

Indicators of the Postmodern Constructions of Religion and Spirituality

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Introduction

I arrived in 1990 as a priest in the parish of Port Melbourne. I followed a priest whom the parish had unsuccessfully tried to starve out. By any assessment the parish was stripped of the normal assets that allow a mainline church to function. Many of the buildings were beyond repair. On a rainy day with the wind in the right direction you needed an umbrella to stay dry inside the church building. There were only a handful of active parishioners left. There was no stipend available therefore I had to supplement my income from other sources. The treasurer had committed suicide just prior to my arrival.

In the following years the parish was revitalised. A new form of christian religious community emerged very different from anything preceding it. The community consisted of three sets of people. There was group simply looking for Christian church to express their Christian identity. Another group had limited or no previous ongoing exposure to Christian formation and had taken on the moniker of Christian, aware in a minimal sense for what they had signed on for.¹ The other group had an over abundance of christian cultivation and was looking to deconstruct this experience as they headed in a postchristian understanding of their religious identity.

I would argue that this diverse expression of Christian religious identity I have encountered is an essential expression of postmodern religious experience. Religious construction as a multifaceted process is a new phenomenon in Australia. My experience suggests that some people begin with something that they wish to perpetuate, some people wish to discover something new, while others wish to deconstruct what they have received. Some seek a little or a lot of all three. The fundamental question of this study is how the postmodern constructs the religious.

Modernist Construction of Religion

The diversification and fragmentation of religious construction is a response to the modernist conception of religious formation. How does the modernist worldview construct religious identity? The beginning of the modern period has been characterised as the turn to the subject.² During the seventeenth century a decisive turn took place in our religious

¹ For instance this group was highly influenced by a pyramid marketing scheme. Their evangelical zeal resulted in many if not the majority of parishioners trying this out to explore how it would improve their quality of living.

² Lonergan, B. *The Subject* Marquette University Press, 1969. At the centre of the Enlightenment vision is the idea that there is a stable, coherent, unified self or subject. This self is a given, that exists prior to society and history. The belief was that through rationality, we can rise above all social and historical influences, even

construction.³ A new era, the modern era, inaugurated the process of placing human reason and experience at the foundation above all knowledge including religious construction. It is the era in which epistemology became the centre of philosophy, replacing cosmology and metaphysics.⁴ It is the age of scepticism, reductionism, individualism, and the flight from traditional authority.⁵ No longer was revelation, mythology or religion sufficient for understanding our place in the world. Sometimes reference is made to the period before the Enlightenment as being 'premodern'. This refers to the period of history prior to the rise of the Western scientific method. This can be fluid for it could be argued that this begins with the Renaissance, confirmed by the Reformation and reaches its fruition in the Enlightenment.⁶ Modern science was one of the key forces that dissolved the premodern religious worldview. The birth of empirical method and scientific knowledge now relegated these to mythological status. It brought a new worldview in which human beings came to have an even more central place than before and arguably taking the place once occupied by God and religion.⁷

Christian churches have been the dominant organisational expression of religion in Australia and has exhibited the classic modernist tendencies in its construction of religion. When the First Fleet arrived, only Anglicans could offer religious services and everyone had to adhere or miss out. Upon this basis a religious diversity evolved that reflected the modernist trajectory of religion in other Western societies. Therefore, it is important to describe the milieu in which the modernist construction of religion takes place. Bosch helpfully identifies seven dominant ideas behind the modernist paradigm and how it impacted on Christian

above bodily desires and interests and attain a completely objective, impartial, unprejudiced grasp of how things are.

³ There is sound argument that the modern period actually began during the renaissance and reformation, which emphasised rationality expressed in creed and orthodoxy. Though it could be argued that there was a diversity of outlook even there, with Luther perhaps drawing from a premodern well whereas Calvin with his legal training reflecting the modern. At the very least, the Enlightenment signposts a significant new threshold in this development. Weber's view the emergence of rationality and legality equates it to the rise of modernity, which perhaps provides even a later date to the birth of the modern era.

⁴ Rorty, R. (ed.) *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, University of Chicago, 1967. He highlights that philosophy has taken another turn, understood as the *linguistic turn*.

⁵ Stout, J. *The Flight from Authority*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.

⁶ For instance, the premodern often refers to the seeking of knowledge beyond the rational; the modern to a desire to hold knowledge in the structure of human rationality (with or without God) it is postmodern to the impossibility of such knowledge.

