



— 1 —

PLACING OURSELVES

Globalization and Postmodernity



By some reckonings, the twentieth century had already ended in some parts of the world as we sat in a pub with William on December 31, 1999. It was good to see him for the first time in quite a while. He was now in law school, having recently returned from a stint working in international finance in London. That experience had led William to the conclusion that money is boring and that people who get excited about money are even more boring than the money itself. While we were wondering whether law school might lead him to simply intensify this already insightful conclusion, the conversation took a different turn.

“I’ve decided that I am a theist,” he announced.

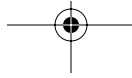
“Oh?” we asked. “And what does that mean?”

“Well, I guess that I’ve concluded that autonomy isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. I no longer believe that I am totally in control of my life. There is a higher power—God—with whom I must be in relation.”

This confession had a familiar ring to it. Didn’t the Gen X author Douglas Coupland offer a similar confession near the end of his book *Life After God*? “My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.”¹ Of course, William didn’t quite say all of that, but the sentiment was similar. And we knew William well enough to know that his abandonment of autonomy was his way of appropriating certain important features of postmodern culture and thought.

Autonomy was the clarion call of modernity, with its image of a self-made, self-centered ego. William had played with such a self-image and found it resulted in

¹Douglas Coupland, *Life After God* (New York: Pocket, 1994), p. 359.





loneliness and confusion. Moreover, William's international finance experience, in which people made their fortunes and moved massive amounts of capital around the world every day, had been less than exciting and definitely not fulfilling. So William abandoned international finance and in the process abandoned autonomy and embraced theism.

This was quite a step for William. Raised in a Christian home that was deeply reflective and intellectually stimulating, with parents who had academic and pastoral ministries, William had become deeply alienated from Christian faith during his university studies. It was in that context that we'd first met. And now, a number of years later, William gave us a state-of-his-soul report by telling us of his embrace of theism. Needless to say, the news was received warmly both at home by his parents and in the pub that December afternoon.

But before we could pursue the issues further, William made an important clarification.

"This doesn't mean that I'm reading the Bible on any regular basis, though."

"And why is that?" we asked.

"My problem with the Bible is that as soon as I open it I bump up against the absolute. Actually, it is more that the absolute punches me in the face whenever I read this book."

As we inquired further to learn exactly what William was struggling with, certain themes began to emerge. For William there is an incredible tension between his lived experience and what he meets in the biblical text. In his lived experience everything is malleable, porous and changeable. He does not live in a world of unchanging, hard-and-fast absolutes. For William life is fundamentally a matter of interdependent relationships. And relationships are, by definition, dynamic, changeable and in process. So how does he read a text that seems to be set in stone, that seems to be full of absolutes? For William, such a text is not simply alien, it is offensive. This text proclaims a Truth (with a capital *T*), speaking with an absolute authority that is unrelated to William's lived experience. Actually, for William it is worse than that. This absolute is not only unrelated to his experience but also seems to be experience-denying and profoundly disempowering.

How then does William respond to the biblical text? Usually by reading a couple of verses and then slamming the book shut. His immediate impulse is to resist this text, question it, attack it. William responds to biblical texts with a deeply set hermeneutic of suspicion. And he has good reason for his suspicion. This text has been used—in his experience and throughout much of Christian history—as a repressive book of absolutes that silenced all questioning. Indeed the Bible seems to be a text suffused with certainty. And if there is one thing that William and his generation are certain of, it is that there is no certainty. Certainty needs to be abandoned because it claims too much for any human perspective.



Again we come back to William's problem with absolutes in the midst of a world of dynamic relationships. To be in relation is to be relative. Allan Bloom's depiction of the average university student at the end of the twentieth century fits William well: "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative."² Of course truth is relative, replies William. Just consider the alternative! The modernist pretense to have objectively grasped a total reality invariably results in a totalitarian social practice. Failing to recognize that human knowledge is always constructed in particular historical contexts, "total systems" are invariably achieved "only at the cost of violence, by repressing what doesn't fit and erasing the memory of those who have questioned it."³ At least implicitly agreeing with Jean-François Lyotard that modernist totality thinking has given us "as much terror as we can take,"⁴ William has renounced the quest for a total scheme of things because it is both unattainable and inherently violent. In this important respect William is postmodern.⁵

So, given this postmodern allergic reaction to absolutism and any and all large claims to have understood, grasped and become a spokesperson for the Truth, what happens when someone like William attempts to read a particular biblical text like Paul's letter to the Christian community in Colossae? Essentially the allergic reaction sets in.

When William opens up a text like Colossians, the first thing he is struck by—indeed the first absolute to hit him in the face—is the claim the author is making for himself.⁶ "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God" (1:1). Given that introduction, is this a text that is likely to invite dialogue? Is this a text that might give the reader enough room to beg to differ on any subject that it addresses? Not likely. The author identifies himself in such a way that not only does he have divine authority but so also does the text that he writes.

Things only get worse as the salutation continues: "To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ" (1:2). After asking whether the sisters were really mentioned in the original (they were not; this is a contemporary inclusive translation), William is concerned that there is here a fundamental exclusionary dichotomy. If some folks are saints and faithful, then others must be sinners and faithless, and William is wor-

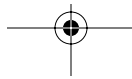
²Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 25.

³John D. Caputo, "A Cold and Comfortless Hermeneutic or a Warm and Trembling Hermeneutic: A Conversation with John D. Caputo," interview by James H. Olthuis, *Christian Scholar's Review* 19, no. 4 (1990): 351.

⁴Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, Theory and History of Literature*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 81.

⁵See J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Post-modern Age* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), chap. 2.

⁶While our story about William so far has been reporting a real conversation, the account that follows is a loose fictionalization based on e-mail correspondence.





ried that he and his friends are in the second camp. So the text has, at least in his reading, already excluded him. Why would he continue to read?

But continue he does. Admittedly it is only a cursory read, but he notices that in the first twenty verses of this letter the author uses words like *all*, *everything* and *whole* something like twelve times. This author is certainly not afraid of making large claims! Given his religious perspective and divinely appointed authority, the author presumes to talk about how *all* of creation hangs together (1:17) and even to intimate that the point of his letter to these folks in Colossae is that they would come to *all* “wisdom and understanding” (1:9). But then if you presume to know how the whole world hangs together, it isn’t such a big step to say that somehow you can impart that wisdom to anyone who will submit to your authority.

