour disputes in the 1910s and 1920s, arguing that, without such direct action the white majority could never be forced into negotiation with the African American minority.¹¹ Echoing the words of Niebuhr in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, King argued that,

Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals. We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.¹²

As Stephen Steinberg argues, what King's letter also reveals, in addition to this appeal for direct action, is a response to the growing liberal backlash that would come to colour much of the debate on race and religion in the coming decades.¹³ A

⁸ Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, 145-148.

⁹ Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, 148.

¹⁰ Heather A. Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Realists 1920-1948*, New York: Oxford University Press (1997), 131.

¹¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, ed. James Melvin Washington, HarperSanFrancisco (1986), 86-87.

¹² King, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," 87.

¹³ Stephen Steinberg, "The Liberal Retreat from Race During the Post-Civil Rights Era," *The House That Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano, New York: Vintage Books (1997), 14, 20.

similar backlash occurred in the 1920s, and offered a target for Bernard Iddings Bell's cultural critique in "Postmodernism". It can also be read between the lines of contemporary postmodern narratives, like those cited in the essays of hooks and West, which openly exclude, or (in Fiedler's case) mock the contributions of African Americans to debates on contemporary culture in the 1960s and 1970s. By couching such involvement in terms of "the end of history," or "the end of ideology," this type of criticism ensures that only an elite few enter into the debates on postmodernism in the latter decades of the twentieth century. This argument, as Steinberg notes, was not however exclusive to white critics. Part of the problem facing discussions on race and culture in the latter half of the century can also be attributed to the reactions of many African American critics themselves to these issues.

In "The Liberal Retreat from Race During the Post-civil Rights Era" (1997), Stephen Steinberg argues that the 1970s saw not only white liberals, but many African American intellectuals themselves begin to insist upon "the declining significance of race" in American culture.¹⁴ In this respect it was not only the subject of religion that suffered at the hands of postmodern revisionists. But neither was religion completely overlooked in the final edit. Many histories that have since emerged on the Civil Rights movement as a completed and successful movement have also begun to minimize the role played by Christianity in the foundation of the movement. As Gayraud S. Wilmore remarked as early as 1972,

Despite the inseparable connection between Black religion and the struggle for freedom, in no place in the world today...is the institution of the Christian religion and its official representatives more roundly

¹⁴ Steinberg, "The Liberal Retreat from Race," 30. Here Steinberg refers specifically to the success of William Julius Wilson's, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1978).

criticized than in the Black community in the United States. Leading this attack upon the Black church are militant students, the young 'street people' and the Black professional class, itself only recently drawn into the vortex of Black Power and Black awareness.¹⁵

bell hooks, in her account of "Postmodern Blackness," allies herself with the latter group of scholars when she argues that the period immediately succeeding the legislative gains of the 1960s was marked by a sense of retreat and repression. But unlike Steinberg, who makes a similar point, hooks completely bi-passes the Civil Rights movement in posing such an argument, insisting instead that,

In the wake of the *black power* movement, after so many rebels were slaughtered and lost, many of these voices were silenced by a repressive state; others became inarticulate. It has become necessary to find new avenues to transmit the messages of black liberation struggle, new ways to talk about racism and other politics of domination.¹⁶

hooks, who still chooses many of her metaphors from the Black Arts movement's notion of newness, sees in the debates over postmodernism in the 1980s and early 1990s a unique opportunity to do just that, create "newness" out of old conflicts. According to hooks,

Criticism of directions in postmodern thinking should not obscure insights it may offer that open up our understanding of African-American experience. The critique of essentialism encouraged by postmodernist thought is useful for African-Americans concerned with reformulating outmoded notions of identity. We have too long had imposed upon us

¹⁵ Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, C. Eric Lincoln Series on Black Religion, Garden City, NY: Doubleday (1972), xii.

¹⁶ hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," 25. My italics.

from both the outside and the inside a narrow, constricting notion of blackness. Postmodern critiques of essentialism which challenge notions of universality and static over-determined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness can open up new possibilities for the construction of self and the assertion of agency.¹⁷

But while hooks sees "hope" and "insight" in the supposedly "new" discourses of postmodernism, other African American intellectuals like Toni Morrison see something different. In a paper delivered at the "Race Matters" conference at Princeton University in April 1994, Morrison argued that what was needed more than ever was a "nonmessianic language to refigure the raced community, to decipher the deracing of the world."¹⁸ For Morrison the same critics who had begun to describe "race without dominance" and race without "hierarchy" in the late 1970s, were now in league with so-called postmodern critics who had begun to describe the same situation as "barbarism", as "the destruction of the four-gated city", and as "the end of history."¹⁹

In the midst of this critique of postmodern critics, and African American scholars who fell in with them, Morrison introduced her latest project *Paradise*, still three years away from publication, as the antidote to postmodern criticism. "In the novel I am now writing," Morrison declared,

¹⁷ hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," 28.

¹⁸ Toni Morrison, "Home," *The House That Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano, New York: Vintage Books (1997), 11.

¹⁹ Morrison, "Home," 11. One prominent example of this type of criticism can be found in Fredric Jameson's essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", where Jameson argues that "writers and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds" because "they've already been invented...the unique ones have been thought of already...stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles". Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, London: Pluto Press (1983), 115.

I am trying first to enunciate and then eclipse the racial gaze altogether....

In my current project I want to see whether or not race-specific, race-free language is both possible and meaningful in narration. And I want to inhabit, walk around, a site clear of racist detritus; a place where race both matters and is rendered impotent....I want to imagine not the threat of freedom, or its tentative panting fragility, but the concrete thrill of borderlessness.²⁰

What we get, of course, is far more than this, and far more complex than Morrison lets on in her "Race Matters" paper. In this language freed from "messianism"—which at least one critic has still insisted on describing as a "postmodern discourse"²¹—Morrison shows how much of what hooks attributes to postmodernism, what Daniel Bell describes as "gnosticism", and what poststructuralists term a "literature of silence," is misconceived and can be better understood in a broader Christian framework.

In previous discussions on the treatment of religious subjects in Toni Morrison's fiction critics have been quick to focus upon the African elements in Morrison's treatment of African American Christianity. Any reference to Christianity in these arguments is then interpreted as the embodiment of white hegemony and therefore the target of literary subversion.²² In the following discussion, however, we

²⁰ Morrison, "Home," 9.

²¹ Therese E. Higgins, *Religiosity, Cosmology, and Folklore: The African Influence in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, ed. Graham Hodges, Studies in African American History and Culture, New York: Routledge (2001), ix. Higgins defines postmodernism in terms of the philosophy of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein—two thinkers who, as argued earlier in this thesis, were also strongly opposed to the idea that religion could still have a voice in any postmodern future. Higgins, who attempts to apply such philosophy to a critique of African religious ideas in Morrison's fiction, fails to make note of this inherent contradiction.

²² See for example: Allen Alexander, "The Fourth Face: The Image of God in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," *African American Review*, vol. 32, no. 2 (1998), 293-303; Peggy Ochoa, "Morrison's *Beloved*: Allegorically Othering 'White' Christianity," *MELUS*, vol. 24, no. 2 (1999), 107-123; and Higgins, *Religiosity, Cosmology, and Folklore*, introduction.

will examine this “back to Africa” motif from a different angle, one that turns not on the presence of West African religions like Yoruba and Ashanti (whose presence we do not deny in Morrison’s fiction), but on African Christianity like the Ethiopian and Egyptian Coptic Churches and especially on Morrison’s incorporation of a poem from the Coptic *Nag Hammadi Library* in the epigraph to *Paradise*.