⁷ Solomon, R. *Continental Philosophy since 1750: The Rise and Fall of the Self*, Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 4. It is the age of the rise of the self, beginning with Descartes who fathered the obsession with the self as the locus and arbiter of knowledge; the 'transcendental self' as Robert Solomon calls it, 'unprecedentedly arrogant, presumptuously cosmic... timeless, universal...!'

religion.⁸ He argues that the first characteristic was the modern primacy of reason, which means religion can no longer be unconsciously assumed but requires conscious and intellectual assent. The importance of reason in religion was not new but was now employed to radically relativise or affirm the exclusivist claims of Christianity. This provided the ferment of future sectarian loyalties. Church and theology responded in a variety and often overlapping ways:⁹

1. To divorce religion from reason and locate it in human feeling and experience and thus protect it from attack from reason.
2. To privatise religion by carving out for itself a small domain in public life and for the rest remains a personal matter.
3. To declare theology and religion itself a science and therefore the science of God superior, precisely as science, to any other science.
4. To establish its own hegemony by creating a Christian society, in which Christianity would be the official religion and public officers as well as government would have to adhere to religious principles and precepts. It sought to apply the notion of Christendom to a new context. An example of this is the church's bureaucratic partnership with the nation state in the process of births, deaths and marriages.
5. To embrace the secular society and its methodology so that religion was reinvented in its own image.

A central assumption to these new foundations for discerning truth was the belief that to all genuine questions there can only be one correct answer, all the other answers being incorrect. These correct answers are certain and indubitable. A further assumption was that all correct answers must, at the very least, be compatible with one another since logically, one truth cannot be incompatible with another truth or be in conflict with it. Furthermore, the belief was that these answers must form a harmonious whole, forming a system that is logically related. The belief was therefore that the truth is one, forming a harmonious whole. These assumptions amount to central tenant of modernist worldview of foundationalism. In his

⁸ Osborn, L. *Restoring the Vision*, Oxford, Mowbray, 1995. He identifies five "myths of modernity" that have affected the Christian Church in the West: the myth of evolution, the myth of progress, the myth of objective neutrality, the myth of scientism, and the myth of human perfectibility and autonomy.

⁹ Bosch, D.J. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, New York, Orbis, 1991, pp. 269-270.

characterisation of modern western thought, Isaiah Berlin makes the point that the utopian vision of reason rested on certain unquestioned dogmas which he calls 'foundationalist assumptions', about the nature of truth.¹⁰ This absolute conception of reality along with this enormous confidence in the power of human reason was a distinctive political and moral outlook. Reason was held to be able to provide the basis for a proper social organisation and for legitimate social authority. The belief was that social evils such as arbitrary, cruel and tyrannical exercise of political power are only able to persist because of ignorance and superstition and reason would bring about a non-oppressive, enlightened society. From this view of reason followed a view of history as progressive and as moving towards the ideal, enlightened society.

The second characteristic of the modernist paradigm involved the strict separation of subject and object in the natural sciences, which was also applied to religion.¹¹ This separated humans from their environment and enabled them to examine the world from the vantage point of objectivity. It was clear that there was a gap between the sources of Christian religion and our own times. One could no longer assume direct access to the Christian story and so the task of religion was to recreate, as far as possible, the original stories and glean a message from it for today's church. Increasingly one could stand outside the Christian religion and critique it from a neutral point of view.¹² The critique of sacred texts and traditions was conducted safe from the fear that they could examine the examiner. This required that clergy emulate scientific experts and their training reflected this development, as critical historical tools became even more central.

The third characteristic was the elimination of purpose from science and the replacement of purpose by direct causality as the clue to understanding of reality.¹³ The Newtonian paradigm viewed the world as increasingly governed not by purpose but by a closed cycle of cause and

¹⁰ Berlin, I. "The Crooked Timber of Humanity", Ch. 12 in Hardy, H. *Chapters in the History of Ideas*, Fontana Press, 1991, pp. 209-211.

¹¹ Bosch, 1991, pp. 270-271.

¹² Bosch, 1991, p. 269. Reason supplanted faith so that theology now differed from other academic disciplines only in its "object", so that in time it was increasingly difficult to allow room for God. Bosch states, "Previously, it was believed that humans derived their existence from God. Now the opposite was proclaimed - God owed his existence to humans. Freud declared religion to be nothing but illusion. Marx saw it as something evil, the "opiate of the people". Durkheim suggested that every religious community was, really, only worshipping itself. Others were more magnanimous. They conceded that there had been a time when belief in God made sense. Now, however, humans had become mature and no longer needed God. So, even if religion had at one time made sense, this prehistorical residue had no role to play in the modern world. The emergence of true humanity, which had been held in check by prejudice, superstition, and arbitrary authority, had at long last become a possibility."