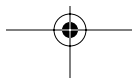
For William, things simply go from bad to worse in this text. While a lot of the imagery of the letter simply makes no connection whatsoever for him, William finds that much of the epistle seems to be little more than an attack on the corporeal self. Why such a preoccupation with sex and the flesh in chapter 3? With this attack on the body there also comes the repressive foolishness of Paul’s admonitions to wives, children and slaves to obey their husbands, fathers and masters.

There, William insists, is where this whole letter was going from the beginning. “You posit a divine authority that structures and orders the world in a certain way, attribute that authority to yourself as author of the letter, wipe out any opposition that suggests things might be looked at differently, put clear restrictions on personal and communal life, and then top it all off with a divine sanction for patriarchy and slavery. And you want a postmodern person at the beginning of the twenty-first century to read this text, learn from it and maybe even receive it as divinely inspired Scripture? I don’t think so!”

Discerning Our Context

Reading is always contextual. How one reads, interprets and responds to a text is influenced and formed by the context within which one does the reading. Latin American peasants, upper-middle-class North Americans and African villagers engage this text differently.⁷ And so does someone like William. For William, the Bible is an alien and oppressive text of absolutes. How did William ever come to such a conclusion? It wasn’t too difficult. You see, this is the Bible William met in Sunday school and while listening to countless sermons as a young person reared within a particular kind of Christian community. Within that Christian tradition the Bible is received as an authoritative text of absolute Truth. But we have seen that this is not the only context in which William lives his life. He is also a member of what has been dubbed

⁷See Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., *Reading from This Place*, vol. 1, *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, and vol. 2, *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).





Generation X and is comfortable describing himself as “postmodern.” Interestingly, however, this Gen X postmodern has also dabbled in international finance and law school. All of this forms the context in which William reads and evaluates an ancient biblical text.

Reading is always *from* somewhere. We always read from a particular historical, cultural and geographical place. The question that we must ask is, how do we discern our particular place at the beginning of the twenty-first century? How do we “place” ourselves, how do we discern the times and spirits that invariably influence our reading of a text like Colossians? What are the questions, crises and opportunities that we necessarily (and legitimately) bring to this text? If we are not clear about these issues the biblical text will remain silent, unable to address (and confront!) us where we live.

Such discernment, however, is no easy thing. Indeed, cultural discernment in service of opening up the biblical text must be deeply rooted in that very text. Discernment of the spirits of our time must be directed by the Spirit who, we confess, has inspired this text. Another way to say this is that any worldview analysis of our cultural context that will serve the reading of the biblical text in that context must drink deeply from the wells of a biblical worldview.⁸

But cultural discernment is always a risky business. How do we discern between competing cultural visions, seemingly conflicting cultural trends and interpretations of our time that are in stark contradiction to each other? Consider two visions that would appear to be diametrically opposed.

Peter McLaren opens his hard-hitting critique of contemporary culture with these words:

I will not mince my words. We live at a precarious moment in history. Relations of subjection, suffering, dispossession and contempt for human dignity and the sanctity of life are at the center of social existence. Emotional dislocation, moral sickness and individual helplessness remain ubiquitous features of our time.⁹

This emotional dislocation and sense of helplessness are the result, he says, of late modernity’s “dehydrated imagination that has lost its capacity to dream otherwise.”¹⁰ And with this loss of imaginative creativity a “funky nihilism has set in; an aroma of cultural disquiet.”¹¹

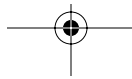
Precariousness, helplessness, dislocation, dispossession, nihilism and cultural disquiet—that is one way to read the times. Consider another. In 1998 *Wired* maga-

⁸Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984), pt. 2.

⁹Peter McLaren, *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture: Oppositional Politics in a Postmodern Age* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 1.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 4.





zine delivered its “State of the Planet” statement in the form of an evocative photoessay.¹² In the opening of the essay we see contrasting images on two pages. On the left there are two photographs: the chest of a black man with the word *Terror* crudely (and cruelly) burned into his skin, and a densely smog-covered cityscape. The caption over these images looks something like this:

YESTERDAY

We lived in the shadow of nuclear
and environmental apocalypse.

On the facing page, however, we see a beautiful garden scene, lush in spring bloom with a tranquil, flowing stream. The caption strikes the contrast with the previous message:

We stand on the verge of an era
of peace, freedom,
prosperity, and
environmental
harmony.

TODAY

Not that we don't
have problems—
we do.

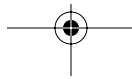
But we also
have real reasons
to be optimistic
about the future

because
things
are getting
better.

Funky nihilism or optimism? Precariousness or things are getting better? Contempt for the sanctity of life or environmental harmony? Suffering or peace? Emotional dislocation, individual helplessness and moral sickness, or peace, freedom and prosperity? Two visions, both powerfully alive in our culture. How do we discern between them?

We will investigate these two visions under the broad rubric of postmodern disquiet and cybernetic global optimism. After discussing each cultural dynamic, we will ask how they might be related.

¹²“Change Is Good,” *Wired* 6.01, special fifth-anniversary issue (January 1998): 163-207.





Postmodern Disquiet

The performer has returned to the stage for an encore.¹³ A solitary woman sits down at a grand piano, while the crowd shouts out the names of songs she has not yet performed in the concert. She quietly begins to play and then leans towards the microphone and sings, “Somewhere, over the rainbow . . .”

The crowd goes wild. Someone shouts out, “Toto!” But as she continues to sing, a hush, a deeply respectful silence, falls over the crowd. You see, if you aren’t quiet you won’t be able to hear this remarkable performance. The artist is Tori Amos, famous for her pathos-filled, post-Christian and postmodern songs of pain and loss.¹⁴ And she sings this song of longing for home, this cultural icon from *The Wizard of Oz*, with an intensity and a pathos that are immediately arresting. When she gets to lines like “And dreams that you dared to dream really do come true,” her voice trails off, and that last word of the phrase—*true*—is barely whispered.

It is clear that this is a song sung from the perspective of a terribly broken heart. In this performance there is no confidence that dreams can come true, that there might even be such a thing as truth, that the plot tensions of our lives might ever be resolved and we might finally be able to go back home. For Amos, and for many of her generation, there is no going home. She sings the song as if she is out of breath because she is all cried out. Her performance is a testimony to the ending of dreams and a profound loss of confidence in the hopes of a modernist culture. At heart, this performance questions not just whether the story of homecoming in *The Wizard of Oz* is still believable but whether the whole narrative of modern culture might have exhausted itself.