The first words in *Paradise* are not those that appear on page 3, often touted by book groups and critics, but those that appear in the epigraph and repeat the final lines of the gnostic poem “The Thunder: Perfect Mind”. These words, although equally “charged”, are less often the subject of literary conversation. Nor is it the first time that Morrison has included a verse from this poem in the epigraph to one of her novels. *Jazz*, which immediately precedes *Paradise* in order of publication, also contains lines from the “The Thunder: Perfect Mind.” When we look at these lines in context we are able to gain a better understanding of their meaning and purpose in Morrison’s novels and how such references relate to a critique of postmodern criticism. The section from which the epigraphs are quoted appear at the end of the poem and read:

Hear me, you hearers,

and learn of my words, you who know me.

I am the hearing that is attainable to everything;

I am the speech that cannot be grasped.

I am the name of the sound

and the sound of the name.

I am the sign of the letter

and the designation of the division.

And I [...].

[...] light [...].

[...] hearers [...] to you

[...] the great power.

And [...] will not move the name.

[...] to the one who created me.

And I will speak his name.

Look then at his words

and all the writings which have been completed.

Give heed then, you hearers

and you also, the angels and those who have been sent,

and you spirits who have arisen from the dead.

For I am the one who alone exists,

and I have no one who will judge me.

For many are the pleasant forms which exist in

numerous sins,

and incontinencies,

and disgraceful passions,

and fleeting pleasures,

which (men) embrace until they become sober

and go up to their resting-place.

And they will find me there,

and they will live,

*and they will not die again.*²³

²³ "The Thunder: Perfect Mind," *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson, revised ed., HarperSanFrancisco (1978), 302-3. Breaks in original. My italics.

The two parts that appear in italics above provide the epigraphs to *Jazz* and *Paradise* respectively. The stanzas in between, which serve little more than to document the breaks in the text—due most likely to age and wear—are also significant for they highlight a sense of silence and loss similar to that often discussed in debates on African American literature and history. The emphasis in the poem upon ungraspable meaning and the “divisions” between words in a text underlines this point, but it also calls to mind a similar emphasis in poststructuralist theories like those inspired by the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. When we read the first section of the poem (quoted above) alongside certain passages in de Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* (where he argues that in language “there are only differences”, and that “what distinguishes a sign is what constitutes it”),²⁴ we are able to note a certain symmetry between the two. A similar argument is present in Jacques Derrida’s concept of “différance.” Building upon de Saussure’s use of the term in his definition of the linguistic sign, Derrida defines “différance”, as “a silent and intuitive consciousness.”²⁵ This “silence” on the subject of difference is what hooks refers to when she laments the lack of emphasis upon race in discourses on postmodernism. But the presence of these ideas in a fifteen-hundred year old poem,²⁶ and their repetition by Morrison in a novel that she has already described as a challenge to the claims of postmodern critics, also serves as a challenge to critics like hooks who continue to privilege the uniqueness and originality of postmodern and

²⁴ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Roy Harris, Chicago, IL: Open Court (1983), 118-119.

²⁵ Jacques Derrida’s “Différance,” *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf, New York: Columbia University Press (1991), 67-68.

²⁶ There are some who argue that the poem is even older than the manuscript in which it was first discovered. See for example, Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, London: Penguin Books (1979), 16-17.

poststructuralist texts over more traditional means employed by the African American community to deal with questions of identity—namely, the Christian church.

Questions of “insight” and “newness”, cited by hooks in connection with what she describes as postmodern discourses, are also a main feature of gnostic Christian texts like “The Thunder: Perfect Mind,” as well as Old Testament “wisdom” texts like Proverbs and the Song of Solomon, from which the poem obviously derives. As Morrison notes in an interview with Charlie Rose in January 1998, far from an expression of postmodern discourses, what she wished to portray in the novel was a sense of religious transformation and renewal. When asked by Rose to define what she meant by her choice of the title *Paradise*, Morrison responded that *Paradise* “is about the love of God, when people truly believe, not in the sort-of-vaguely-secular, halfway-religious notion of ‘perhaps there is a God’ or ‘hope there’s one;’” but of people whose lives are shaped by a “love, which passes all understanding, which is simply faith.”²⁷ In this we hear an echo of the final words to Don DeLillo’s novel *Underworld*, where faith is defined as the unspeakable, untranslatable, bond between God and men. But it can also be argued that Morrison’s sense of the term “Paradise” in the above definition is about religion in a more general sense, as in that set of history, tradition, and belief, which defines a community; in this case, the African American community in the United States. As Morrison asserts, when defining this community in terms of “the community of the church,” churches in the African American community,

‘are not only the religious sources of people’s inspiration, they’re very political and community-minded. They’re the places where people can

²⁷ “Toni Morrison Suggests ‘Paradise’ Defined by Inclusion,” *The Charlie Rose Show*, PBS, January 19, 1998.

meet, can assemble. They may not be able to do that anywhere else in a town. They are the places where you know what's going on. They are the leaders of the community. Those women and those men who are in those churches already had laid the groundwork for anybody coming down there in the civil rights movement. They were already there, and they had hidden one another, protected one another...From the beginning. And they had functioned under duress...They had preached in caves, in what they used to call "quilt churches"...and they understood what pressure they were under. So that they were absolutely critical to the civil rights movement and to the life of African-Americans.'²⁸

When we examine this testimony alongside the accounts of hooks and Higgins who have sought to marginalize the importance of African American churches in the struggle for racial equality, we note a dramatic disparity in accounts which is perhaps best reflected in the novel itself within the context of the debates over words placed upon the iron lip of an oven.

In the opening pages of *Paradise*, the disagreement over the interpretation of the words on the Oven is described at first as a "problem of language", not only a problem with the language in the mouth of the Oven, but with the language in the mouths of the disputing parties in the community. According to one authority, the Reverend Pulliam, "The problem is with the way some of us talk. The grown-ups, of course, should use proper language. But the young people—what they say is more like backtalk than talk."²⁹ Likewise to Soane Morgan, the wife of a community

²⁸ "Toni Morrison Suggests 'Paradise' Defined by Inclusion," *The Charlie Rose Show*, PBS, January 19, 1998.

²⁹ Morrison, *Paradise*, 85.

elder, the language favoured by the younger generation of Ruby, marked specifically by the speech of Royal Beauchamp, is unintelligible.³⁰

Royal, called Roy, took the floor and, without notes, gave a speech perfect in every way but intelligibility. Nobody knew what he was talking about and the parts that could be understood were plumb foolish. He said they were way out-of-date; that things had changed everywhere but in Ruby. He wanted to give the Oven a name, to have meetings there to talk about how handsome they were while giving themselves ugly names. Like not American. Like African.³¹

In Royal's speech we can also immediately detect the influence of the Black Arts movement, and, by association, the Black Power movement in the late 1960s. Both movements were also inspired and cross-fertilized by the post-colonial liberation movements in Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, and the writings of Franz Fanon. In the movement's manifesto, for example, Larry Neal, echoing the words of Fanon, argues that,

the Western aesthetic has run its course: it is impossible to construct anything meaningful within its decaying structure. We advocate a cultural revolution in art and ideas. The cultural values inherent in western history must either be radicalized or destroyed.³²

Quoting another member of the movement, Neal elaborates that,

Unless the Black artist establishes a 'Black aesthetic' he will have no future at all. To accept the white aesthetic is to accept and validate a

³⁰ Morrison, *Paradise*, 104.

³¹ Morrison, *Paradise*, 104.

³² Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell, Durham, NC: Duke University Press (1994), 185.

society that will not allow him to live. The Black artist must create new forms and new values, sing new songs (or purify old ones); and along with other Black authorities, he must create a new history, new symbols, myths and legends (and purify old ones by fire).³³

The desire of the younger generation of Ruby to translate the Oven's words as "Be the Furrow of His Brow",³⁴ or even, "We Are the Furrow of His Brow",³⁵ reflects this sense of a desire for a new identity. But it also, in another sense, reflects criticism of this desire as a divisive force within the African American community. In his last work *Chaos or Community?* (1967), for example, Martin Luther King, Jr. recalls a conversation he had with Stokely Carmichael, one of the founders of the Black Power movement in the 1960s, in which Carmichael advocated changing the words of "We Shall Overcome," the famous Civil Rights rallying song, to "We Shall Overrun."³⁶ According to King, statements like these were unfortunate because they reflected the same type of "narrow-mindedness" that in others had for so long been the source of African Americans' afflictions.³⁷ Such "narrow-mindedness", King argued, could only lead to the very deterioration and self-annihilation the African American community had fought so long to stave off. Here it will be argued that a large part of the poetic symbolism employed in *Paradise* is meant to both reflect upon and reengage this conflict.

It is significant, for example, that the novel opens in July 1976, the bicentennial anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the source of all subsequent challenges to white male landed authority in the United

³³ Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," 185.

³⁴ Morrison, *Paradise*, 87.

³⁵ Morrison, *Paradise*, 298.

³⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Chaos or Community?* London: Hodder and Stoughton (1967), 26.

³⁷ King, *Chaos or Community*, 52.

States, including and most recently the Equal Rights Act. Far from resolved by the two hundredth anniversary of the nation's independence is the issue of equality, least of all within the African American community. In interviews Morrison has admitted that her first choice of a title for the novel was not *Paradise*, but *War*. She might also have considered the word *Schism*, as the conflicting narratives within this tale closely mirror the battles between different factions of the African American community—what one critic has described as a “generational shift” between those involved in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and those involved in the Black Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.³⁸ This is where the image of the Oven becomes crucial to any reading of the novel and prescient of King's warning of the self-destruction inherent in such a schism.³⁹

The idea of an Oven as a symbol for paradise is indeed a curious one. Ovens are more commonly associated with images of hell than paradise, with “the oven of Gehenna”, or “Tophet”, described in the Old Testament as a place where children are sacrificed to Molech. But when we investigate the translation of this last word further, we find that it reveals a similar story to the one unraveling in *Paradise* between the community of Ruby and the women in the Convent, as well as that described by King in *Chaos or Community?* between the opposed factions within the African American protest movement in the early 1960s.

If we search the Old Testament, for example, we find that there are several references to a place or structure called a “*tophet*,” or “*topheth*,” described in connection with the Canaanite practice of child sacrifice, and from which at least one

³⁸ Houston A Baker, Jr., “Generational Shifts and the Recent Criticism of Afro-American Literature,” *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell, Durham, NC: Duke University Press (1994), 282-328.

³⁹ King, *Chaos or Community*, 44-50.

of our notions of a fiery hell is derived.⁴⁰ While various interpretations of the word have sifted down to us through the generations, the theory which continues to attract the widest support among contemporary scholars (archaeologists and theologians alike) remains that put forward by William Robertson Smith in *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889).⁴¹ In this work, Smith argues that the Hebrew word “תֹּפֶת”, translated in the Greek Septuagint as τῶφεθ, and the King James Bible as “tophet,” or “topheth,” is in fact an Aramaic loan word for fireplace, or “for the stones on which a pot is set, and then for any stand or tripod set upon a fire”.⁴² Smith, not surprisingly, attempts to link the practice of ritual sacrifice among various ancient Semitic tribes with the idea of the communal meal and the formation of social bonds through the sharing out of cooked food. In making these observations, however, Smith is careful to draw the distinction between the hearth stones of *tophet* (which are apparently reserved for rites involving human flesh),⁴³ and the traditional Semitic altar

⁴⁰ In some cases this word is capitalized. In the King James and New Revised Standard Versions of 2 Kings, the term *tophet*[h] appears in connection with the reigns of Ahaz and Manasseh, kings of Judah during the Assyrian occupation who were supposedly tempted by and converted to the ‘idolatrous’ religion of the neighboring Canaanites. In 2 Kings 23.10, the religious reforms implemented during the reign of Josiah in the wake of the Assyrian withdrawal from Jerusalem, are credited with the destruction of a place or structure called “Topheth”, located in the valley of Hinnom, “that no man might make his son or his daughter to pass through the fire to Molech.” In Jeremiah 7 and 9, the term is also used in the form of a proper name, designating one of many open air sanctuaries, or “high places”, dedicated to the Canaanite “fertility” god Baal, where child sacrifice is supposed to have taken place. In Isaiah, however, we receive a different description of *tophet*. In this book it appears as both a proper name as well as the term for a specific type of structure, like a fire pit or ancient stove. Isaiah 30.33 declares, “For Tophet is ordained of old; yea, for the king it is prepared; he hath made it deep and large: the pile thereof is fire and much wood; the breath of the Lord, like a stream of brimstone, doth kindle it.” For more on the etymology of *tophet* see also John Day, *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1989), 24-27; and Maria Eugenia Aubet, *The Phoenicians and the West: Politics, Colonies, and Trade*, 2nd ed., trans. Mary Turton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2001).

⁴¹ Gary A. Anderson offers a sound synopsis of Smith’s work, its relation to other studies in the area of sacrifice and sacrificial practices, and its continued relevance to recent academic and archaeological findings, in, *Sacrifices and Offerings in Ancient Israel: Studies in their Social and Political Importance*, Harvard Semitic Monograph Series, no. 41, Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press (1987).

⁴² William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black (1889), 357.

⁴³ In other words, for those individuals rejected by, or otherwise prevented from participation in the community such as the extremely young, the extremely old, the physically deformed or disabled, as well as slaves and/or foreign captives. Several of these examples are given by Miranda Aldhouse

or sacred stone upon which animals and other food stuffs were offered to the deity, and were generally viewed as symbols of the community's union with their god, as opposed to the embodiment of their abjection. "It appears then", writes Smith, "that in the ritual of human sacrifice, and therefore by necessary inference in the ritual of the holocaust generally, the burning was originally no integral part of the ceremony, and did not take place on the altar or even within the sanctuary, but in a place apart, away from the habitations of man".⁴⁴ Indeed, the authors of the Old Testament books that refer to *tophet*, whether as the name of a place or as a specific type of structure, locate it beyond the walls of the city, to the south of Jerusalem in the Valley of Hinnom.

Morrison's decision to place the Convent in a similar position with relation to the town of Ruby would seem consistent with this description. When we look at the two opposed ovens in *Paradise*—the Oven at the center of Ruby and the oven that sits in the kitchen of the Convent—we note further similarities, including the Convent's reputation for child sacrifice.⁴⁵

But recent scholarship on the relationship between the ancient Hebrews and their neighbors also suggests a closer relationship between the religious and cultural practices of both groups than the Old Testament literature perhaps meant to reveal (or that W.R. Smith cared to recognize in making the above distinction). This supports the argument that the incorporation of the term *tophet[h]* into the Biblical lexicon in order to connote a place of damnation, and its continued incorporation into Hebrew

Green, in *Dying for the Gods: Human Sacrifice in Iron Age & Roman Europe*, Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing (2001).

⁴⁴ Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, 357-358.

