

## ABSTRACT

### THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO POSTMODERNISM: A LOOK AT THE LOGICAL AND SCRIPTURAL FALLACY OF POSTMODERNITY

This thesis argues that postmodernity, specifically the theory of deconstruction, is both illogical and incompatible with the Christian faith. This argument is based upon looking to the epistemological system of *a priori* warrant and to the Biblical arguments as presented by Francis Schaeffer. The first half of the paper deals with what postmodernity (deconstruction) is and its application to Christianity. The last half of the paper explains why postmodernity is ultimately illogical and why it cannot be applied to Christianity.

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## THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO POSTMODERNISM: A LOOK AT THE LOGICAL AND SCRIPTURAL FALLACY OF POSTMODERNITY

Currently, the most predominant philosophical system in Western society that is likewise permeating into Christianity is postmodernism, specifically the branch of deconstruction<sup>1</sup>; ultimately, however, such a system is logically flawed, can be supplanted by a better system, and is incompatible with Christianity. Postmodernity teaches that either there is no absolute truth or if there is absolute truth, such truth cannot be known. In the absence of absolute truth, all “truth” is left to one’s own interpretation where one must deconstruct the text. Many postmodern innovators, such as John Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, are attempting to apply this system to Christianity, claiming that the Bible is not absolute and that the human idea of God is false. These beliefs are ultimately false in that they are illogical. Aside from being illogical, through Alvin Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemology, truth can be known substantially. Finally, postmodernity (deconstruction) is mostly incompatible with Christianity, as shown through the writings of Francis Schaeffer.

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<sup>1</sup> The use of “deconstruction” rather than “deconstructionism” is intentional. As Peter Rollins explains, “Derrida would, I think, not be happy as it makes it [deconstructionism] into a concrete position rather than an act that takes place. Usually 'deconstructionism' is a term used pejoratively and allows the critic to develop a line of argument that does not really deal with what Derrida is doing.” Joel Borofsky, From Joel, e-mail message to Peter Rollins, April 18, 2009.

## Ye Olde Belief

For millennia, most epistemic foundationalists supported Plato's theory of Justified True Beliefs (JTB) as a foundation for knowledge. Such a theory teaches that one only has knowledge when a belief is true, when a person believes the belief, and when one is justified (usually through physical evidence) in believing the belief. The logical syllogism is formed as such:

1. Person *S* believes proposition *P*
2. *P* is true
3. The belief in *P* is justified for *S* at the same time *S* believes it

According to Moreland and Craig, "For a long Time, the standard definition of propositional knowledge was more or less accepted as adequate by philosophers."<sup>2</sup> Thus, JTB was the accepted standard of knowledge for foundationalists for quite some time.

Unfortunately for foundationalists, Edmund Gettier posed some counter-examples to JTB in 1963 that were seemingly detrimental to the belief in JTB. The ultimate point of the counterexamples is to show that it is possible to have JTB without having knowledge (knowing for certain that something is true). One famous counter example is that of a man seeing sheep. Gettier's counterexample supposes that a man is walking along and sees what he perceives to be a sheep in the field. He forms the belief that there is a sheep in the specific field he is looking at. He forms the belief, "There is a sheep in this specific field." Unbeknownst to him, the sheep is actually a wolf in sheep's clothing. However, half a mile further in the field there is an actual sheep that the man cannot see.

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<sup>2</sup> J.P. and Craig Moreland, William Lane, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 74.

Thus, though his belief is justified, is true (there is a sheep in the field), and a belief, it nonetheless fails to constitute knowledge. Gettier's counterexample (one among many) seemingly pokes holes into the theory of JTB.

With doubt cast upon the theory of JTB, postmodernity (skepticism) suddenly seemed justifiable and the theory of deconstruction slowly began to creep in. After all, if one cannot be certain of knowledge, then deconstruction (stripping the text out of its culture and away from its bias) makes the most sense. All knowledge would be coherent as opposed to foundational.<sup>3</sup> If all knowledge is coherent, then it means it is constructed, or that it is structured within a certain cultural context. This would mean that the primary method of teaching knowledge – language – would simply be words that contain the events of knowledge put forth by the culture. In order to gain a deeper understanding of a text one would have to deconstruct a text. Gettier's doubt helped justify postmodernism by laying the foundation for philosophers to jump over to deconstruction.

### **Derrida's Deconstruction**

Deconstruction, simply put, is the critical evaluation of a text or event by looking at its internal workings, cultural surroundings, biases of the author, author's intent, and reader's reaction to the text. Proponents of deconstruction, using this method, believe that there never is one unifying understanding of the text; all texts are "...always unfinished, full of holes, and contradictory."<sup>4</sup> The reason for this belief is that deconstruction views

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<sup>3</sup> Coherentism teaches that P is justified by R, R is justified by Q, and Q is justified by P. All beliefs are built upon each other. Foundationalism, however, teaches that Q is justified by P, P is justified by R, and R is justified by nothing as it is a basically proper *a priori* belief.