¹³ Bosch, 1991, pp. 271.

effect. The cause determines the effect. The effect thus becomes explicable, if not predictable. It is reluctant to engage in the question by whom and for what purpose the universe came into being. The human mind becomes the master and initiator, which meticulously plans ahead for every eventuality, so all processes can be fully comprehended and controlled. Conception, birth, illness and death lost their quality of mystery, tending to be mere biological and sociological processes.

This leads to the fourth element, which is belief in progress.¹⁴ There was a new confidence that humans had the ability and the will to remake the world in their own image.

Modernisation and development were assumed to be an inevitable, linear process that would operate naturally in every culture. Material possessions, consumerism and economic advance became universal values. The birth of general education is indicative of this spirit. The Sunday school movement both led and expressed this commitment. Christianity was regarded as an irresistible power in the process of reforming the world, eradicating poverty and restoring justice for all. The singular expression of this is the nineteenth century missionary movement infused with the belief that progress was synonymous with the entire world being converted to Christianity.

The fifth characteristic was dichotomy between fact and value.¹⁵ Knowledge is based on facts, which have a life of their own independent of the observer. A belief is true when there is a corresponding fact and false when there is no corresponding fact. Over against facts is values based not on knowledge but on opinion or belief. Facts cannot be disputed whereas values are a matter of preference and choice. Religion was increasingly assigned to the realm of values. Two different truths or facts about the same reality could not coexist whereas two different values could. Different religions merely represented different values with the Christian religion one value in the religious sphere. In the sphere of values, tolerance became the key value. This was problematic as the various church traditions fuelled by premodern historical memory and affirmed by a modern sense of being the bearers of the religious facts conducted a battle for the religious heart and mind of Australian society. This sectarianism and the tendency to marginalise themselves from the rest of tolerant society portrayed the churches as sects battling for a dominant market share of Christianity.

¹⁴ Bosch, 1991, pp. 265-266.

¹⁵ Bosch, 1991, p. 266.

The sixth element was that all problems were in principle solvable.¹⁶ Of course, many problems were still unsolved but this was due to the fact that not all the relevant facts had been mastered. Everything was explicable as science continued its cumulative and all encompassing journey. In terms of religion this made belief in miracles and the transcendent unlikely if not impossible. The "God of the gaps" was gradually made smaller and smaller. This made the tenants of Christianity less appealing and changed its role to that of organised moral, communal and civic custodian.

The final characteristic of the modernist paradigm is that it regarded people as emancipated autonomous individuals. This faith in humankind was assured by the free competition of individuals to increasingly pursue their happiness. All humans are born equal with equal rights; a birthright bestowed by nature rather than religion. Therefore individuals are able to free themselves from the obligations of religious institutions and make their own decisions about what they believed and practised. This freedom also fuelled voluntary associations such as emerging sporting clubs. It reflects a new pattern for communal life that was informed by personal choice, preference and compatibility. The parochial church with its set territory to oversee had its geopolitical character gradually infused and overtaken by this voluntary association. The buildings, clergy and stipend arrangements sought to provide organisational infrastructure to support this new voluntary association.

The above general description is not exhaustive or suggesting that modernity is something monochrome. In some sense, many modernities exist in the sense that every culture and locality has its own history of interacting with modern dynamics including Australia. Each may be shown to have different ways of relating to the religious realm. Bouma historically identifies three transitional institutional arrangements between religion and western society. Each seeks to resolve modernist tendencies and the challenge of religious diversity.¹⁷

1. Religious 1400-1650: A period of intense religious conflict resulting in the repression and expulsion of religious diversity, as a new form of society is established with singular, totalising national state, religious and other institutions.
2. State Church Hegemonies 1648-1820: After the wars of religion, peace was established on the basis that one religion, organised by one religious group was to unite each society. All aspects of religious life were regulated by a central

¹⁶ Bosch, 1991, p. 273.

¹⁷ Bouma (ed), 1999, pp. 11-13.

authority, which not only legitimated the state but also used the state to enforce the regulation of religious life and the repression of diversity.

3. Tamed Populism - Mainline Religion 1820-1970: State church hegemonies unravelled in the face of revitalisation religious movements. Western societies moved sooner or later toward social institutions promoting or allowing tolerance of some level of religious diversity as long as the groups were supportive of the state and society. This led to the emergence of a new social institution - religious denominations sharing or competing for space in a society.