⁴⁵ The place where these sacrifices were supposed to have occurred in the Valley of Hinnom, or "Ben Hinnom", can likewise be translated as the Valley of the Son, Sons, or Children of Hinnom, or "Gehenna" in its Aramaic form.

and Greek, and finally into English, points to an obvious corruption of the term's original meaning—a term which could otherwise have been applied to the Hebrew altar itself, and perhaps at one time was. According to Gary A. Anderson, who proposes this theory in *Sacrifices and Offerings in Ancient Israel* (1987), the only aspect of sacrifice that distinguishes the Israelite cult from the neighboring cults of the Canaanites is not to be determined by a difference in sacrificial machinery, (i.e. between *tophet* and altar – namely because a *tophet*, as Smith informs us, is an altar of sorts); or, indeed, between the substance of the offering itself, but in “*the limitation of cultic activity to one particular patron deity*”, in other words, Yahweh.⁴⁶ Other than this distinction, writes Anderson, Israelite rites of sacrifice “were not significantly different from Canaanite rites.”⁴⁷

When we compare the evidence for this theory with the descriptions of sacrifice that appear in the opening pages of *Paradise* we are able to discern a similar sense of shared community rites. Here foreign women, whose bodies are likened to “the hides of game” smeared with the mist of “holy oil”,⁴⁸ are being pursued through a building referred to as “the Convent” by a group of armed men whose intent to kill

⁴⁶ Gary A. Anderson, *Sacrifices and Offerings in Ancient Israel: Studies in their Social and Political Importance*, Harvard Semitic Monograph Series, no. 41, Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press (1987), 3.

⁴⁷ In this instance Anderson gives the example of Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings, where “the holocaust offering is prepared in exactly the same way between the two parties”. While Anderson admits that differences may exist in the way the priests from the opposing groups behaved during the performance of these rites, “the preparation of the animal is the same”, leading Anderson to conclude that perhaps the charges of child sacrifice made against the Canaanites in the same text, and the use of the term *tophet* to designate the space where such sacrifices were supposed to have taken place, were, at best, exaggerated in order to expand an imaginary gap between two communities, the membership of which would otherwise have been difficult to distinguish. Others who have written on the similarities between the religious traditions of the Hebrews and the Canaanites, include Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1973); and Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, London: SCM Press (1986), specifically their chapter on “El, Baal, and Yahweh”, 109-112.

⁴⁸ Morrison, *Paradise*, 18.

is established in the first sentence: "They shoot the white girl first."⁴⁹ The Convent's likeness to a Greek temple is also unmistakable. While the nuns have done their best to chip away the presence of nymphs, "curves of their marble hair" are still visible in the moldings.⁵⁰ The "thunder" of men's heavy work shoes "on marble floors",⁵¹ and the presence of altars with offerings to "graven idols",⁵² are also enough to convince us as we follow these men through the Convent's many rooms that we are retracing the fateful steps of cursed Agamemnon. But no sooner are these connections made, than clues emerge that point us to a different tradition of sacrifice entirely, older, and—to borrow a word from the sociologist who first translated its nuance—more "primitive". As the men continue through the Convent their eyes pause on more familiar and seemingly modern objects: a table, a stockpot, a large industrial sized stove. It is through these objects that we begin to learn the story of a community. One hand on the stove, the other holding a handgun, one of the men, Arnold Fleetwood, pauses in the Convent's windowless kitchen to recall how the people of a town called Haven once gathered around a similar appliance.

On crates and makeshift benches, Haven people gathered for talk, for society and the comfort of hot game. Later, when buffalo grass gave way to a nice little town with a street down the middle, wooden houses, one church, a school, a store, the citizens still gathered there....Whenever livestock was slaughtered, or when the taste for unsmoked game was high, Haven people brought the kill to the Oven and stayed sometimes to fuss and quarrel with the Morgan family about seasoning and the proper test

⁴⁹ Morrison, *Paradise*, 3.

⁵⁰ Morrison, *Paradise*, 4.

⁵¹ Morrison, *Paradise*, 3.

⁵² Morrison, *Paradise*, 9.

for 'done.' They stayed to gossip, complain, roar with laughter and drink walking coffee in the shade of the eaves. And any child in earshot was subject to being ordered to fan flies, haul wood, clean the worktable or beat the earth with a tamping block.⁵³

Depending upon who is responsible for the telling, the number of protagonists informing the progress of this narrative can range anywhere from 79 to 81 to 158 people, the members of anywhere from 7 to 9 to 15 families, who came up out of Mississippi and Louisiana into Oklahoma Territory in 1890 in search of a fresh start. At other times the commencement of the journey is pushed back to colonial times, to 1755, when one of their number is reported to have "carried a white napkin over his arm and a prayer book in his pocket",⁵⁴ when the emphasis of the narrative is not on the triumph of a few men who may have made it into the statehouse, but on an entire group of people, "artisans, gunsmiths, seamstresses, lacemakers, cobblers, ironmongers, masons",⁵⁵ each individual unit of which contributed to the successes and failures of the whole. Still other times the beginning is removed from American soil entirely, to Africa and a nebulous time before slavery.

But the details as to when the narrative began, or how many individuals informed its progress between that ambiguous date and the novel's various presents, are soon lost to and eclipsed by the description of a horror encountered along the way, what is referred to throughout the course of the novel as "the Disallowing". It is the recollection of this part of the narrative that causes Fleetwood to break free from his trance and pull away from the Convent's oven. For when the band of travelers—the "Descendants of those who had been in Louisiana Territory when it was French, when

⁵³ Morrison, *Paradise*, 15.

⁵⁴ Morrison, *Paradise*, 284.

⁵⁵ Morrison, *Paradise*, 283.

it was Spanish, when it was French again, when it was sold to Jefferson and when it became a state in 1812,"⁵⁶ who "[w]alked from Mississippi and Louisiana to Oklahoma,"⁵⁷ picking up orphans and abandoned children along the way, were refused entry at every town they came to, the greatest horror they could have imagined lay at the heart of this refusal and the color of their skin.

[F]or ten generations they had believed the division they fought to close was free against slave and rich against poor. Usually, but not always, white against black. Now they saw a new separation: light-skinned against black. Oh, they knew there was a difference in the minds of whites, but it had not struck them before that it was of consequence, serious consequence, to Negroes themselves.⁵⁸

By 1973, riding his own horse on "his own land with free wind blowing...the thought of that level of helplessness" was enough to make another of these men, Steward Morgan, "want to shoot somebody."⁵⁹ This is the point at which the community's narrative—like the significance of the Canaanite altar—is translated. Where sometime before this the Oven had provided a sanctuary for *all* of those who had been "disallowed", by the early 1970s its meaning had turned inward and against itself—a fate similar to that predicted by King in 1967 and assigned to the African American community as a whole.

Like the translation of *Tophet*, the translation of the Oven took place after a period of exile and during the subsequent rebuilding of a community. In the early 1950s, after returning from fighting in the Second World War, we learn how certain

⁵⁶ Morrison, *Paradise*, 193.

⁵⁷ Morrison, *Paradise*, 194.

⁵⁸ Morrison, *Paradise*, 194.

⁵⁹ Morrison, *Paradise*, 96.

male members of a community called Haven decided to split off from the original community and form a new one, in a new location, named Ruby. It is this group of male members who take responsibility, not only for the Oven's physical translation, but for its literal translation as a symbol of that new community. The Morgan twins, self-proclaimed leaders of this breakaway sect, are, we are told, renowned for their "powerful memories".⁶⁰ But powerful memories are of little use—in fact they are dangerous—if one does not know how to interpret and interact with the raw data that is recalled.