<sup>4</sup> Glenn Ward, *Teach Yourself Postmodernism* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 2003), 7.

all writings as fragmented parts of different cultures, societies, and languages. Thus, it is impossible for something to avoid being contradictory.

The goal of deconstruction (if it can be said that deconstruction can have a goal) is, therefore, to open up the text and expose the errors found within. Glenn Ward gives an excellent definition for the purpose of deconstruction when she says:

“Deconstruction discovers hidden assumptions. There is no ‘pure’ knowledge outside of society, culture, or language. This means that all belief systems, however ‘rational’ they may appear...are available for critique. The more a point of view presents itself as ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ the more Derrida wants to deconstruct it.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the point in deconstruction is to lay bare the flaws in the text, but also to embrace those flaws. Nothing is free from being deconstructed and Derrida attempts to apply deconstruction to every avenue of human existence.

### **The Nietzschean Revolution**

To understand what brought postmodernism and deconstruction about, one must look to the history, specifically beginning with Nietzsche. The historical roots of postmodernity play into the method of deconstruction. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche argues that, “There are no moral phenomena at all, only a moral interpretation of phenomena...”<sup>6</sup> By this quote, Nietzsche is saying there is nothing absolute in the world, merely the human interpretation of what occurs in the world. This view goes beyond Kant’s categorical imperatives (as Nietzsche makes clear in *The Genealogy of Morals*), of people relating to some synthetic *a priori* and visualizing the world through

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<sup>5</sup> *Teach Yourself*, 103

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 96.

such actions – Nietzsche’s “interpretation” states there is no absolute for anyone. One does not relate to the world or conform to what is true; one merely interprets what one sees.

This subjectivity of Nietzsche lays down the foundation for postmodernism and deconstruction by removing the absolute. When the absolute is removed – such as in language – there is nothing to appeal to other than social convention. With everything being an interpretation, one does not decipher the *truth* of what is said, but rather one deciphers what one believes is being said. One looks to find the underlying view that has dictated the reason a person said something. An example if someone says, “Muhammad was a prophet and all humans should be guided by him.” The postmodern would point out that the person is not claiming this out of some “absolute truth”, but that a person is playing out the cultural surroundings in the person’s word play – he is making the claim to validate himself. Modern readers, however, would have to read their own culture and understanding into the text. Without the absolute standard of interpretation – without an appeal to a foundational fact – Nietzsche allows readers to forget what is said in a text and instead say what the reader wants the text to say.

Gianni Vattimo even admits that Nietzsche’s “interpretation, no facts” view has influenced deconstruction:

If, as good hermeneuticians, we go on to admit that there are no facts, but only interpretations, then what we are proposing is precisely an interpretation of the philosophical meaning of hermeneutics – not, however, one opposed to another specific interpretation that might underlie the general hermeneutic *koine*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Vattimo, Gianni, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, trans. David Webb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 2.

Nietzsche's other contribution was in his suspicion of all things, what Gianni Vattimo has called a "nihilistic hermeneutic of suspicion."<sup>8</sup> In *Beyond Good and Evil*, when introducing his work, Nietzsche argues that the philosopher should ascribe to the belief of *de omnibus dubitandum* ("doubt everything").<sup>9</sup> To Nietzsche, all things are to be doubted no matter how those things sound. This eventually causes cynicism, which leads to a negative and nihilistic attitude toward all things—even when an activity appears to be altruistic; the cynic argues that there is a darker motivation masked by altruism. All interpretation, through the Nietzschean method, looks upon all writings with suspicion and looking for some underlying motive.

The effect of such a hermeneutic is seen most prevalently in popular culture, specifically on how celebrities are dealt with in the media. A celebrity that is known for being a partier and playing "fast and loose" with certain ethical codes is fun to watch for a while, but it gets old because what the celebrity does is expected. Whether it is Britney Spears or Paris Hilton, the news gets old after a while because people expect negative actions. However, if a politician who is against homosexual marriage is caught having a tryst with his secretary, or a philanthropic celebrity is found to be spending money frivolously and selfishly, society can hardly stop talking about it. The reason is it confirms societal suspicions that there are always underlying selfish motives for a person to act in a certain way.

Thus, deconstruction has found its way into the popular culture via postmodernity. Since people have accepted that there is no absolute truth or that if

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<sup>8</sup> *Beyond Interpretation*, 3

<sup>9</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil*, 5

absolute truth exists, humans cannot know it, they have abandoned all hope of finding truth in anything; this even breaks down into how one reads a text. Deconstruction, however, was not formed in a vacuum. Though deconstruction is now found in popular culture, one must look to the writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jacques Derrida in order to understand the formation of deconstruction.