The result of this historical process, Bouma argues, is that religious life in Australia is fragmented with active participation in formally organised religion declining.¹⁸ No group is able to provide an all embracing overarching community of meaning for society let alone their many of adherents. The modern era was an age of imperialism in which the culture of one group was forced upon another in the name of unity, in the quest for universality of meaning, legitimacy and in the quest for evidence of superiority.¹⁹ The imposition on others of the religion of the dominating society was part of the process of empire building and expansion. Modernity rejected difference as evil or faulty and sought instead the one best strain of wheat, the one best form of nation state, the one best culture and the one best and only true religion.²⁰

How does the postmodern construct religion and spirituality?

The modernist worldview is inclined towards the abstract, monistic, deductive, ahistorical and is intimately bound up with deference to authority. The postmodern deconstruction of the modernist worldview has emphasised the concrete, pluralistic, inductive, historical, sceptical and is intimately bound up with deference to experience. The postmodernist wishes to fragment the power of modernist foundationalism and its supporting metanarratives. The modernist tendency to foundationalism absolutises worldviews whether they are political, social or religious.²¹ Such modernist absolutism can be seen as contributing as a source to most human atrocities from Nazism, Stalinism to the Stolen Generation. At the very least,

¹⁸ Bouma (ed), 1999, pp. 22-23.

¹⁹ Bouma, G.D. *Theology in Post-Modernity: The Social Context of Reflecting on Experiences of God*, Monash University, Department of Anthropology and Sociology Working Paper No. 6/92, 1992, p. 10.

²⁰ Bouma, *Theology in Post-Modernity*, 1992, p. 10. He argues that Christianity has reflected this modernity as it has attempted to develop systems of universally valid theology, uniform liturgy, the conversion of the world to Christianity and ecumenism.

²¹ Schlesinger Jr, A. *The Opening of the American Mind*, New York Times Company, 1989. Schlesinger's responds to Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* which defended modernist education against postmodern trends by arguing that modernist absolutism is the great enemy today of the mind.

postmodernist dynamics have auspiced a diversified and multiperspectival worldview. I would argue that postmodernist perspectives also seek to fragment this foundationalism which leads to singular views and tends to oppressive approaches. The postmodern appreciation of diversity is a deconstruction of absolutism's potency. A critique of modernist understanding and use of power was the context of deconstructing this modernist worldview. In this regard postmodern perspectives rebel against the notion of conformity to metanarratives, which are now understood as power projections. The notion that one needed to be converted to the truth was suffocating instead of liberating. The resultant fragmentation of truth legitimated the relative merits of different worldviews being introduced as a positive pathway. Difference rather than threatening Truth becomes the pathway to truth. This reflected a consumer and market driven approach to worldviews. In experiencing our differences we encounter our truth. In the religious sphere the modern religious organisations built to serve the edifice of Christendom lost their potency. This process is indicative of a general decline in social and cultural capital. The decline in church numbers in the last thirty years perhaps is an indicator of this fragmentation. This is not unique to christian churches but was also emulated among the political left following the fall of communism. Adherents to communism as an all embracing philosophy of life declined in the face of consumer and market driven worldviews.

In contrast, postmodernity accepts cultural differences as real, not resolvable and possibly even desirable.²² The differences among us are real and cannot be subsumed under some overriding system aspiring to attract universal acceptance. Bouma argues this is true for any field of knowledge, whether it is philosophy, politics, the arts or ecclesiastical organisation.

If the aim of modernity was the construction and imposition of universally integrating orders of thought, social organisation and aesthetics; the starting point of post-modernity is the acceptance that that project is doomed by the reality of the differences between among us. No single system of law, governance, religion or philosophy will unite. Humanity is bound together by the reality of interdependence not by similarity of race, culture, history or creed. Whilst these once provided and still do provide a form of unity for smaller communities and societies, they are not sources of global unity.²³

The postmodern person then is free of having to give his allegiance to one, none or more than one metanarrative and is able to access those worldviews from the smorgasbord on offer that

²² Bouma, *Theology in Post-Modernity*, 1992, p. 10.

²³ Bouma, *Theology in Post-Modernity*, 1992, p. 10.

make sense or work for them. Often it is a matter of adding layers upon layers than trying for congruence and logic. At times incongruent beliefs and practices are embraced with surprisingly little disquiet for people, for instance, reading one's horoscopes while being a scientist or a minister of religion.