What is missing from the Morgans' interpretation of their community's past, it becomes apparent, is the same thing that is missing from the debate over the missing words on the Oven, and that is the presence of "Wisdom". This is where the narrative circles back around to the words in the epigraph taken from the gnostic poem "The Thunder: Perfect Mind". In "The Thunder: Perfect Mind", as in the Old Testament wisdom texts from which it is derived, wisdom is personified in female form. When we read through the debate over words on the Oven what we notice, in addition to a sense of anxiety over missing words, is the absence of female voices. The difference between Reverend Pulliam's observations about the translation of the Oven's words and Soane Morgan's, for example, is that Reverend Pulliam's views are voiced, and voiced where the entire community can hear them and contemplate them. Soane, like the rest of the women in the community, keeps her opinions about the Oven's language to herself.

While at least one critic has alluded to this evidence in describing *Paradise* as "a contrived, formulaic book that mechanically pits men against women",⁶¹ what I

⁶⁰ Morrison, *Paradise*, 13.

⁶¹ Kakutani, "Worthy Women, Unredeemable Men," *New York Times*, January 6, 1998, E8.

believe Morrison is attempting to draw the reader's attention to here is the need for the reader to become an active participant in the narrative process itself, to read beneath and between the lines instead of just over them.

Combined with the words from the epigraph, what we discover in *Paradise* is a narrative that moves beyond and between modern narratives of emancipation, without having to resort to what hooks and Higgins describe as the messianic properties of postmodern philosophies. In addition to the ability to amass facts and weave narratives of identity, what one also requires is the wisdom and the skill with which to interpret that data. This is the meaning of "insight" in Morrison's novel, not what hooks describes as the "insights" proffered by the postmodernist "critique of essentialism".⁶² Moreover, such insight—which is at one point described as "a question of language" in an obvious challenge to the poststructuralist solutions cited by hooks⁶³—has been present within the African American community and, indeed, the African Christian community, for generations. It is only recently, as Gayraud Wilmore has noted, that certain members of that community have begun to question it with such vigor as a symptom of cultural disintegration and the germ of Eurocentrism.⁶⁴ As references to "The Thunder: Perfect Mind", and the wisdom texts of the Old Testament serve to remind us, Christianity also traces many of its roots to Africa, and African narrative traditions.

When we juxtapose the words on the Oven, "...the Furrow of His Brow", with Proverbs 3.19, for example, "The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens", we are provided with additional insights into how to interpret the missing words signified by the ellipsis in the former

⁶² hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," 28.

⁶³ Morrison, *Paradise*, 247.

⁶⁴ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, xii.

quotation. In this regard “Furrow of His Brow” might also be understood in terms of the “furrows” of “the earth” whose creation, in Proverbs, is credited to the presence of “wisdom”.

Other references to Proverbs in the novel can be detected in the story of Elder Morgan’s return to the United States at the end of the Second World War. According to his younger brother Steward, Elder’s first moments back on U.S. soil were spent in the defense of an African American woman who was being assaulted by two white men in a city street. Rather than take this information at face value, however, Steward extrapolates from the fact that the woman was in the street that she must have been a prostitute. While he praises his brother’s willingness to stand up to white men, it unnerves him that Elder’s story is “based upon the defense of and prayers for a whore.”⁶⁵ In sympathizing with the white men over the victim in this case, in leaping to conclusions about the woman’s occupation and “imagining the fist was his own”,⁶⁶ Steward also reveals something about his own ability to differentiate between good knowledge (wisdom) and bad knowledge (ignorance).

More than a commentary on sexual morals, this story and the woman at its centre is an exercise in reading. Proverbs also contains a warning on the distinction to be made between righteous women and whores. But rather than symbols of sexual morality, the female characters in the narrative are intended to symbolize different forms of knowledge, wisdom and ignorance respectively. In Proverbs both types of women cry out “in the street, in squares, and at every [street] corner”.⁶⁷ The “foolish woman”, like the false wisdom she represents, is distinguishable by her “loud” and

⁶⁵ Morrison, *Paradise*, 95.

⁶⁶ Morrison, *Paradise*, 95.

⁶⁷ See for example Proverbs 7.12 and 2.20-21.

gaudy appearance.⁶⁸ The righteous woman, by contrast, is more difficult to follow. She must be sought out “On the heights, beside the way,/ at the crossroads” where “she takes her/ stand”.⁶⁹ Her regime is demanding, she does not offer pleasure or ease. At other times, as is the case with “The Thunder: Perfect Mind”, the distinction between the two is less simple. The two are intertwined, and it is left up to the reader, or student in this case, to make the distinction between them, to literally *choose* wisdom over ignorance.

The Convent Women, like the voice of the female deity in “The Thunder: Perfect Mind, offer a similar riddle to the reader. While at times they are presented as uncouth and boisterous, as at Arnette and K.D.’s wedding reception, where they pile “out of the car looking like go-go girls: pink shorts, skimpy tops, see-through skirts”;⁷⁰ at other times in the novel they are more subdued, as when Connie is transformed from a basement drunk into an inspired leader in the seventh chapter of the novel. Here in the descriptions of Connie (now Consolata) preparing food, setting a table and addressing the other women in the Convent through declarations like, “If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for”,⁷¹ we find strong parallels to Proverbs 9.1-6, where Wisdom and Ignorance vie for the attention of the unlearned. In reference to the former we read how,

Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table.

She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls from the highest places in the

⁶⁸ Prov. 7.11, 9.13.

⁶⁹ Prov. 8.2.

⁷⁰ Morrison, *Paradise*, 156.

⁷¹ Morrison, *Paradise*, 262.

town, 'You that are simple, turn in here!' To those without sense she says,
 'Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside
 immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.'

Such references are also meant to demonstrate that plurality and heterogeneity are not limited to the purview of postmodern critics. The Judeo-Christian tradition contains a rich heritage of texts that deal in this type of subject matter. What many contemporary critics fail to recognize, however, through a lack of knowledge and understanding of religious history, is that such subject matter still has applications in today's world. In this, it can be argued, many of critics fall into a similar trap to the Morgan twins who are schooled in modern forms of monumental narratives, where the great heroes are men, and the great deeds those of ancestors long dead.

Like his twin brother Steward, Deacon Morgan is also able to recall powerful lessons from the past. But, like Steward, he recalls these lessons—the words, the stories—without translating the “great deeds” of his ancestors into his own life. Like Steward, Deacon talks about and glorifies how the families of Haven survived the tough times, like the “disallowing” and the great depression, by sharing and working as a community and yet (as his wife Soane notes) he refuses to allow a younger member of the community, who has recently returned from fighting in Vietnam, to continue living in Deek's house on St. Matthew Street until he gets back on his feet. Deek prefers instead for the house to remain derelict, foreclosed, with nobody living in it, than allow a friend to shelter there for free.