### **Gadamer and Derrida: Bedfellows in the Deconstruction Movement**

Though Jacques Derrida is quite the famous philosopher, few people lend credit to the German wing of deconstruction in Hans-Georg Gadamer. His *Philosophical Hermeneutics* is a great companion to Derrida's *Grammatology* or *Limited Inc.*, but both dissenters and supporters of deconstruction tend to overlook the importance of Gadamer. His contributions to deconstruction, primarily through his teaching on reflection and personal historicity, are invaluable in attempting to understand deconstruction.

Both Gadamer and Derrida picked up where Nietzsche left off, believing that everything was an interpretation of the truth and not the truth itself. Gadamer's theory rests upon the idea that hermeneutics is ontological rather than methodological, seeking to explain the conditions of interpretation behind each interpreter (reader), and to show that understanding is an event that the interpreter has no control over.<sup>10</sup> Whereas Nietzsche argued that truth was subject to the interpretation given to it, Gadamer took Nietzsche further and argued that even human interpretations are subject to the contexts they are found in.

Ironically enough, Gadamer's postmodern application within deconstruction

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<sup>10</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), xx.

(ontological hermeneutics) is actually a linguistic version of Kant's theory of knowledge via ontology concerning the *ding an sich*. In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant supposes that humans can never see the *ding an sich* of anything; that is to say, humans cannot see the thing in and of itself.<sup>11</sup> When a human looks at a chair he sees the legs of the chair, the seat of the chair, and all the properties of the chair, but he never sees the essence of the chair. The chair itself, the *ding an sich*, is never seen by the human. Kant then supposes that since the person cannot see the chair for what it is, in its essence, that all views of the metaphysical world are subjective to the viewer. Though person *P* can see object *S*, and person *Q* can see *S*, neither *P* nor *Q* see *S* in the exact same way – both see *S* and have an idea of what *S* is, but neither sees *S* in the same way due to their positions in time and space. Deconstruction, then, must tilt its hat to Kantian Ontology.

Under the precept that Kant is correct about the *ding an sich*, deconstructionists say that there can never be a unified understanding of written or spoken text because people can never know the text in its essence. A reader can only understand the properties of that text and never the text itself (the same, awkwardly enough, goes for the author of the text as well).

Kant's Ontology is central to Gadamer's view of personal history in the role of hermeneutics: whether Gadamer wittingly uses Kant or not is up for debate and is another subject. Gadamer taught that all of human interpretation had to be sifted through one's own personal history and tradition.<sup>12</sup> Gadamer, much like Kant, argues that one must

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<sup>11</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Dover: Dover Publications, 2003), 263.

<sup>12</sup> *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 29

acknowledge one's place in time and culture before attempting to interpret a text. Going back to the previous example, both *P* and *Q* can look at text *T*, but both will come to different conclusions. Even if both *P* and *Q* come from the same culture, even the same family, both will look at *T* differently due to *P* and *Q*'s personal histories. All interpretation is based upon the reader's place in culture (space) and time.

Gadamer's historicity draws the conclusion that absolute meaning of a text is always elusive and never explicit, that if there is an absolute meaning to the text the reader will never grasp at the said meaning. The author has a personal history that no one can ever experience or know fully, thus the text that comes from the author (using words that were developed out of multiple personal histories, thus the words themselves cannot really be known) is up for interpretation by the personal history of the reader. The text itself can never truly be known and must be left open to constant interpretation, never coming to a concluding unifying belief because all personal histories are fragmented and not unified.

Gadamer takes his argumentation further and says that readers can never be removed from their personal history. He argues that one's personal history is a make up of the person's cognitive abilities, thus to eject one's personal history one would first have to eject all cognitive thinking, which would negate the ability to interpret a text.<sup>13</sup> One is therefore stuck in one's personal history, never able to look past it. What Gadamer is attempting to present is that personal history plays both into the person projecting a

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<sup>13</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason*, 49. This is where Coherentism comes into play. To Gadamer, everything a person knows is simply built up of *a posteriori* beliefs that are coherent with each other, lacking a foundation. To eject *P* from *P*, *Q*, and *R* would ruin the coherence of the beliefs.

message and the other person interpreting the message; absolute meaning simply does not exist or, at the very least, cannot be known. A person's inability to be removed from his or her own personal history means the person can never understand the *ding an sich* of a text.