Amos embodies in her music precisely the kind of cultural disquiet that McLaren refers to. Her inability to return home mirrors the emotional dislocation of our time. And that sense of cultural disquiet, we suggest, is all-pervasive. We can feel it in our bones when we walk through a mall or turn on the television. Something is different “out there” and maybe even deep within ourselves. There is indeed a sense of cultural disquiet. We have a sinking feeling that we don’t really understand what is going on, but we know that the changes taking place around us affect both what we believe and the way we believe it.

The term *postmodern* keeps being tossed about as a possible explanation for our present confusion and malaise. But what does it mean? The attempt to find an answer to this ques-

¹³Portions of this section have been previously published in three articles by Brian Walsh. “The Church in a Postmodern Age: Ten Things You Need to Know,” *Good Idea! A Resource Sheet on Evangelism and Church Growth* 3, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 1-5; “Education in Precarious Times: Postmodernity and a Christian World View,” in *The Crumbling Walls of Certainty: Towards a Christian Critique of Postmodernity and Education*, ed. Ian Lambert and Suzanne Mitchell (Sydney: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, 1997), pp. 8-24; and “Where Is Society Going? Education, Tall Tales and the End of an Era,” *Christian Teachers Journal* 8, no. 2 (May 2000): 4-9.

¹⁴Tori Amos, “Somewhere over the Rainbow—Live,” from the CD *Hey Juniper*, Atlantic Recording, 1996.





tion can be frustrating. Since the postmodern outlook is characteristically suspicious of definitions, what follows is necessarily more descriptive than an attempt at definition.¹⁵

The first thing that we need to say about postmodern culture is that it is a culture of betrayal. This is at the heart of our cultural crisis and is the emotional source for a widespread hermeneutic of suspicion—not just of ancient authoritative texts but of any systems or institutions of authority. Long before we begin trying to listen to what postmodern thinkers might be saying, we need to note that the experience on the street, and especially the experience of young people, is suffused with a sense of betrayal. In the song “bullet with butterfly wings” on the album *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*, the Smashing Pumpkins sing,

the world is a vampire, sent to drain
secret destroyers, hold you up to the flames
and what do i get, for my pain
betrayed desires, and a piece of the game.¹⁶

This quintessentially Generation X lament is permeated by a deep sense of betrayal. Someone has told them a story, spun them a line, about the good life, and it has proved to be a lie. When the lie runs as deep as this, it is not surprising that they experience the world not as a place of safety and opportunity but as a “vampire” that sucks the very lifeblood out of them. The world is decidedly malignant and dangerous. The best that one can expect in this world of betrayal is to simply get a piece of the game; but even this cannot be guaranteed.

Betrayal can breed either rage or numbness. While we meet rage at antiglobalization protests, the more prevalent postmodern emotional response is numbness and boredom.¹⁷ For example, in the teen film *Pump Up the Volume* the young protagonist says, “There’s nothing left to do anymore. Everything decent’s been done; all the great themes have been used up and turned into theme parks.” And the Smashing Pumpkins echo this sentiment when they sing,

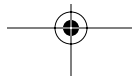
there’s nothing left to do
there’s nothing left to feel.¹⁸

¹⁵Robin Usher and Richard Edwards note that the term *postmodern* is not a fixed description but a “loose umbrella term under whose broad cover can be encompassed at one and the same time a condition, a set of practices, a cultural discourse and a mode of analysis” (*Postmodernism and Education: Different Voices, Different Worlds* [New York: Routledge, 1994], p. 7).

¹⁶Smashing Pumpkins, “bullet with butterfly wings,” from the album *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*, ©Virgin Records America, 1995. Lyrics by Billy Corgan.

¹⁷In the early 1990s Albert Borgmann described the mood of America as a passive sullenness evidenced by “the incapacity to be pained by things undone and challenges unmet” (*Crossing the Postmodern Divide* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992], pp. 6-7).

¹⁸Smashing Pumpkins, “jelly belly,” on *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*, ©Virgin Records America, 1995. Lyrics by Billy Corgan. This song also includes the words “living makes me sick / so sick i wish i’d die / down in the belly of the beast.”





We feel most passionately when we have a sense of newness to our life, projects to complete, dreams to fulfill. If there is nothing left to do, then there is nothing left to feel either. And if the guiding narrative of our culture breeds suspicion, not confidence, then history-forming action is paralyzed.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Lyotard's summary of postmodernity is the one most often cited: "Simplifying in the extreme, I define postmodernity as incredulity toward all metanarratives."¹⁹ Again, the Smashing Pumpkins prove to be insightful. In their infinitely sad song "tales of a scorched earth," they sing, "and we're all dead yeah we're all dead / inside the future of a shattered past."²⁰ We live inside the future of a shattered past because that past told grand stories that have proved to be destructive lies. The grand story of a Marxist utopia collapsed along with the Berlin Wall. The heroic tale of technological progress blew up with the Challenger explosion. The progress myth of democratic capitalism that promised economic prosperity and social harmony strains under the weight of economic contraction, ecological threat, and an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, both domestically and internationally. The postmodernist ethos insists that stories such as these—stories that have so shaped our lives—are not stories of emancipation and progress after all but stories of enslavement, oppression and violence. And on such a view, any story, any worldview, that makes grand claims about the real course and destiny of history—including the grand narrative of God's redemption of all of creation in Christ found in a text like Colossians—will make common cause with such violence and oppression.

Of course, all of this creates profound uncertainty for human history-forming praxis. Alisdair MacIntyre is right when he says, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"²¹ But if all narratives—especially overarching and civilization-directing metanarratives—are met with postmodern incredulity, then it is not surprising that postmodern culture appears to have no fixed ethical anchors and is characterized by profound moral instability.

In his apocalyptic song "The Future," Leonard Cohen sings,

Things are going to slide in all directions
Won't be nothing you can measure anymore.²²

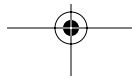
Robin Usher and Richard Edwards make the same point: "Postmodernity, then, describes a world where people have to make their way without fixed referents and

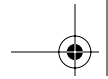
¹⁹Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiv.

²⁰Smashing Pumpkins, "tales of a scorched earth," on *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*, ©Virgin Records America, 1995. Lyrics by Billy Corgan.

²¹Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study of Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 216.

²²Leonard Cohen, "The Future," from the album *The Future*, ©Sony Music Entertainment, 1992.





traditional anchoring points. It is a world of rapid change, of bewildering instability, where knowledge is constantly changing and meaning ‘floats.’²³

Postmodernity insists that all moral codes, all normative frameworks, are particular inventions of people in history. This means that the old idea that there are moral absolutes to which we all have access and to which we all, in principle, are subject has evaporated in the heat of a postmodern culture. And since there are no universally recognizable measures for human life, it is not surprising that Cohen confesses that “When they said REPENT / I wonder what they meant.”²⁴ One can only imagine what happens when a text that speaks of “forgiveness” (Col 1:14) and being “blameless and irreproachable” (1:22) is read in such a context.