We are told on another occasion that Deek “had had to hear Dunbar's lines only once to memorize them completely and forever.”⁷² But facility with memorization is one thing. What the Morgan twins seem to lack is an ability to

⁷² Morrison, *Paradise*, 110.

interact with the narratives they memorize—to understand and manipulate—to *listen* to the material they expound in order to make it applicable to their own lives. As Reverend Misner notes,

Over and over and with the least provocation, they pulled from their stock of stories tales about the old folks, their grands and great-grands; their fathers and mothers. Dangerous confrontations, clever maneuvers. Testimonies to endurance, wit, skill and strength. Tales of luck and outrage. But why were there no stories to tell of themselves? About their own lives they shut up. Had nothing to say, pass on. As though past heroism was enough of a future to live by. As though, rather than children, they wanted duplicates.⁷³

Rather than the Convent being a place of child sacrifice, it is the Morgan family who are described as “crop feeble” and the town of Ruby that bears the burden of this accusation by the end of the novel.⁷⁴ From Jeff and Sweetie Fleetwood’s “damaged” children,⁷⁵ Soane Morgan’s miscarriage in 1973,⁷⁶ Arnette Fleetwood’s sacrifice of her “maybe-baby”;⁷⁷ and even Pat Best, “the gentlest of souls”, who misses killing her own daughter by inches with a “Royal Ease” iron.⁷⁸ The town of Ruby is fraught with images of *tophet* and child sacrifice. Perhaps the most telling are when Gigi first sets foot in town and finds the younger generation of Ruby “lounging” around the Oven,⁷⁹ or when Steward wonders if Reverend Misner and his nephew

⁷³ Morrison, *Paradise*, 161.

⁷⁴ Morrison, *Paradise*, 192.

⁷⁵ Morrison, *Paradise*, 57-60.

⁷⁶ Morrison, *Paradise*, 102, 240.

⁷⁷ Morrison, *Paradise*, 144.

⁷⁸ Morrison, *Paradise*, 203.

⁷⁹ Morrison, *Paradise*, 53-4.

K.D.'s generation will have to be "sacrificed" in order "to get to the next one".⁸⁰ The decision has already been made, the job completed, the outcome evidenced in how that generation is driven to the Oven—the ultimate symbol of *tophet* and child sacrifice.

Beyond these descriptions we have the women in the Convent who are also sacrificed by the community. The women are "targeted", we are told, because they represent "detritus: throwaway people that sometimes blow back into the room after being swept out the door."⁸¹ But it is also because they challenge the community's interpretation of its founding narrative by demonstrating how its members have come to embody everything that their ancestors would have detested.

This is precisely what King warned against in his critique of the Black Power movement in 1967, when he argued that although the urge toward violence among members of the African American community was "understandable as a response to a white power structure that never completely committed itself to true equality for the Negro, and a die-hard mentality that sought to shut all windows and doors against the winds of change, it nonetheless carries the seeds of its own doom."⁸² The Convent women, beginning with the "white girl" who is shot in the novel's opening sentence, are meant to reflect this sense of doom. More than a "coven" of witches, as they are at one point described, the Convent women symbolize a broken *covenant* within the community itself. In this sense, it bears remembering that it is not the Convent women who are gunned down "like panicked does" in the opening chapter of the novel, but the community of Ruby who the men take aim for from the windows of the

⁸⁰ Morrison, *Paradise*, 94.

⁸¹ Morrison, *Paradise*, 4.

⁸² King, *Chaos or Community?* 44.

schoolroom. "God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby."⁸³ Like the man who follows the path of ignorance (the harlot) in Proverbs, the men of Ruby follow these women "like an ox to the slaughter", "like a stag toward the trap", "like a bird rushing into a snare", "not knowing that it will cost [them their lives]".⁸⁴

We also know that the women's sacrifice is a sham, an insult to God, by the numerous references to mint associated with them in the novel. Moments before the attack on the Convent the women rub their heads with wintergreen oil.⁸⁵ When the men searching for them in the Convent's chapel find a gum wrapper where they expect to find the remains of a votive offering, the flavor of the gum advertised on the wrapper is "Doublemint".⁸⁶ The colour of the Cadillac in which Mavis's twins are suffocated is "mint green".⁸⁷ And Connie's eyes before she is struck blind are likened to the colour of "mint leaves".⁸⁸

The word "mint" appears twice in the Bible, both times in the New Testament, in the form of a warning to the Pharisees. The older and more descriptive example of the two, Matthew 23.23, reads:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.⁸⁹

In sacrificing these women the men of Ruby have offered the equivalent of Mint leaves, harvested from a weed which grows plentifully even under harsh conditions,

⁸³ Morrison, *Paradise*, 18.

⁸⁴ Prov. 7.22-23.

⁸⁵ Morrison, *Paradise*, 284.

⁸⁶ Morrison, *Paradise*, 12.

⁸⁷ Morrison, *Paradise*, 21.

⁸⁸ Morrison, *Paradise*, 228.

⁸⁹ A similar description also appears in Luke 11.42.

and whose value in the marketplace yields little return. But they have also sacrificed something else, something more valuable and closer to themselves. At the end of the novel, it is the community of Ruby that has suffered a death, the first death of that new town, a child by the name of "Save-Marie". The Convent women live on.

Like Sister Edgar and Clark Lazlo—whose very name implies resurrection—the Convent women in *Paradise*, are examples of the type of person that postmodern critics have continued to discount in defining the role that religion will play in a postmodern future. They are the outcast, the poor, the undocumented workers, those whose "rope to the world" as Connie describes it, has slipped from their grasp.⁹⁰ According to the postmodern narrative, derived from Nietzsche's dystopian vision of the "last man", it is this person who will dance over the ruins of civilization at the end of the world. According to the Christian narrative it is the same person who stands to inherit the kingdom of God on earth.⁹¹ Between the two narratives is a silence similar to that generated by the missing words on the Oven, and comparable to the critical silence surrounding the subject of religion in contemporary literary and cultural debates.

⁹⁰ Morrison, *Paradise*, 247.

⁹¹ Matt. 5.5, "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth."

Conclusion

The Spirit of the Living God will create Postmodernism and in its making many individuals, as they seek to find answers to the problems involved, must make their contributions. All that one man can do is to state what, in a judgement based upon his own experience as a searcher for the Truth and his dealing with other intelligent men similarly engaged today, are some probable characteristics of Postmodernism. It is in that spirit, and with no illusion of peculiar inspiration from the Eternal to become the lone prophet of a new day, that I here set down some of the principles which must, as I see it, be those of the Postmodernist if he is to give spiritual leadership to our puzzled generation.¹

When Bernard Iddings Bell wrote these words in 1925, he was responding not only to the theological problems of the day, but to political, philosophical and social-scientific problems as well. The post-war 1920s was a period of rapid change in the United States, much like the period in the late twentieth century when many future critics would begin to compose theses on “postmodernism.” In addition to the successes of various reform movements, like women’s suffrage, the labour movement, and the Black Nationalist movement of Marcus Garvey, the early 1920s—like the early 1970s—experienced a conservative backlash against these attempts at reform. This occurred not only in the United States, but, indeed, around the world.

It is significant that Bernard Iddings Bell finished the proofs for *Postmodernism, and other essays* in Italy in 1925. Many writers and intellectuals were drawn to Italy during this period to experience Mussolini’s experiment. Bell, it

¹ Bernard Iddings Bell, *Postmodernism, and other essays*, Milwaukee, WI: Morehouse Publishing (1926), 54.

turns out, was not impressed. But he did carry away something from the visit. Bell's descriptions of postmodernism as not only a reaction against Protestant fundamentalism and the terrorist activities of the Ku Klux Klan, but to socialism and communism, and later to fascism and totalitarianism,² acknowledges and denounces this post-war shift to the right. But it also offers a critique of the left. When Bell charges in the final chapter of *Postmodernism*, that "Modernism has ceased to be modern" and that we are now "ready for some sort of Postmodernism",³ he is attacking not only fundamentalists and fascists, but his former comrades in the socialist movement, arguing that while some "used to think that they were in revolt...against contemporary economics", many of their pronouncements today would make Marx himself "foam with wrath."⁴

With these ideas in mind, Bell sought to challenge the arguments of modern philosophers and critics who attempted to exclude theological subjects from contemporary sociological debates. For this he turned to modern science itself. Here, like subsequent critics, Bell found the tools to combat the modern scientific establishment in the ideas of modern scientists themselves. While Max Weber and others continued to insist that increased levels of rationalisation and intellectualisation would lead inevitably to religious disintegration, leading scientists, including and particularly, Bertrand Russell, Robert A. Millikan, and J. Arthur Thomson, had begun to argue that reason could prove just as illusive in the early decades of the twentieth century as faith had seemed towards the close of the nineteenth.