Derrida recognizes Gadamer's view and adds to it through his own explanation of deconstruction. Derrida builds on Gadamer by showing "...that all meanings and truths are never absolute or timeless, but are always framed by socially and historically specific conditions of knowledge."<sup>14</sup> As stated previously, then, deconstruction seeks to lay open texts and point out the fragmentations. Derrida does not do this to ruin knowledge, but instead to open up the text to greater possibilities. Caputo, Derrida's student, even says, "...everything in deconstruction...is organized around what Derrida calls *l'invention de l'autre*, the in-coming of the other, the promise of an event to come, the event of the promise of something coming."<sup>15</sup> Deconstruction attempts to open up a text for something that is always coming; a new interpretation, a new application, a new understanding, a new way of viewing the text. Derrida, as previously noted, believes this will be perpetually coming and never arriving, mostly because personal histories will always be changing and never obtaining a static state.

Postmodernism, however, focuses on more than just a text. Many postmoderns take their view of 'truth' and apply it to culture as well. Few, however, take deconstruction and apply it to culture. Jean Baudrillard, however, was successfully able

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<sup>14</sup> *Teach Yourself Postmodernism*, 102

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. John Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 42.

to apply deconstruction to society, allowing deconstruction to move beyond the text and into the “simulated world.”

### **Baudrillard and the Postmodern View of Society**

The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, another postmodern (one that could be labeled a social deconstructionist), is also one of the most overlooked philosophers on the issue of deconstruction. Largely ostracized after his 1992 article *The Gulf War Did not Happen*, much of his writings have simply been ignored or disregarded as mad ramblings. However, Baudrillard’s critique of media and culture is a perfect example of postmodern deconstruction applied to society. The only difference between he and Derrida is that Baudrillard tends to be quite a bit more pessimistic and nihilistic in his approach to the issues. This too could be a reason for people overlooking him.

Baudrillard’s *magnum opus* is *Simulacra and Simulation*, which deals with how society has created a fake reality that people buy into. He states:

“All original cultural forms, all determined languages are absorbed in advertising because it has no depth, it is instantaneous and instantaneously forgotten. Triumph of superficial form, of the smallest common denominator of all signification, degree zero of meaning, triumph of entropy over all possible tropes.”<sup>16</sup>

According to Baudrillard, there might have been original languages that could be understood universally or universal cultures, but such languages and cultures have been replaced by fragmented realities that simulate the actual realities. Just like Derrida and Gadamer’s views of deconstruction within a text, Baudrillard believes that society is a construct, a *simulacrum* that, though interacted with, cannot ultimately be known

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<sup>16</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994), 87.

absolutely. Baudrillard, in some ways, enhances Derrida's deconstruction.

What is seen more in Baudrillard, however, is Nietzsche's suspicion as Baudrillard teaches that in the simulated reality there is always an underlying negative motivation for all actions. He argues that one can only experience the world through prefabricated systems established by the simulated society, making all experiences subjective and constructed.<sup>17</sup> In light of this, all things are to be doubted. All things, according to Baudrillard, are geared toward the effect and not the message itself. The reason people buy certain clothing is not for the practicality of having clothing, but instead for having the effect of a brand on that clothing, which in turn adds to one's social status (which is only determined by the simulated reality to begin with).<sup>18</sup> All of this is caused by the underlying intent to get the person to buy something, that is, to become a consumer.

A better example of Baudrillard's postmodern teachings as a whole, however, would be the movie *300*. The movie is supposed to draw from the Battle of Thermopylae where three hundred Spartans faced down Xerxes' Persian forces. The movie, however, entirely ignores the history and instead goes for the effect, the stimulation of the mind. It creates a simulated reality of what occurred, ignoring the real event, so that the story can be understood in a modern cultural context. This falls into Baudrillard's teaching that the simulated reality arose out of the necessity to be able to tell stories in the context of the culture.

Thus, Baudrillard teaches that one is limited to one's own cultural context, which

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<sup>17</sup> *Teach Yourself*, 64

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 67

is actually a simulation of what is really culture and that one can never escape this simulation. One is simply stuck in the simulation, unable to know the real, unable to know what is being copied; merely that *something* is being copied.

Such postmodern views, especially concerning deconstruction, have slowly found their way into the Christian community. For some modern Christians, it is almost “fashionable” to be considered “postmodern.” However, some have taken the philosophy deeper than the superficial sense of the word and have attempted to either integrate postmodern teachings into Christianity or show how Christianity has held to postmodernism all along.

### **The Postmodern Christian**

Postmodernism has moved beyond the walls of secular society and slowly crept into Christianity. There are many different “movements” within Christianity that take on a postmodern taste; Youth Specialties, Emergent Church, Radical Orthodoxy, and others openly embrace the postmodern mindset. Due to the immense number of “movements” within Christianity claiming to be postmodern, it is best to focus deconstruction within postmodern Christianity as this one philosophical movement can be found in multiple ‘organized’ movements.