There is a transition from modernist to postmodernist formation of individuals and communities across the various aspects of society including religious construction.²⁴ For example in Australia as elsewhere in Western societies, in the two hundred years, one could ask the question what are the measurable building blocks of the construction of Christian adherence? Whether protestant or Catholic there was a similar construction path. It involved a mixture of baptism, first confirmation, first communion, Sunday school, religious instruction at school, possible attendance at a Religious primary or secondary educational institution, marriage in a church, and with the birth of children the process repeated itself, finally a funeral in a church conducted by a Minister of Religion. Each tradition had variations on how they delivered, and the relative effectiveness of their religious construction. This path is clearly overlaid with modernist concepts and expectations. From the post war period until the latter part of last century, this modern construction of religion has fragmented. The statistics on marriages and funerals by Civil Celebrants is as clear a sign of this process. Overlaid is a new process which involves the postmodern construction of religion. The challenge is identifying people who are in the midst of this transition in order to observe and research this phenomenon.

Who is postmodern and how do you place yourself where the religious is being constructed? I wish to propose a set of criteria for locating the postmodern field of religious construction. I suggest that the following is a sufficient, though not exhaustive, basis for identifying postmodern religious construction.

1. Temporary Communal Allegiances

Postmodern religious construction occurs when belonging to group activity is characterised by transitory and temporary allegiances. Postmodern person belongs to many such communities. This is contrasted with belonging to a village, in what is often described as a

²⁴ Lyon, D. *Postmodernity*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 1994, pp. 29-30. He argues that modernity is a phenomenon of great diversity and richness. It can be seen in terms of its major institutional areas. It is not to be viewed as the outcome of some single overriding factor such as capitalism but a cluster of institutions. They include capitalism, industrialism, surveillance and the military, which dovetail with the dimensions of ethnicity, gender, culture and religion.

premodern construction of religion. Essentially this refers to the construction of religion by myths such as the dream time stories of Aboriginal spirituality or the recent attempts at philosophical and religious construction in classical and medieval traditions.²⁵ The notion of premodern often hides a sense that what can be described as modern is superior. This is not the case nor is it helpful to imply that the postmodern construction of religion is likewise superior or inferior to modern dynamics. Simply they are terms that describe and identify different social and cultural contexts within which religious construction is done.²⁶ In the case of the modern era it is belonging to a movement that seeks to shape society such as a mainline church or political party. The fragmentation of communal experience and its corresponding loss of control direct individual's concerns in group activities, as a form of compensation and security, to maintaining appearances and secrets management. This is a significant move from premodern concepts of losing face and shame, which were supplanted by the modernist social contract for negotiating communal exchanges. The aim of modern communal allegiance is to control and shape one's context according to a unilateral vision of the common good. People still seek community but with minimal hindrances to commitment beyond one's comfort zones. The notion of voluntary association has become dominant with increased mobility and the emergence of multiple and overlapping communal allegiances. Communal allegiances in the postmodernist perspective offer liberation from constraint enabling a new impetus to explore diverse religious expressions and worldviews. This works simultaneously at global and local levels.²⁷ Robertson has coined a helpful term describing this dual process, "glocalisation".²⁸ It points up the interconnection between the local and the global as mutually dependent. The result of this is that privatised religion, not only continues to increase, but does so in myriad pluralistic directions across a full range of religious

²⁵ For example, Alisdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1981 and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame, 1988., and John Milbank's *Theology & Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1990. For instance in Zuckert, C.H. *Postmodern Platos: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, Derrida*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996., she argues that one can read the many philosopher influential in the construction of postmodern worldviews by their response to the platonic tradition.

²⁶ Lyon, D. *Postmodernity*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 194, pp. 73-84. He highlights that it is better to regard postmodernity as a sign of modernity's exhaustion or at draw our attention to its limits. Therefore responding may involve resignation to the postmodern; reassertion of the modern; and reaching back to the premodern. Lyon is keen to highlight they do not necessarily exclude each other.

²⁷ Beyer, 1997, p. 67. He argues, "The analysis of religion must therefore proceed along a double track, one following its similarity and identification with group culture, another its character as a societal subsystem. Religion, in other words, like the political system, is a social sphere that manifests both the socio-cultural particular and the global universal."