² Bernard Iddings Bell, *Postmodernism*, ix, 9, 42; *Religion for Living: A Book for Postmodernists*, London: The Religious Book Club (1939), xi.

³ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 54.

⁴ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 42.

What separates the conclusion that Bell draws from these arguments and those that the scientists drew for themselves, can, for the most part, be found in Bell's attitude toward religion, and religion's role in the creation of a world beyond the modern world. On the latter point, subsequent critics of postmodernism, from Toynbee to Jameson, would also side with scientists like Russell who described the new "religious view of life and the world" in more secular, scientific, and nationalistic terms.⁵ Theologians, including David Ray Griffin, Matthew Fox, and Levi A. Olan, who base much of their ideas about postmodernism and religion on the philosophy of Russell's colleague Alfred North Whitehead—while they believe that world is still in much need of some kind of spiritual salvation—also continue to regard the postmodern world as similarly secular and scientifically determined.⁶ But what the modern scientists, and their postmodern progeny, failed to anticipate in continuing to distance themselves from the impending religious response to modern social unrest, was the backlash against their own empirical and pragmatic approach to social reform that the resurgence in conservative Evangelical religion would focus upon in the United States after the Second World War, and which Bell's essay, in part, predicted.

The decade of the 1970s, which began in a similar fashion to the 1920s, with post-war economic recession, political scandal, and the chants of Black nationalism and women's rights, witnessed, not only the rebirth of postmodern theory through works like Ihab Hassan's, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* (1971), Charles Jencks' *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (1977), and Jean-François Lyotard's *The*

⁵ Bertrand Russell, *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, 140-41. See also note 8, chapter 3.

⁶ David Ray Griffin, *The Reenchantment of Science: Postmodern Proposals*, SUNY Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press (1988); Matthew Fox, "A Mystical Cosmology: Toward A Postmodern Spirituality," *Sacred Interconnections*, ed. David Ray Griffin, Suny Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press (1990), 15-33; Levi A. Olan, "The Prophetic Faith in a Secular Age," *Jewish Theology and Process Thought*, ed. Sandra B. Lubarsky and David Ray Griffin, Suny Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought, Albany: State University of New York Press (1996), 25-34.

Postmodern Condition ([1979] 1984); it also marked a major turning point in public attitudes toward religion. As José Casanova notes in *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994), in the closing years of the 1970s,

four seemingly unrelated yet almost simultaneously unfolding developments gave religion the kind of global publicity which forced a reassessment of its place and role in the modern world. These four developments were the Islamic revolution in Iran; the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland; the role of Catholicism in the Sandinista revolution and other political conflicts throughout Latin America; and the public reemergence of Protestant fundamentalism as a force in American politics.⁷

According to Gilles Kepel, what all of these movements had in common was a belief in “the futility of a society dominated by reason alone”, and the need for a return to a society built upon traditional religious foundations.⁸ In other words, precisely what Bernard Iddings Bell had called for and predicted back in 1926.

But while the findings of sociologists like Casanova and Kepel allow us to challenge the attempts to exclude Bell’s thesis from more recent studies on postmodernism on the grounds that it was too concerned with religion, the results of that research also allow us to challenge some of Bell’s own assumptions about the manner in which a postmodern religious revival would be implemented in the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century. In *Postmodernism* for example, in his description of the “restless youths” of the post war generation, Bell describes a

⁷ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1994), 3.

⁸ Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World*, trans. Alan Braley, Cambridge: Polity Press (1994), 7.

generation that would grow weary of “the complacency, the smugness, the mere carnality of contemporary life”, and eventually lead a revolt against that life.⁹ In subsequent works like *Still Shine the Stars* (1941), Bell describes the same group as forming a possible “divine column” against the secularising influences of modern culture, whose members are willing to “preach...understand and believe”, who “are sure that Christian obedience is sufficient to save man from the horns of the modern dilemma—from the greedy scramble that our democratic life too long has been, on the one hand, and on the other, from the tyranny of a regimented State.”¹⁰ In his last book, *Crowd Culture*, Bell describes the same group as a company of “rebels,” a “democratic elite”, composed of “skilled diagnosticians, well versed in the history of man and ready to examine contemporary behavior patterns in the light of what that history reveals.”¹¹

But the conditions that Bell describes as placing limitations on the effectiveness of such an elite, such as the growth in public education and the disproportionate emphasis upon subjects like engineering and the applied sciences at the expense of liberal arts subjects like literature and history in American schools, are the very conditions cited by Casanova and Kepel as key features of religious growth. Here, like subsequent critics, Bell can also be found guilty of ignoring the role that African Americans and marginalized whites would play in the implementation of such a revolution. While Bell at times pays lip service to what he describes as America’s “racial problem,” he fails to anticipate (as Reinhold Niebuhr does) how that problem would manifest itself in movements like the Civil Rights movement and the Black Power movement in the 1950s and 1960s, and the role that the African American

⁹ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 42-44.

¹⁰ Bernard Iddings Bell, *Still Shine the Stars*, New York: Harper & Brothers (1941), 54.

¹¹ B.I. Bell, *Crown Culture*, 105-107.

clergy (both Christian and Muslim) would play in the dissemination of these movements.¹²

In *Crowd Culture*, for example, when Bell criticizes the emphasis upon the applied sciences in American universities after the Second World War, maintaining that “[i]t is unfortunate for human welfare that so much university emphasis is laid today on scientific studies, particularly on those which have to do with applied science”,¹³ he fails to anticipate the contribution that many of those trained within these fields—many of them the children of poor and working class whites—would also make to this religious revolution. As Kepel notes, it was precisely this segment of the university-educated population who would form the main phalanx of the re-Christianization and re-Islamization movements in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁴ Rather than the old liberal elite, described by Bell in works like *Postmodernism, Still Shine the Stars*, and *Crowd Culture*, what these groups formed was a new elite, what Kepel terms a “‘counter-elite’, in opposition to the current holders of cultural power, who produced the dominant values and ethical standards of the establishment.”¹⁵ Such a “counter-elite” also bears a strong resemblance to what Daniel Bell describes in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, as the “cultural mass”—those involved in the knowledge and communications industries—but like Jameson, continued to deny any claim to legitimate religious or moral conviction.¹⁶

¹² Bernard Iddings Bell, *God Is Not Dead*, New York: Harper & Brothers (1945), 166-67. Reinhold Niebuhr anticipates the actions of groups like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the civil rights movement in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons (1932), xvii.

¹³ B.I. Bell, *Crowd Culture*, 113.

¹⁴ Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World*, trans. Alan Braley, Cambridge: Polity Press (1994), 127, 137.

¹⁵ Kepel, *The Revenge of God*, 138.

¹⁶ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, London: Heinemann (1976), 20; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press (1991), 387-88.