The main reason that many postmodern Christians have felt a need to deconstruct God – that is, reevaluate the traditional view of God – is due to their experiences in the world. They often times experience a cold world, one that is full of evil, seemingly chaotic, and sometimes without purpose.<sup>19</sup> They have a hard time seeing how the

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<sup>19</sup> Gianni Vattimo and John Caputo, *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 2.

objectivist Christian vision of God can be adequately applied to such a dark world. Due to the changing cultural views, archaic views of God seem not only out of date, but out of touch with the current culture. Thus, they take the view of postmodernity, namely deconstruction, and apply it to the view of God in order to make God fit into their experiences of the world.

The first step in this process of deconstructing God is the admission that Christianity is not a rational faith, but instead that it can only be known through authentic acts of love. Peter Rollins states, “It is clear that John and Paul are not asserting that no encounter with God is possible, but rather that any encounter with the divine cannot be reduced to an idolatrous understanding.”<sup>20</sup> Rollins doesn’t go so far as to say that God doesn’t exist or that humans cannot know God, but merely that God can only be known through how one lives. Even in such experiences, one cannot simply reduce the actions to a mental construct; if one were to do so, one would make the action an absolute that everyone would have to follow. In order for Christianity to truly be postmodern, according to Rollins, it must avoid being “intellectualized” and instead be shown solely through action, regardless of the religious system one holds to.<sup>21</sup>

None of the above is to say that belief is completely nullified under a deconstruction view of Christianity. Rather, beliefs exist that help aid in actions, but those beliefs are constantly changing in order to shift with the history and culture. Rollins believes that beliefs are necessary in order to understand love, but such beliefs are limited

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2006), 16.

<sup>21</sup> *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 57

to history and context.<sup>22</sup> Thus, beliefs are necessary, but are overpowered by love and ultimately the actions cannot be condensed into beliefs.

What is interesting about the postmodern Christian's view of truth is that he can believe truth exists, just that it cannot be known. Rather, one is transformed by truth even if one interprets truth differently from others. Rollins writes:

“What is important about revelation is not that we seek to interpret it in the same way but rather that we all love it and are transformed by it. To fail to recognize this would be similar to an art critic saying that what is important when considering a piece of art is that we interpret it correctly rather than loving it and being challenged by it.”<sup>23</sup>

The main contention is that what Christians know is not what matters; what matters is *how Christians live*. Rollins looks to the life of Jesus in order to justify his claim. He states that Jesus didn't heal people out of some belief or out of some obligation; Jesus healed people, according to Rollins, out of His love for people.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, those who seek God should live on the basis for love rather than belief or rationality. Christianity is, to the postmodern Christian, a “belief without belief.” It is an action where the basis is not found in some “intellectual other,” but is rather founded in love.

Due to the postmodern Christian's emphasis on loving others, a community based faith is vitally important, especially concerning the interpretation of the Bible.<sup>25</sup> Rollins calls for a type of deconstruction within the text and the community, to embrace

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<sup>22</sup> Rollins, Peter, 2009, email, April 18

<sup>23</sup> *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 17

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 36

<sup>25</sup> *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 18

conflicting views of Scripture so that the community might partake in Scripture:

“For the Word, if it exists at all, does not simply dwell in the ink that marks the pages of the Bible and cannot be isolated in a dissection of the story into its constituent parts...The act of second naïveté is directly encouraged by the fact that there are various, often conflicting, accounts of God and faith at work in the Scriptures.”<sup>26</sup>

What Rollins is conveying is that Scripture is not held to just one tradition; the community interprets and re-interprets the Scripture repeatedly. This belief corresponds to both Gadamer and Derrida’s belief that all texts are merely full of contradictions. Rollins’ view of community also echoes Baudrillard’s view that culture is a construct. However, rather than lamenting such a fracture, Rollins seeks to embrace it as he believes it allows for a more loving community.

The Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo echoes Rollins when he says:

“This concept of postmodern faith has nothing to do with the acceptance of strictly defined dogmas or with disciplines imposed by a single authority. The Church is certainly an important vehicle for revelation, but it is above all the community of believers who, in charity, hear and interpret freely the meaning of the Christian message, mutually helping and correcting one another.”<sup>27</sup>

When deconstructing Scripture through the community, the ‘truth’ of Scripture is not found in some objective or absolute foundation, but instead in how the community lives out their interpretation of Scripture, most notably through charity for one another.

One other key point in the deconstruction of Scripture is that the postmodern Christian accepts Nietzsche’s critique that all interpretation is done through a cultural

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal: Towards a Church Beyond Belief* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2008), 47.