²⁸ Robertson, R. "Globalization, Politics and Religion" in Beckford, J. & Luckmann, T. (eds) *The Changing Face of Religion*, London, Sage, 1989.

possibilities from superficial asceticism to devoted liberality, from committed sectarianism to piecemeal smorgasbord.²⁹

2. Consumer Identity

Postmodern religious construction occurs in a consumer context because capitalism has provided the buying power, which underpins the availability of diversity and difference. Consumerism entered the picture when it became easy to "shop". This is easily illustrated. There is no comparison with previous times as to the number of people who are now able to travel overseas. Previously the only way you travelled, unless you were of aristocratic stock or wealthy, was if you were yoked to a process bigger than your own interests such as soldier, public servant or priest. Travel is now available to high proportion of individuals in western societies as never before. The same goes for cuisine. In the not to distant past the most likely way one were to experience different cuisine is if one was cooking it for one's lord and master! In contrast, we experience the provision of being served diverse cuisine across the socioeconomic range, whether it is McDonalds or an elite French restaurant. Though capitalism is an abstract category, how it works, what it effects, varies in different places and at different times. Though capitalism is a modernist construct, consumerism is a postmodern phenomenon. The former describes a totalising means of production, the latter our access to the products of that production. Capitalism emerged during the later stages of organised capital.³⁰ The extent to which consumption structures societal patterns rather than production, further and more intensive differentiation and diversity become possible. To coin a phrase, 'I work in the means of production therefore I am' compared with 'I shop therefore I am'. Kumar argues postmodernity and capitalism is related and this impacts on our understanding of society including religion.³¹

Post-modernity maybe capitalist, but it is capitalism with a new face, one that shows many peculiar and unexpected features. The investigation of this novelty is important in its own right. In the end, the question of whether or not post-modernity is the ideology of (late) capitalism may not be very important - or, perhaps better put, it may be more a matters of emphasis or of the interest of the investigator. 'Post-modern capitalism' shows sufficient distinctiveness to warrant an analysis that respects the radical changes of form at all levels - cultural and political as well as economic - that modern society has undergone

²⁹ Beyer, 1997, pp. 93-94. He argues that this is the case regardless of whether one begins with liberal or conservative religious convictions.

³⁰ Crook, S., Pakulski, J. & Waters, M. *Postmodernization: Change in Advanced Society*, London, Sage Publications, 1992, p. 131.

³¹ Kumar, K. *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society: New Theories of the Contemporary World*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1995, p. 195.

in the last third of the twentieth century. If this leads some to conclude that we live in a new world, a post-modern world, they cannot be held guilty of either blindness or naivety. The contemporary world may not be simply or only post-modern; but post-modernity is now a significant, perhaps central, feature of its life, and important way of thinking about it.

He affirms the view that postmodern phenomena are essentially linked to mass socioeconomic wealth creation available as a result of the modern era. Within the emerging form of consumption, products represent codes and shared systems of meaning found in fashion, advertising, media messages and information processing but which are without material foundation and have limited terms of reference but their own, creating an imagined community characterised by common tastes, habits and concerns.³² Such simulations even encourage a sense of fellowship, common interest and shared identity. However, these communities do not depend on an actuality of shared situation, much less on dense interpersonal networks, and are linked to specific power arenas of advantage and disadvantage. They generate an enormous capacity to affect social practice. As Crook, Pakulski and Waters declare:

Postmodernisation involves a shift in patterns of differentiation from the social to the cultural sphere, from life-chances to lifestyles, from production to consumption.³³

Contemporary life is increasingly structured around consumption. People establish significant boundaries and build bridges through consuming. Social integration and identity formation are increasingly found through consumption. In fact, society needs consumers and consumption ;is indiscriminating in its effect on everything from education to medical care.

Religious activity in a postmodern context involves a similar process of choosing and possessing those options that work or are most comfortable. Capitalism in creating the middle class empowered the modernist commitment to questioning traditional authorities and received wisdom. Other certainties were discovered with a corresponding imperative to win people to this alternative vision of truth. In contrast, the postmodern context overlays a commitment to tolerance. Therefore postmodern religious communal experience is transitory in Australia with preponderance to rent rather than own. The socioeconomic autonomy and choice sponsored by capitalism has generated diversity and fragmentation in identity. It

³² Crook, Pakulski & Waters, 1992, p. 132.

³³ Crook, Pakulski & Waters, 1992, p. 133.

allows people the freedom to broaden their identity and more importantly it allows people to possess and develop multiple identities. As Kumar argues, heterogeneity, difference and fragmentation mark contemporary social reality.³⁴ This represents the break up of the order associated with premodern organic and modern western societies. Reality is classified in multiple and overlapping yet separate ways.