Together with moral instability and incredulity toward all metanarratives and totality systems, postmodern culture is a *postrationalist* culture. Simply stated, while the modernist penchant for seeking rational justification for all beliefs and actions lives on in some segments of our culture, it is all but dead in the street and in the real lives of people as they make economic, political, cultural and religious choices. Notice that few products are touted on television these days on the basis of being “scientifically proven.” That doesn’t impress the postmodern consumer. On the contrary we are all too aware that science can prove whatever we want it to and rational argumentation can be used for all kinds of terrible causes. Rather than being concerned with rational justification, the quintessential epistemological stance of a postmodern culture is “Show me.” What will this idea accomplish? What are the implications for my life and the life of our culture and planet if we accept this perspective as true?

While we will argue in this book that such an epistemological stance is in important respects both legitimate and thoroughly biblical, it needs to be acknowledged that there is a cultural downside to all of this. The relative homogeneity of a modernist culture is replaced by the carnivalesque culture of postmodernity. Lacking any unifying story, rational justifications and normative anchors, postmodern culture fills the boredom of our time with a carnival of worldview options and consumer-directed faiths. An all-encompassing plurality of beliefs and perspectives are available for our tasting and consumption. Or perhaps we could say that we live in a mall culture: the carnival has simply moved indoors. And just as we mix and match our wardrobe items and our culinary tastes at the mall, so also do we find it increasingly unproblematic to combine beliefs from various religious traditions into one faith. The imposition of one set of beliefs is seen to be a hegemonic move to close down other options. Postmodernity is all about keeping your options open and not closing down new experiences, perspectives, rituals and beliefs without trying them out. If life is a carnival, then why not taste every-

²³Usher and Edwards, *Postmodernism and Education*, p. 10.

²⁴Cohen, “Future.”





thing that is on offer? Being “all over the map” would appear to be a postmodern virtue.

Consider the “anything goes” attitude described by Kenneth Gergen: “Under post-modern conditions, persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction; it is a world where anything goes that can be negotiated. Each reality gives way to reflexive questioning, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality. The center fails to hold.”²⁵ Why place so much emphasis on coherence in our moral or spiritual lives, especially if such coherence would mean no longer being open to all of the diverse spiritualities, worldviews and lifestyles that we have to choose from? Why close down choice? In place of the blandness of homogeneity, postmodernists raise a toast to heterogeneity, the celebration of difference.²⁶

But if we are to celebrate heterogeneity, then what are we to make of a text like Colossians that seems to strenuously close down choice in its attack on any kind of syncretism?

Perhaps we need to begin by acknowledging that an abandonment of coherence has debilitating personal and cultural consequences. Modernist homogeneity is easily replaced by postmodern fragmentation. Tom Beaudoin puts it this way: “For Xers, both our *experience* and our *imagination* of our selves are characterized more by incoherence than coherence, more by fragmentation than unity.” He goes on to say, “We seem to have many centers, each of them shifting and unstable.”²⁷

When one is accustomed to toying with a multiplicity of perspectives, identities and worldviews, it is not surprising that life starts to feel fragmented. And when “difference” is experienced not just “out there in the world” but deep within our personal life, a biblical text that offers a path to integral wholeness (see Col 1:28—2:3) could only be received as odd at best, or as offering unrealistic pipe dreams at worst.

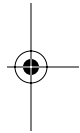
Postmodernity, then, can be described as a period of cultural disquiet. In the face of the betrayals and failures of past overarching metanarratives, culturewide suspicion and incredulity takes hold. A single story, providing coherence to personal identity, grounding for ethical action and passion for life in history, is displaced by a carnivalesque existence of fragmentation, numbness and boredom. Final decisions based on rational analysis give way to the undecidability of keeping all options open and the spiritual promiscuity of pop religion.

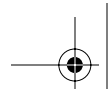
Cohen captures our cultural mood well when he sings,

²⁵Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991), p. 7.

²⁶Our thanks to David Lyon for this phrase. For helpful exposition of our cultural times, see his book *Post-modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

²⁷Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), p. 137.





The blizzard of the world
has crossed the threshold
and it has overturned
the order of the soul.²⁸

The cultural disquiet we are here describing is not a shift that is taking place only “around us”; it is happening “within us.” The postmodern blizzard has crossed the threshold and entered our homes. This is quite literally the case every time we turn on the television or surf the Internet. Christians do not live in a self-enclosed, hermetically sealed world. They breathe the same air as everyone else, and postmodernity is in the air.

So how do we read Scripture, specifically the letter to the Colossians, in such a context? Can Scripture continue to speak a fresh word, a radical word that has “voice and force in changed circumstances”?²⁹

But things are more complicated than we have thus far suggested. Recall that postmodern disquiet is only one voice we need to hear as we discern our cultural context. There is another loud, persistent and powerful voice.

Cybernetic Global Optimism

Here’s the problem. The same young adults who listen appreciatively to artists like the Smashing Pumpkins (and Tori Amos, Nine Inch Nails, Rage Against the Machine, Marilyn Manson, etc.) are often at the forefront of the cybernetic revolution with all of its super-hyped hope of a new era of economic growth along the information highway. Somehow, crushing despair and even nihilism capture the imagination of a generation that at the same time is buoyantly optimistic about the future. What we see here is both a sense of the emptiness, betrayal and ending of a particular cultural mythology and—at the same time and often in the same people!—a retrenchment, intensification and rebirth of that very same worldview or cultural myth.

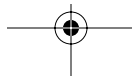
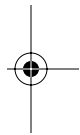
While an artist like Leonard Cohen can apocalyptically intone that the story of modernity is “over, it ain’t going any further” precisely because the poet has “seen the future baby, it is murder,”³⁰ that’s not the way things look from the perspective of the cybernetic revolution. Indeed, IBM ran a three-paneled advertisement recently that confidently proclaimed in the middle panel, “We have seen the future. And it actually held still for a couple of photographs.” Those photographs are on the other two panels, and they are, predictably enough, of IBM’s most recent technology.

Wired magazine’s photoessay “Change Is Good” illustrates well this transformation of apocalyptic anxiety and nihilism into the buoyant humanistic optimism of the cyber-

²⁸Cohen, “Future.”