<sup>27</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 9.

lens.<sup>28</sup> Rather than viewing this as a negative, most postmodern Christians view this as a positive as it allows for creativity in the interpretation of Scripture. In fact, John Caputo argues that by deconstructing the text, the ‘believer’ allows the text to *happen* to him:

“As we have just seen, one of the things Derrida means by a text or a tradition is that it keeps ‘happening’ without ever quite ‘arriving’ at a final, fixed, and finished destination. We cannot simply ‘derive’ direct instruction from it, but we must instead allow it a certain drift or free play, which allows the tradition to be creative and reinvent itself so that it can be, as Augustine said of God, ever ancient yet ever new.”<sup>29</sup>

Caputo is saying that the community, even if, hypothetically, it were to exist forever, would never come to a full understanding of the truth. What the community believed one hundred years ago will not be what it believes in the present and what it believes in the present will not be what it believes one hundred years from the present. As Kester Brewin has stated, one goal of a postmodern Christian community is to always be evolving, always moving forward in its interpretation of Scripture.<sup>30</sup> To the postmodern Christian, the use of community in interpretation of Scripture is not an option; it’s essential if the community is to remain relevant.<sup>31</sup>

Though interpretation occurs within the community, no community must become so arrogant as to think that *it* has the one and only correct interpretation of Scripture.

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<sup>28</sup> John Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church*, The Church and Postmodern Culture Series (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2007), 40.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 57

<sup>30</sup> Kester Brewin, *Signs of Emergence: A Vision for the Church that is [Always Evolving]* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004, 2007).

<sup>31</sup> Brian McLaren and Tony Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point: How the Culture-Controlled Church Neutered the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 78.

Postmodern Christians embrace the diversity of interpretation and believe that any attempt at an absolute interpretation is nothing more than a power-play, an attempt for one community to enforce its will upon other communities. Vattimo considers the traditional church and that it must have made a “deal with the devil” in order to enforce its interpretation on other communities. He says, “A devil’s bargain [gave] the leaders of the church the needed authority not only to define orthodoxy but also to enforce their vision of the church’s proper uniformity and homogeneity.”<sup>32</sup>

### **The (Un)Known God**

Due to the fragmentation of views caused by different cultures, time periods, and other influences, the postmodern Christian believes that one cannot come to an absolute understanding of Scripture. Such “power” of absolutism negates the lovingness a community can provide and is subsequently antithetical to Scripture. Thus, the postmodern Christian, specifically those of the “deconstruction branch,” tends to embrace the idea that God cannot be known. Each person, having a different background, subsequently experiences God in different and sometimes contradictory ways.

As shown previously, God cannot be known through the mind according to postmodern Christians, but He can be as Peter Rollins says, “God is the name we give to the ground of our experience”.<sup>33</sup> Tony Campolo, in writing against theological systems that define God, says:

“God is greater than any theology or system of ideas we come up with about God. God is not defined by our systems, by our theologies – not even by our firm convictions about him or her. Yes, or *her* – for God

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<sup>32</sup> *After the Death of God*, 6

<sup>33</sup> Rollins, Peter, 2009, email, April 18

also transcends anything we think we know about masculinity and femininity.”<sup>34</sup>

Campolo is pointing out that humans do know God rationally – as something put in a test-tube and studied – but through experience. The individual and/or community experiences God in their own unique ways and, due to these experiences, no concise theological system can ever adequately explain God.

To the postmodern Christian, knowing God is the equivalent to four blind men walking into a room and attempting to describe an elephant. Each man touches a different part of the elephant and therefore describes the elephant in different ways. If one blind man were to declare that the trunk is all there is to know about the elephant, he would be wrong.

Likewise, how absurd it is for people to experience one aspect of God (assuming the experience is valid) and then declare that experience to be the *only* proper view of God. Rollins summarizes the view best when he states, “In the same way that the sun blinds the one who looks directly at its light, so God’s incoming blinds our intellect.”<sup>35</sup> God cannot be known as a thing of contemplation.<sup>36</sup>

How does one differentiate between experiencing God and bad indigestion? The simple ‘truth’ to the postmodern Christian is that God will reveal Himself in multiple ways and that when He is experienced, thus there is always doubt about whether or not God is acting. One can only speak of one’s understanding of God, not who God is or how one

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<sup>34</sup> *Adventures in Missing the Point*, 32

<sup>35</sup> *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 24

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 22

knows when He has been experienced.<sup>37</sup> As Peter Rollins explains, “what one thinks is an experience of God may indeed be a case of bad indigestion (or mild epilepsy etc). What the pomo theorist would likely say is that we don’t ever know for sure... doubt is always part of faith claims. It is part of the structure of religious belief.”<sup>38</sup> To Rollins, one never knows if one has experience God; only simply has faith that an experience was from God.