The concept of the postmodern is made up of distinct and overlapping features that cannot be aggregated or integrated, unlike more traditional concepts such as feudalism or capitalism. The postmodern is expressed in the language of 'discourse' and 'voices' rather than falsifiable propositions. Bouma argues that until recently Australians were identified by a few totalising and exclusive categories which they achieved, such as work; chose such as a Football team; or born to, such as religion. Now identity is determined more by what Australians consume, religion being one of the products available for identity consumption.³⁵

In so far as religion is identified by its traditional institutional forms, so consumerism is seen as an erosive force. While the metanarratives of western modernity might in some respects be fading, this does not mean that no narratives are available or that what remains does not have sacred aspects. What has taken place is a process where religious commitment has been supplanted by consumption nurturing a person's spirituality. The deregulation of religion has mutated into a range of spirituality resources. In postmodernity, religion is best understood as a cultural resource than as a social institution. Religion has become both a container for cultural conservation and a source of radical change. The realm of choice has opened up tremendously for most people in the affluent societies, giving unprecedented opportunities to chose lifestyles and beliefs from a range of options. One is less likely to be a religious dweller and more a spiritual seeker. Consumer choices are made, using skills acquired in the general consumer marketplace, but the nature of these can vary from the shallow and superficial to the seriously considered. Fun and fundamentalism appear as points on a continuum of such choices, thus producing the possibility new extremes of opinion and conduct far less encountered in modern, let alone premodern, varieties of religious expression. The effect of consumerism is to supplant religion with spirituality. The question is, what sort of religion is constructed out of this postmodern process?

³⁴ Kumar, p. 183.

³⁵ Bouma, 1999, p. 21.

3. Human Interest Story

Postmodern religious construction asserts that truth is accessed through and in human interest stories. This mode of engagement is endemic in all forms of communication. The human interest story reflects its modernist heritage in its turn to the experiential human subject. However this turn to subject is no longer serving a metanarrative. The same human interest story can work to undermine or support a worldview. A story of conversion can function as an affirmation of religious identity and proof of its bankruptcy. Postmodern religious truth is an amalgam of human interest stories that have resonance for a person. Zuckert explains how Derrida undergirds much of this transitory view of identity formation.³⁶

Derrida is much better at pointing out the difficulties in other positions, arguments or texts than he is at articulating a positive alternative or "direction", which is to say, way of life. He himself occasionally admits as much. For example, in "The Principle of Reason," he concedes that it is not certain that the questioning of first principles he advocates "can bring together a community or found an institution in the traditional sense." And in "Post-Scriptum" he notes that "community [is] a word I never much liked, because of its connotation of participation, indeed fusion, identification; I see in it as many threats as promises." If all forms of order have inherently questionable foundations, Derrida urges, the most important thing is to remain vigilant in the face of any and all attempts to articulate and impose any that would exclude other alternatives.³⁷

In the insistence that there is no "Author", Derrida agrees with Nietzsche, in effect, that God is dead. Therefore, everything should be regarded as a 'trace' of something that is no longer there, which is gradually erased or concealed by later marks. Derrida does not think this insight into the essentially transitory character of all things is the result of a lengthy historical development. On the contrary, the traces of the essential in-decidability of all issue(s) are to be found from the very beginning. A parallel is worth noting between this insight and with high energy physics and astronomy, where matter has ceased to be but now happens. And if history has no beginning or origin, it does not have an end either.³⁸ What Derrida seeks to show is that there is a more historical understanding of our "knowledge" as a series of incomplete stories.³⁹ Derrida brings out the fact that there are alternative or competing accounts of the tradition from its inception, because he thinks explicit recognition of the incomplete, nonnecessary character of any one account will have desirable political effects

³⁶ Zuckert, 1996, p. 226.

³⁷ Zuckert, 1996, p. 253.

³⁸ Zuckert, p. 226.

³⁹ Derrida, J. *Khora*, Paris, Galilee, 1993, pp. 15-16.

including in religious expression and construction.⁴⁰ This affirms the notion of the human interest story as a trace element in religious construction in the broadest sense.

Spirituality can be seen as an aspect of the autonomous subject where religious expression becomes increasingly the product of individual biographies, patterned after similar human interest stories. Tracing individual paths of biographical identity construction is done by studying the actual practices that are adopted to make sense of life. Needless to say, autonomous spiritual subjects, who construct their own religious identity through peculiar patterns of practices not only create new questions for social analysis, but also for ongoing religious activity.