²⁹Calvin G. Seerveld, “Footprints in the Snow,” *Philosophia Reformata* 56 (1991): 30.

³⁰Again, Cohen, “Future.”





netic revolution.³¹ In this essay the past is presented as a time of terror, ignorance, hierarchical control and stifling pollution, while the future is depicted as a time of peace, Internet access to information, egalitarianism and natural harmony. We are confidently told that “for the first time in a long time, PROSPERITY in the world is expanding faster than the population” because we have entered “the Long Boom” with “the arrival of personal computers, open markets and globalization in the early 1980’s.”

It doesn’t take too much imagination or suspicion to discern that all of this buoyant optimism is little more than a new, improved version of the very same modernity that Tori Amos and the Smashing Pumpkins feel has betrayed them. When a photo of a replica of Rodin’s *The Thinker* sculpture being lowered into place by a crane bears the caption “In this economy, our ability to create wealth is not bound by physical limits, but by our ability to come up with NEW IDEAS—in other words, it’s unlimited,” it becomes clear that this is the same old modernity all over again. But this isn’t just a retrenched modernity, it is modernity with an arrogant vengeance. It is almost as if postmodernity has managed to kick one or two modernist demons out the front door, only to allow seven more virulent demons in the back.

If the problem in late modernity was that it seemed as if it could not deliver on its socioeconomic and cultural promises, then the new and improved modernity is confident that information technology will be able to deliver on our deepest dreams and realize our most precious values. The *Wired* photoessay accompanies a picture of the Berlin Wall crumbling with the words “Networks are inherently decentralizing and anti-hierarchical”—as if the World Wide Web brought down the wall!

That this is warmed-over humanism is demonstrated in an advertisement from AT&T which shows us a group of people, all of whom have a globe in their hands—or on a laptop! The ad copy reads,

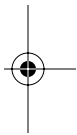
Your world without limits. It’s not about phones. Or faxes. Or the World Wide Web. They are just the tools for you to do what you want, be what you want, get what you want from life. Life? You get out of it what you put into it. Introducing AT&T Canada True Choice . . . A world of communication tools for the only world that matters. Yours.

With this technology, we are told, autonomous human beings once again have history under control, once again can determine for themselves what life is all about. There may well be a plurality of worlds, but they are all in our hands—if we have the right technology!

Contrary to the postmodern disquiet identified above, this optimism is fueled and propelled by the cybernetic revolution in communications technology and rooted in a metanarrative.³² An extended citation from another article published in *Wired* magazine illustrates the point:

³¹“Change Is Good.”

³²Portions of the following analysis have previously been published in an article by Brian Walsh, “Will You Have Fries with That Faith?” *The Varsity* 120, no. 41 (March 7, 2000): 10.





We are watching the beginnings of a global economic boom on a scale never experienced before. We have entered a period of sustained growth that could eventually double the world's economy every twelve years and bring prosperity for—quite literally—billions of people on the planet. We are riding the early waves of a 25-year run of a greatly expanding economy that will do much to solve seemingly intractable problems like poverty and to ease tensions throughout the world. And we will do it without blowing the lid off the environment. . . . These two metatrends—fundamental technological change and a new ethos of openness—will transform our world into the beginnings of a global civilization . . . that will blossom through the coming century.³³

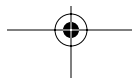
This is pretty inspirational stuff! And *inspiration* is the right word! Think about it for a minute. Where else do we meet language about solving problems that have previously been intractable, radical new beginnings, transforming the world, an ethos of openness, and the blossoming of life? Doesn't all of this sound just a tad religious? In fact, we could find strikingly similar language in the epistle to the Colossians.

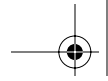
Of course, it could be asked how something so clearly materialistic as the shift to a centralized global economy could ever be confused with a religion. What could possibly be religious about a borderless economic order ruled by transnational corporations moving capital around in cyberspace and exploiting public resources for private economic gain? What could be religious about a free market of unrestrained competition in which we can all fish in each other's ponds without worrying about outmoded notions of national sovereignty or local control of resources? And how could the hope of a rising economic tide that will "lift all boats" ever be construed as a religious hope? Never mind the problem that only people with the capital resources to own fishing gear get to fish in other folk's ponds—and that if you don't actually own a boat then a rising tide is more like a Mozambiquan flood than a symbol of hope. Those are just glitches in the system. And while they may suggest at least some degree of blind faith is at work here, surely globalization isn't a religious vision, is it? We think it is.

This cultural force promises nothing less than the blossoming of a new civilization that will eventually bring an end to international conflict, resolve hitherto intractable problems like poverty and environmental degradation, and produce increased prosperity for all—even though all the current evidence seems to contradict these promises! We are dealing with something here that is bigger than free trade, the lifting of tariffs, money speculation and exploitation. We are facing the most powerful, fastest-growing and most successful religion in the history of the world. And what is fantastic about this religion is that it actually doesn't require any volitional choice of its converts.³⁴

³³Peter Schwartz and Peter Leyden, "The Long Boom," *Wired*, July 1997, p. 116.

³⁴Harvey Cox puts it this way: "I am beginning to think that for all the religions of the world, however they may differ from one another, the religion of The Market has become the most formidable rival, the more so because it is rarely recognized as a religion" ("The Market as God: Living in the New Dispensation," *Atlantic Monthly* 283, no. 3 [March 1999], available online at <www.theatlantic.com/issues/99mar/marketgod.htm>).





In a famous essay, Benjamin Barber described the dynamics of globalization as the emerging “McWorld” culture. “McWorld is a product of popular culture driven by expansionist commerce. . . . It is about culture as commodity, apparel as ideology.” In such a commodity culture, various products become “icons of a lifestyle,” and shopping malls become “the new churches of a commercial civilization” in which everything is “constructed around image exports creating a common world taste around common logos, advertising, slogans, stars, songs . . . and trademarks.”³⁵ Icons, churches, image, logos, songs. Do you see the pattern?

When a religion aggressively proselytizes and seeks to transform the world, its most important resource is its images. It is image that transforms the imagination, and it is imagination that engenders a lifestyle. And what globalization does better than anything else is transform the imagination. That is why the entertainment and advertising industries are the first wave of the emerging global consciousness.

In *Mustard Seed Versus McWorld*, futurist Tom Sine puts it this way: “Borders are melting and distance is dying as five billion of us now shop at the same macromall and stare transfixed at the same electronic images.”³⁶ Those images, whether on a television set or a computer screen, are not simply about increasing free trade and free enterprise; rather, they “are working to redefine what is important and what is of value in people’s lives all over the planet.”³⁷ What is at stake in globalization is not only the production and consumption of products but, more important, the construction of a homogenized global consumerist consciousness. Globalism wants more than your pocketbook, it wants your soul.