In addition to all views of God being subjective to the person or community, the postmodern Christian must be in the constant process of deconstructing her beliefs about God. Caputo argues for this when he says, “In a deconstruction, our lives, our beliefs, and our practices are not destroyed but forced to reform and reconfigure – which is risky business.”<sup>39</sup> Since God is an event according to Caputo and is happening to people, individuals and communities never “arrive” at proper view of God. Their view of God might be what they need for that time and culture, however it must continue to change (much like the community’s understanding of Scripture). The community must constantly reform its view of God or it risks forming an intellectual idol and subsequently missing the opportunity to experience God.

The cynic might interject that this leads to an invalid view of God where the community can make God into whatever they want God to be; but this is not a proper view of deconstructing God. Under such a view, the view of God is to move *toward* a God that fits within the kingdom of God.<sup>40</sup> The kingdom of God, Caputo goes on to say,

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<sup>37</sup> *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 32

<sup>38</sup> Email with Rollins

<sup>39</sup> *What Would Jesus Deconstruct*, 27

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 35

is linked with justice, if there is such a thing. Thus, if justice exists then it is within the kingdom of God, again, if such a thing exists. He argues that this is part of “working out” religion:

“To follow or be on the way may very well be what “religion” is...the differences among religious traditions being worked out by their different visions of the way.”<sup>41</sup>

Thus, the community is consistently deconstructing its view of who God is by evaluating their different experiences. A community that is oppressed by a brutal dictator might see God as a subversive liberator. To a group of women in a patriarchal society, God might be a feminist who views both men and women as equal in all aspects. Even if one community’s view of God contradicts another, it does not matter; so long as both views work for the oppressed, work toward justice (if such a thing exists), then both communities should go about their ways.

### **The Weakness of God**

The postmodern Christian’s view of God being for the weak has an interesting side effect, namely the recent teaching on the view of a weak God. The line of thinking is along the lines of “If God is for the weak, how can He be strong?” Since Nietzsche uttered, “God is dead,” many Christians who embrace deconstruction have taken such a statement to mean that the metaphysical “strong-God” is dead. As Caputo says,

“Suppose we say there is at least this much to the death of God: that the God of metaphysical theology is a God well lost and that the task of thinking about God radically otherwise has been inescapably imposed upon us?”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *What Would Jesus Deconstruct.* 39

<sup>42</sup> John Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 23.

Caputo is referring to the idea of a strong, metaphysical God, holding control over everything and states that this view of God is a social construct. He, and others such as Vattimo, believes that most beliefs about God are nothing more than social projections.<sup>43</sup> Thus, he takes to task the cultural view of God and attempts to deconstruct this view. The idea of a powerful God is washed away under deconstruction.

The reason for the traditional view of God being subject to ridicule is that a strong God can't possibly relate to a weak people. If God is always for the oppressed then He too must be "oppressed," otherwise He doesn't know what the oppressed are enduring. In fact, if God is not weak and oppressed, but instead holds power, then He is in some ways an oppressor; He holds power and by doing so He gives credence to oppressors in the world. In deconstructing the name of God in order to get to the event of God, weakness theologians note that God is "weak" in the following areas:

### **God is weak in day-to-day lives**

According to Caputo, God has no control over the events of this world. This is most notably shown in the life of Jesus. Though Christians have traditionally looked upon Jesus' death as part of God's plan and that He fully intended to go to the cross, all so His blood could cover sins, Caputo argues that none of this is the case. Instead, he states:

“...Jesus was being crucified, not holding back; he was nailed there and being executed very much against his will and the will of God. And he never heard of Christianity's novel idea that he was redeeming the world with his blood. His approach to evil was forgiveness, not paying off a debt due the Father, or the devil, with suffering or with anything else.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *After the Death of God*, 9

<sup>44</sup> *Weakness of God*, 44

Caputo is arguing that God cannot even keep Jesus alive. Jesus was saying things that upset the power structure at the time, ideas that were revolutionary; so revolutionary that such views got Him killed. According to Caputo, this wasn't the will of God or Jesus and that Jesus' mission was incomplete. However, in death, Jesus demonstrates both (1) God's inability to overpower the principalities of this world and (2) that Jesus is the perfect symbol for the oppressed (particularly in Marxian/Libertarian theology).<sup>45</sup>

### **God is weak in creation**

Caputo goes on to state that God is weak even concerning creation. Though Caputo believes that God shaped and shifted creation, he does not believe that God created *ex nihilo* (out of nothing).<sup>46</sup> Instead, Caputo proposes:

“So Genesis does not begin at an absolute beginning. Elohim begins where he finds himself, with co-everlasting but mute companions: a barren earth, lifeless waters, and a sweeping wind. Elohim has to play the cards he is given, to work with the materials at hand, after which it will turn out he will even need a rest.”<sup>47</sup>

Caputo is attempting to argue that such things were eternal. As he states, Elohim (the creator view of God according to Caputo) must work with what is already present. He does not and cannot create out of nothing. The elements are already there and are eternal.<sup>48</sup> Though God is capable of *manipulating* the physical universe, He did not *create* the physical universe, at least not in the sense of “creation out of nothing.”