It is to subjects like these that fictional authors like John Updike, Don DeLillo, and Toni Morrison have turned in order to highlight the many contradictions in theories of postmodernism, especially in the attitudes of many of its authors and critics toward the role that religion will play in a postmodern social environment. When we look to fictional works like John Updike's novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, for example, we find in Updike's decision to juxtapose descriptions of the birth of the film industry in the United States, with descriptions of the birth of Protestant fundamentalism in 1910, a direct challenge to the ideas of modern sociologists like Max Weber who argued that increased levels of intellectualisation and technological innovation would offer further evidence of secularization. As historians of fundamentalism are often quick to point out, fundamentalists, unlike their modernist theological counterparts, were among the first to take advantage of new technologies like radio, television, and the internet; and therefore cannot, in the strictest sense, be classed as anti-modern.¹⁷

The prominence given to the American Civil War in the novel's title, moreover, combined with the contrasts between a northern minister and his southern wife, the northern city of Paterson and the southern city of Basingstoke, underline what sociologists have described as the southern influence upon much of what is today described as fundamentalist and conservative evangelical theology. When the action moves out West in the second half of the novel, and the contrast is made between urban California and rural Colorado, city boys and mountain men, non-believers and believers, these descriptions also serve to highlight a series of demographic changes, outlined by Robert Wuthnow and Patrick Allitt, which reflect the 90% population growth that occurred in the American southwest during the 1980s,

¹⁷ See chapter two, note 10.

and points to a fundamental “restructuring” of American religion rather than outright religious decline as interpreted by many of Updike’s critics.

The concentration of these ideas in the character of Clark Lazlo, moreover, who comes to embody both the current postmodern critical sense of the “cultural mass”, as well as Kepel’s sociological sense of the “counter-elite”, serves as a challenge to postmodern critics, specifically those who ascribe these characteristics to a decline in religious beliefs and “puritan” values.¹⁸ As we have argued, it is, by contrast, the alternative sense of postmodernism described by Bernard Iddings Bell, and associated with the work of Karl Barth, and Paul Tillich, that permeates Updike’s narrative to the point that we can read in the character of Clark Lazlo the figurative sense of the “mass-man,” and the salvation symbolized in the Eucharist, or Latin “mass”.

We find evidence of a similar transformation taking place in Don DeLillo’s novel *Underworld*, where an African American child is described as physically prizing a title-winning baseball from the hands of his much older and stronger, white, middle class, male companion. We find it again in Toni Morrison’s novel *Paradise*, where a group of poor, outcast, and undocumented women conquer their demons and outwit those who seek the women’s annihilation rather than have their own narrative of emancipation overshadowed.

What all three novels have in common, moreover, in addition to their attempts to highlight the continuing importance of marginalized groups and the role that religion has played, and continues to play, in elevating those groups and granting the individuals within them a voice within contemporary culture, is that each of these

¹⁸ Leslie Fiedler, “The New Mutants,” *A New Fiedler Reader*, New York: Prometheus Books (1999), 208; Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 55; Charles Jencks, *What Is Postmodernism?* 4th ed. 1996, Chichester: Academy Editions (1986), 21-40.

works also concludes with a description of religious transcendence and transformation, similar to that described by Bernard Iddings Bell in the conclusion to his essay on postmodernism. As we noted in the introduction, while we do not suggest that these authors derive their ideas directly from Bell's thesis, the fact that they apply them to a critique of what are specifically postmodern cultural phenomena—in order to offer an alternative interpretation of such phenomena—remains highly relevant to our investigation of Bell's work and how it relates to current debates on postmodernism.

Therefore, after a review of Bell's essay, while we are able to identify many points of agreement between his thought and contemporary sociological thought regarding the place of religion in postmodern culture, there also remain many opportunities to criticize that thought. While Bell's 1926 thesis helps us to challenge the perceived scholarship on the relationship between religion and culture in the late twentieth century, while it can be shown to have much more in common with recent descriptions of postmodernism on subjects relating to the inversion of modern philosophical and scientific concepts like secularization; it also, like these works, can be shown to have many flaws. Bell's assumption, for example, that the reorganization of religious forces will be implemented from the top down and that such "spiritual soldiers" will be drafted from the old liberal elite, threatens to ally him with critics like Daniel Bell who advocate the revival of Puritan Christianity and the Protestant Ethic. While critical of theological Modernism, which he describes at one point as, hopelessly "sentimental", Bell proceeds in chapter five of his essay, "How God Became Comprehensible", to extol the properties of Christian love, arguing that "Religion is the art of discovering, through love, Him who is back of and through and

behind all things".¹⁹ And while critical of both the scientific and the fundamentalist interpretation of Truth with a capital "T", after insisting that "Christianity is a religion based upon agnosticism", or "uncertainty", opposed to the imposition of dogmas and creeds; Bell proceeds in chapter six, on the "Possible Principles of Postmodernism", to insist upon belief in the Incarnation as "fact", and the acceptance of both the Nicaean and Apostles' Creeds on similar grounds.²⁰

Despite such flaws, however, Bell's insistence that postmodernism will be defined by a renewed interest in religion and mystical theology still has merit in contemporary cultural debates, especially when one considers the literary and textual theory of the second half of the twentieth century and the works of novelists like John Updike, Don DeLillo, and Toni Morrison who challenge the continued relevance of modern sociological theory like that proposed by Max Weber, to theories of postmodernism. With the aid of recent sociological research moreover, Bell's essay, despite its flaws, allows us to challenge the view that postmodernism is informed by purely secular political, philosophical, and sociological currents. This is a step in a positive direction. It allows us to argue that much of the theory now labelled "postmodern", is in fact, like parts of Bell's thesis, much more modern in its origins than originally advertised, as are the arguments employed by those who wish to exclude the subject of religion from the arena of postmodern cultural debate.

At the heart of the problem, is a question of cultural bias. In the present cultural and political climate, however, when scholars are becoming more open to the subject of religion and the history of religions, it seems timely that we reassess theses

¹⁹ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 48-49.

²⁰ B.I. Bell, *Postmodernism*, 62.

like Bernard Iddings Bell's, that we may identify such problems earlier, and prevent the rush to polarize debate in the future.

Appendix:

Major Published Works of Bernard Iddings Bell

1918. *Right and Wrong After the War: An Elementary Consideration of Christian Morals in the Light of Modern Social Problems*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
1919. *The Church's Work for Men at War*. Chicago: Morehouse Publishing.
1922. *The Good News*. Milwaukee: Morehouse Publishing.
1926. *Postmodernism, and Other Essays*. Milwaukee: Morehouse Publishing.
1928. *Common Sense in Education*. New York: William Morrow and Company.
1929. *Beyond Agnosticism: A Book for Tired Mechanists*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
1931. *Unfashionable Convictions*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
1933. *Men Wanted!* New York: Harper & Brothers.
- , *The Holy Week*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
1935. *Preface to Religion*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
1936. (Compiler) *Christ the King: The Presiding Bishop's Book for Lent, 1936*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- , *A Catholic Looks at His World: An Approach to Christian Sociology*. New York: Morehouse Publishing.
- , *O Men of God!* New York: Longmans, Green, & Company.
1938. (Ed.) *Affirmations by a Group of American Anglo-Catholics, Clerical and Lay*. New York: Sheed & Ward.
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1939. *Religion for Living: A Book for Postmodernists*. London: J. Gifford.
1941. *Understanding Religion: An Introductory Guide to the Study of Christianity*.
New York: Morehouse-Gorham.
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1943. *The Church in Disrepute*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
1944. *The Altar and the World: Social Implications of the Liturgy*. New York: Harper
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1945. *God Is Not Dead*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
1947. *A Man Can Live*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
1949. *Crisis in Education: A Challenge to American Complacency*. New York:
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