“Wait a minute,” someone is bound to say. “Capitalism is about capital, it’s about money. Religion is about faith.” Well, we’re not so sure that capitalism isn’t ultimately a matter of faith.³⁸ Faith is invariably rooted in overarching stories or metanarratives that give meaning and direction to life. (Precisely the kinds of stories that engender postmodern incredulity!) Such stories always entail certain foundational beliefs or assumptions. These assumptions and these kinds of stories are usually argued *from*, not argued *to*. They are the basis of any argument and are not, in the end, finally provable. That is, they require faith.

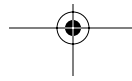
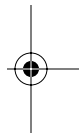
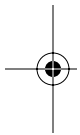
Given this little bit of phenomenology of faith, what might we say about globalization? To begin with, let’s note that global capitalism is the most recent (and most virulent) chapter in a story that has its roots in the age of discovery, the industrial revo-

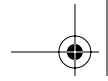
³⁵Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Times, 1995), p. 17. This book is an expansion of the original article of the same title that appeared in *Atlantic* 269, no. 3 (March 1992): 53-63.

³⁶Tom Sine, *Mustard Seed Versus McWorld: Reinventing Life and Faith for the Future* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), p. 53.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 21.

³⁸See Bob Goudzwaard, *Capitalism and Progress: A Diagnosis of Western Society*, trans. Josina Van Nuis Zylstra (Toronto: Wedge/Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1979).





lution and the Enlightenment. This is *the story of progress*, which proclaims with all the certainty of faith that civilization will blossom, peace will reign, and we will enter into an age of prosperity if we allow human reason to freely investigate the world by means of the scientific method and transform that world through technological power. If we do these things, then we will realize our highest aspiration, economic growth. This belief in the ineluctable progress of autonomous humanity is the underlying faith or religion of Western culture.

Now this grand tale of progress is a myth that requires faith at the best of times, but especially when none of its promises have been realized. International tensions have increased over the last one hundred years, the environment continues to be raped, and the rise of prosperity for the wealthy has been accompanied by increased poverty, starvation, homelessness and misery for the majority of the world's population. There is something wrong with this story.

The story's foundational assumptions themselves require faith. For example, is it self-evidently true that a limited, finite world can sustain unlimited economic growth? Can we provide an empirical justification for the belief that economic prosperity for the controllers of capital will necessarily result in increased prosperity for all? Doesn't it require faith to believe that economic growth is the driving force of history? And on what basis, other than a perversely blind, self-interested faith, can we justify the assumption of global capitalism that it is permissible to ruin one place or culture for the sake of another?³⁹

Globalization isn't just an aggressive stage in the history of capitalism. It is a religious movement of previously unheard-of proportions. Progress is its underlying myth, unlimited economic growth its foundational faith, the shopping mall (physical or online) its place of worship, consumerism its overriding image, "I'll have a Big Mac and fries" its ritual of initiation, and global domination its ultimate goal.

And now we come to a conundrum in our cultural analysis. Remember, we are trying to find a way to situate ourselves so that we are clear about the context from which we approach the biblical text and to which we want the biblical witness to speak. But we have met two seemingly irreconcilable perspectives on our cultural situation. Are we in a time of numbing cultural disquiet or riding the exciting wave of the cybernetic future? Are we really incredulous in the face of all metanarratives, or is the grand tale of global capitalism experiencing something of a revival? Do we really raise a toast to heterogeneity when our glasses are all full of the same beverages produced by the same international corporations and we are all wearing the same brand of blue jeans and using Microsoft technology to communicate with each other? Doesn't this look like homogeneity and sameness rather than heterogeneity and difference? Even if the

³⁹See Wendell Berry's criticisms of capitalism in *Home Economics* (New York: North Point, 1987); *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1992); and *Another Turn of the Crank* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1995).





world is a carnival, how significant is that if all the side shows are sponsored by the same international entertainment conglomerates? And what about moral flux? Are people in the global economy really having problems making life decisions, or are we mostly following the consumerist dictates of the market?

Ultimately, what all of this boils down to is the relationship between postmodernity and globalization. How are they related?

Postmodernity and Globalization

Empires are totalizing by definition. In the words of the psalmist, imperial “mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth” (Ps 73:9 NIV). Empires are built on systemic centralizations of power and secured by structures of socioeconomic and military control. They are religiously legitimated by powerful myths that are rooted in foundational assumptions, and they are sustained by a proliferation of imperial images that captivate the imagination of the population.

What could possibly be further from the antitotalizing, antihomogenizing agenda of postmodern thought and culture? While postmodernity wants to celebrate diversity and otherness, empires are all about hegemony and sameness. So while it is clear enough that the ineluctable forces of globalization are indeed imperial in character, isn't postmodern disquiet something of a protest movement in the face of such globalization? Not necessarily.

Nicholas Boyle notes that the global market is nothing less than “the establishment of the one and only world-system there has ever been” precisely because it has no outsiders.⁴⁰ “Since 1945 a single overriding economic fact, the development of the global market, has determined not only the economic but the political and cultural life of the human world, and has been responsible for all the most striking changes those years have seen,” including the rise of postmodernism as a cultural force.⁴¹

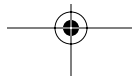
Walter Truett Anderson makes a similar point: “Globalism and a postmodern worldview come in the same package; we will not have one without the other.”⁴² The indissoluble link between them is precisely the “pluralism” that they both champion. As Boyle perceptively points out, “the belief that there is, not a single truth and a single world, but a multiplicity of mutually untranslatable perspectives, is strangely analogous to the belief that the market is a boundless medium within which perfect competition is possible between an infinite number of discrete commercial identities.”⁴³ The postmodern multiplicity of perspectives is essentially the

⁴⁰Nicholas Boyle, *Who Are We Now? Christian Humanism and the Global Market from Hegel to Heaney* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), p. 74.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁴²Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 25.

⁴³Boyle, *Who Are We Now?* p. 152.





same as the multiplicity of products available on the global market. In such a pluralism, “the moral world, like the material world, is supremely represented as a shopping mall: it is now open to us to stroll between the shelves and pick out, or opt for . . . whatever takes our fancy.”⁴⁴ In this discernment of our cultural context, postmodern emphases on choice, diversity, difference and otherness simply function as a smokescreen to cover the homogenizing forces of global capitalism.⁴⁵ Not only is postmodernity no real threat to the empire of consumerism, it also provides ideological comfort to that empire.