4. Self Authenticating Rituals

Understanding religious construction is now more than ever an interaction of family pathology and personality characteristics performed in a metanarrative vacuum. The individualism of the modern era has given way to the self authenticating and self serving experience. This is not to say that it is selfish or only motivated by self interest. Anderson argues that research often focuses on the individual's thought process but there is no suggestion that we construct our world all by ourselves.⁴¹ Reality construction is a process.⁴² Some of these constructs are tenacious but they are still only temporary manifestations of a dynamic flow of thought which are difficult to map or describe in their entirety. Rituals enable access and insight to these constructs. The nature of our rituals is no longer accepted as given but is created by reference to one's own world. This self interest is dynamic. It describes the scope of one's world rather than any rampant solipsism. It involves more than whether there is room for others in one's world. The size of one's self interest encompasses individuality, family allegiances, neighbourhood, work place, global concerns and so on. Anderson describes this process as follows.

And it appears that we construct not just one reality, but realities and realities and realities, that overlap and enclose one another and sometimes conflict. We have large-scale images of the universe and metabeliefs and concepts of space and time, and we have mid-range norms and values and beliefs and customs that shape our social experience, and we have personal images of the self and

⁴⁰ Zuckert, 1996, p. 235-236.

⁴¹ Truett, W. *Reality Isn't What It Used To Be*, San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1990, p. 67.

⁴² Truett, p. 68.

identities and stories about the courses of our individual lives: multiple realities even within ourselves, and changing ideas about what reality is.⁴³

Describing the content of one's self interest is dynamic and can tend to the reductionist or expansionist. The rituals that construct one's self interest are one aspect of how the postmodern constructs the religious. Just as the self authenticates ritual it can be shown that rituals authenticate individuals and communities. Rituals both express and construct such processes. How faith finds new forms, how spirituality finds new modes of expression, within postmodern conditions, cannot be predicted. The point is not prediction but the tracing of trends, the mapping of everyday experiences and patterns. Humans beings construct their identities and pattern their dreams using whatever resources are available, including spiritual, for self and social understanding.

The underlying assumptions about the general trends in social change suggest that the times are postmodern.⁴⁴ Society itself is regarded as social construction of reality. All the things that identify and define such as boundaries, culture, political institutions are usually the products of earlier inventions. Individual identity is also regarded as social construction of reality. This means that the concept of "self" is different in different societies and different stages of history. This requires that we study the collective beliefs of individuals, as the ultimate repository of social reality, as opposed to the mind of God or the laws of nature. Beliefs are dynamic and can be modified. Consequently all sectors of society are deeply interested in finding out what people believe (public opinion) and modifying those beliefs (advertising, propaganda, brainwashing, public relations, marketing and so on). In postmodern society we perceive life as narratives, and the major issues involve the definition of personal roles and the construction of stories that give purpose and shape to social existence.

The postmodernist onset is genuinely explosive as liberated societal components diverge rapidly from modernity's progress.⁴⁵ In contrast, postmodernity is characterised by unpredictability and apparent chaos as much because our perception is in a context of change. Established social patterns seem divorced from underlying material constraints such as the

⁴³ Truett, W. p. 68.

⁴⁴ Truett, W. pp. 107-108.

⁴⁵ Crook, S., Pakulski, J. & Waters, M., 1992, p. 35.

family structure or life long loyalty to the same workplace. In their place, social patterns and rituals enter the voluntary realm of taste, choice and preference. The result is boundaries that determined large scale social phenomena such as states, monopolistic economic organisations, ecclesia, military forces and scientific establishments are fading, diversifying and fragmenting.

As our times can be understood as postmodern, so the postmodern can be seen as essentially religious. This is based on the concept of reflexivity.⁴⁶ This reflects the shift in public psychology, which is the mind's ability to see itself, and to see itself seeing itself.

This recognition involves two of the main keys to postmodern thought: the admission that all explanations of reality are themselves constructions - human, useful, but not perfect - and the ability to "step out" of reality constructs and see them as such.⁴⁷

This stepping out is the characteristic action of the postmodern era.⁴⁸ As we let go of the modern era's idea of progress where everything gets better, the postmodern idea of ever increasing reflexivity, encourages each era of history seeing previous eras and seeing itself, and therefore the individual mind more capable of thinking about its thought. This applies to individual and communal experiences. All of postmodernism, in fact, can be summarised as looking at beliefs - including one's own.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Truett, p. 254.

⁴⁷ Truett, pp. 255.

⁴⁸ Truett, pp. 256.

⁴⁹ Bouma, *Theology in Postmodernity*, 1992, pp. 4-5. He asserts theology is best understood as a reflexive task generated by any experience which is labelled as involving God. It is premised on the belief that God is, acts and can be sensed in life, in all of life.