At heart, postmodernity and globalization share the same anthropology. For both, humans are understood primarily as units of consumption for whom choice is the defining characteristic. Again, Boyle is insightful:

The market does not concern itself with whether my choice is rational, whether it is identical or consistent with choices I made yesterday or may make tomorrow, nor does it concern itself with any purposes I may have in making my choice or any consequences of my choice insofar as these do not themselves involve market decisions. Indeed, as far as the market is concerned, I exist only in the moment of making a single commercial choice.⁴⁶

The fragmented self does not need to buy into any metanarrative of progress or make her choices according to any coherent or rational system of values. All she needs to do is make consumer choices. The Cartesian dictum “I think therefore I am” is replaced by “I consume therefore I am” (or “I shop till I drop”).

The difference between modernity and postmodernity isn’t all that great when looked at this way. The cult of the autonomous imperial ego, an “endlessly acquisitive conqueror and pioneer,”⁴⁷ devolves into a “commodious individualism” characterized by an “unencumbered enjoyment of consumption goods or commodities.”⁴⁸ This ego may not be centered on a modernist self-image of conqueror or pioneer—indeed it may well have abandoned any notion of centeredness altogether. Nonetheless, it remains an endlessly acquisitive ego, consuming the products and, more important, the images that global capitalism serves up.

In late capitalism we see an almost total commodification of life. And once *everything* is commodified—including beliefs, worldviews and all cultural products—then

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 80.

⁴⁵Mark McClain Taylor, “Vodou Resistance/Vodou Hope: Forging a Postmodernism That Liberates,” in *Liberation Theologies, Postmodernity and the Americas*, ed. David Batstone, Eduardo Medienta, Lois Ann Lorentzen and Dwight N. Hopkins (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 169.

⁴⁶Boyle, *Who Are We Now?* p. 153.

⁴⁷Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), p. 137.

⁴⁸Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, p. 43.





the imperial hegemony of global capitalism has been established.⁴⁹

Describing postmodern disquiet above, we noted that a postmodern culture appears to have no fixed ethical anchors and is characterized by profound moral instability. In the lives of many people that instability results in either a moral paralysis or an aimless wandering. But the economic globalism that we are here describing would seem to have a rather clear course through history, directed by the mandate to acquire and consume. The difference is that this is a course directed by no overarching ethical framework or guiding narrative. The young entrepreneur making a killing in e-commerce may be playing the same game as capitalists before him, but he does so without the benefit (or, it would appear, the need) of any grounding, legitimating or directing worldview or ideology beyond personal self-aggrandizement and security. Hence we see the ability to personally identify with the depressing nihilism of Gen X culture while at the same time being a full and energetic participant in global economics.

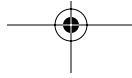
Stanley Hauerwas puts it this way: “Too often postmodernists turn out to be liberals in their ethics and politics who no longer believe in the conceits of liberalism but have nowhere else to go.”⁵⁰ Economic globalization is late capitalism without the framework of a modernist ideology of progress to provide it a narrative foundation and ethical direction.

Returning to William

So now we return to William. By his own admission, he has played the game of economic power in a global economy and found it lacking. Moreover, the anthropology of the autonomous ego constructing itself in a world of endless possibility has proved untenable. So he acknowledges that he needs God. He needs a source, an origin, a meaning beyond himself to give direction and accountability to his life. Another way to look at this is to say that in a world of imperial control, in a world that is suffused with the rhetoric, symbolism and images of empire, we need to have appeal to a power, a sovereignty greater than the empire, if we are to have any hope. In William’s struggle with his own Christian faith, he goes deep into the heart of the beast known as the empire—he plays at international finance—and comes out the

⁴⁹Peter Berger anticipated the commodification of belief in a radically pluralist society in *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967). He argued that once culture recognizes the constructed character of reality, religious traditions can no longer be imposed (to say nothing of “assumed”); they must be marketed. Religion “must be ‘sold’ to a clientele that is no longer constrained to ‘buy.’ The pluralist situation is, above all, a *market situation*. In it, the religious institutions become marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities” (p. 138). Anderson concurs: “Never before has any civilization openly made available to its populace such a smorgasbord of realities. . . . Never before has a society allowed its people to become consumers of belief, and allowed belief—all beliefs—to become merchandise” (*Reality Isn’t What It Used to Be*, p. 188).

⁵⁰Stanley Hauerwas, “The Christian Difference: Or, Surviving Postmodernism,” in *Anabaptists and Postmodernity*, ed. Susan and Gerald Biesecker-Mast (Telford, Penn.: Pandora, 2000), p. 48.





other side with a longing for a God who might be able to disarm and demythologize this beast.

But that doesn't mean that he is reading Scripture. Why not? Because in the absolutism of the Bible and its authoritative interpreters he has met a force as disempowering and oppressive as he met in the empire of global consumerism. Why trade in one absolutism for another?

We wonder, however, whether for William—or at least for many people of William's generation—the aversion to absolutes might itself be paradoxically representative of the continued power of the empire over them. Think about it for a minute. If postmodern pluralism, with all of its rhetoric of “the other” and “difference,” really is a smokescreen for the acquisitive, consumptive lifestyle of the empire of global capitalism, then might it not be that this aversion to absolutes is little more than a resistance to anything that might limit our consumer choice in the marketplace of ideas, beliefs and worldviews?

Don't get us wrong. We think that William has good reason to reject the absolutism of much conservative Christianity. In fact we will argue later in this book that the whole notion of “absolutes” is a bad idea that has been surreptitiously imposed on biblical faith. Nonetheless, perhaps a near-allergic reaction to a text that makes certain clear truth claims might be as indicative of a postmodern consumerist desire to “keep our options open” as it is representative of a healthy rejection of the oppressive strictures of a conservative religious worldview.

Let's put our cards on the table. William may want God, but the question is, which god does he want? And on whose terms will he accept this god? You see, the danger of wanting a god, without being willing to allow this god to speak in a voice that is radically *other* to our own voice, is that the god we end up with is like any other consumer product we take off the shelf. We would never be accountable before such a god, precisely because we never allow this god a voice that would actually call us to account. This consumer-friendly god, this god of postmodern construction, this generic off-the-shelf god would be no God at all. Rather, it would be an idol. And before idols like this the empire has nothing to fear, because ultimately such idols—such gods—are in the service of the empire.

There is, however, an important point we need to add here. We have already said that William has good reason to reject the Absolute Deity encoded in an Absolute Text of his past. He also has good reason, we suggest, to be wary of trading one absolutist system (of the empire) for another (of Christian faith). It will be incumbent on us in our engagement with Paul's ancient letter to the Colossians to demonstrate both how this letter is seriously misread if approached as an Absolute Text and how the kingdom this text proclaims is radically different from the violent absolutism of the empire. Before we proceed, however, we need to reflect for just a few more pages on that violent absolutism.

**September 11, 2001, Postmodernity and Empire**

No attempt at cultural discernment post-September 11, 2001, can fail to take into account the culture-shaping and history-shifting significance of the tragic events of that day and the response that these attacks evoked.⁵¹ If we are at all correct in referring to the culture of global consumerism—a culture that has become essentially synonymous with America—as an empire, then the events of September 11 and its aftermath only served to confirm the analysis. Indeed, if we are attempting to engage in cultural discernment of the shape of the twenty-first century, then it could be said that the twenty-first century began not with William in the pub on December 31, 1999, but on September 11, 2001.

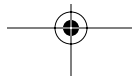
The tragic events of September 11 cannot be fully understood apart from the dynamics of empire. Remember that we said earlier that empires are built on systemic centralizations of power and secured by structures of socioeconomic and military control. Moreover, empires are religiously legitimated by powerful myths that are rooted in foundational assumptions, and they are sustained by a proliferation of imperial images that captivate the imagination of the population. So what happened on September 11? In a stroke of perverse, counterimperial genius, America was attacked at the site of its socioeconomic and military control. The World Trade Center and the Pentagon were, of course, the perfect targets. This attack went to the systemic center of American culture—its economic control and military power. But just as important, these were targets of profound symbolic significance. These institutions are at the heart of the powerful myth that legitimates the empire identified with America. As Benjamin Barber puts it, this was an “astonishing assault on the temple of free enterprise in New York City and the cathedral of American military might in Washington, D.C.”⁵²

Clearly American political leaders understood that the battle at hand was of mythical proportions. This is why the language of myth was sharply in focus during the president’s brief address to the nation on the evening of September 11. The attack, he said, was an attack on “freedom” which was intended to inflict chaos on the nation, but he was here to tell us that America was still in control. The president was in the White House, government services would be reopened in the morning, and, most important, “America is open for business.”

America is open for business? Wasn’t that a rather callous and irrelevant comment under such circumstances? Not at all. You see, “America is open for business” means the forces of chaos will not triumph because the forces of salvation are stronger. And

⁵¹Much of this section is dependent on an article by Brian Walsh, “Lamenting the End of the Empire,” *Church Times*, no. 7231 (September 21, 2001): 9. See also Andrew Goddard, “Something Still Stands,” *Third Way* 24, no. 8 (November 2001): 13-17; and the provocative poem “September 11th, 2001,” by Godfrey Rust in the same issue.

⁵²Benjamin Barber, “2001 Introduction: Terrorism’s Challenge to Democracy,” in *Jihad vs. McWorld*, exp. ed. (New York: Ballantine, 2001), p. xi.



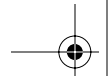


as we have seen, in this myth salvation is found in an ever-expanding global economy. If America is still “open for business,” then freedom still reigns! It is not surprising, then, that the litany repeated throughout the months following these attacks was two-fold. Yes, America will root out the terrorists and destroy them, together with anyone else perceived to be a threat to American freedom. But in the meantime, the highest patriotic duty of the American population was to go out and consume. We must not let the terrorists have the sweet victory of destroying our economy, our very way of life. Spend your money, fly on airplanes and take the kids to Disneyland! This was the moral admonition of the empire.

However, the American imperial mythology of invincibility, rooted in its economic and military hegemony and historically proved with the collapse of communism, had been shaken. When the president said that you can shake the foundation of a building but not the foundation of a nation, you knew somehow that this was not true. The foundation of the nation had indeed been shaken. For the first time in its history, an enemy of the nation had brought the pain, violence and bloodshed of war not only to the American mainland but to the heart of the American system of economic and military power. And you think that the foundations of the nation aren't shaking?

No wonder people on the street said that it all seemed so unreal, so much like a movie, rather than reality. How could this be reality? The American mythology has no way of interpreting such an event. In terms of the myth, the attack simply could not have happened. How could a nation that is so clearly virtuous, so moral, such a leader in civilizational progress ever be hated by anyone so much? Did they hate us, David Letterman asked, “because they don't get cable?” Is that it? Is this a matter of civilizational jealousy? Is it a matter of our just having more stuff than they do? The feebleness of Letterman's humor mirrored the superficiality of the culture that he entertains. So captivated by the consumerist imagination of the empire, and so immersed in the empire's self-justifying mythology and rhetoric, we find ourselves unable to fathom the depths of the crisis in which we now live.

If the myth is in crisis, who better to provide answers to our doubts than the official mythmakers of the empire—the media? And what better entertainment product but *The West Wing* to be the avenue for such myth refinement? In a special episode that was aired in response to September 11, an event of international terrorism has hit the United States, and the White House is subject to a security shutdown. But a group of bright high school students is now locked into the White House, and all of the show's regular characters arrive to discuss the issues with the students. The heart of the show—its moment of mythological resolution—comes right at the end. The security situation is resolved, and the students are about to leave, when the presidential press secretary makes his final point. He tells the students that if they really want to get to the terrorists, if they want to get at them deep down where they really live, then “believe more than one thing. It drives them crazy.”



Believe more than one thing. Embrace a plurality of belief. Keep your worldview options open. And these terrorists go crazy because they are capable of believing only one thing at a time.

Why do “they” hate us so much? Is it because of cable? Well, sort of. Perhaps they hate us because we are a cable culture of multiple channels mirroring a belief pluralism that just keeps too many options open. From the perspective of an Osama bin Laden, such pluralism represents not the maturity of an open society but the lack of moral courage and the conviction of a promiscuous society. Perhaps “they” hate us because we are the consummate consumers. Perhaps “they” find the consumption of belief so morally reprehensible that “they” are willing to risk everything in order to destroy such a civilization.

The culture we have just described is the global consumerist empire, with its post-modern multiplicity of perspectives. And now that empire is under attack. It is not only self-imploding under the sheer weight of its own consumer refuse but exploding under the attack of a counterimperial force.

And in such a context William wants to be a theist. But what will the God he now believes in have to say? And what might a text written by the apostle Paul in the context of the Roman empire possibly have to say to the twenty-first century—the third millennium—which began on September 11, 2001?