This view of God's weakness over creation is taken further by Rollins. Rollins

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<sup>45</sup> *Weakness of God*, 45

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 76

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 57

<sup>48</sup> *Weakness of God*, 58

looks to the Garden of Eden and sees that God has deceived Adam and Eve while the serpent is opening their eyes:

“This snake addresses Eve and encourages her to question God’s prohibition, telling her truthfully that she will not die upon eating the fruit. Indeed the snake also reveals to her what God had concealed, namely that this fruit would bestow deep insight into the nature of good and evil and enable them to become like the divine.”<sup>49</sup>

Rollins’ view is that God has no control over what occurs in the Garden and ultimately the “crafty” snake foils His plan. This seems to be in agreement with Caputo’s view of God’s weakness over creation where Caputo argues that there is no promise that “the event” (God) will be successful in having His plan fulfilled.<sup>50</sup>

### **God’s weak over Himself**

God is not only weak over creation and what occurs within creation, but according to weakness theologians, God has weakness over Himself and is capable of making mistakes. Caputo summarizes such a viewpoint:

“God is not omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, eternal, or supersensuous. God gets into a scuffle with humankind, grows angry, regrets what he has done and starts over, and has to be talked down off the edge by humans trying to dissuade him from acting rashly. He is not at all transcendent, but he frequently appears in sensuous form, the very distinction between physical and spiritual being very tenuous and shaky.”<sup>51</sup>

If postmodern Christians who deconstructed the idea of God held to creeds, the above quote would be the creed for the weakness theologians. The idea that God is almost human, all too human, is a common thread of thought among weakness

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<sup>49</sup> *Fidelity of Betrayal*, 35

<sup>50</sup> *Weakness of God*, 5

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 73

theologians, to the point that if weakness theology had a set doctrine, God as a rash reactor would be part of that doctrine. Even Rollins comes out and says that the “God of this world” was irrational in His reaction to Adam and Eve and was likewise irrational in His rejection of Cain’s sacrifice. Rollins implies (though does not say) that the “God of this world” loves blood and is wrong for such a fascination.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, the idea of God has been deconstructed and it is concluded that God is weak. God is prone to making mistakes and flying off the handle. God holds no power over creation as it has run away from Him, but this is to be expected, as there is no promise of success. Finally, God has little say over humanity’s day-to-day living; though He sympathizes with the oppressed and protests oppression by being oppressed, He cannot stop such oppression. The idea of God, when deconstructed, produces a weak God.

The reason most postmodern Christians tend to move toward a weak God is that to believe in a powerful God is to believe in a God that is oppressive. Too often, so the argument goes, people create a belief in a strong God so that they can turn around and be strong themselves. “God kills the wicked, therefore the strong can kill who the strong declare wicked.” As Caputo explains:

“Is not the sovereign Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth, the very model of every earthly patriarchy? How often has the ‘reign of God’ meant a sovereign reign of theocratic terror? What has been more violent than theocracy? What more patriarchal, more hierarchical? What more authoritarian, inquisitorial, misogynistic, colonialist, militaristic, terroristic?”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *The Fidelity of Betrayal*, 38

<sup>53</sup> *The Weakness of God*, 33

One can merely look to the United State's use of Manifest Destiny to see what Caputo is saying. The United States, under the belief that God had given them all the land between the Atlantic Ocean and Pacific Ocean, slaughtered thousands of innocent lives. They used their belief in a powerful God to uproot families and kill off entire people groups. This is just one example of where a belief in a "strong God" can lead.

Another reason for the denial of a strong God is that weakness theologians believe a strong God removes personal responsibility. As Rollins explains, "There is a view that the God of metaphysics provided a matrix of meaning to help us sleep at night but that the idea helps us to abdicate responsibility..."<sup>54</sup> If God is in control, then humans ultimately has little responsibility. If Mike opts not to feed the poor, God will compel Jan, James, Fred, or someone else to do Mike's responsibility. Weak theologians believe that under a strong view of God, the person can abdicate his or her responsibility and cease moving toward justice.

Rather, Caputo believes that such a view of God, a God of authority and power, is antithetical to the kingdom of God, if such a thing exists. He believes that true justice means that no one has authority and no one has power; everyone is equal in that everyone is weak, including God.<sup>55</sup>

One weakness theologian/philosopher, Gianni Vattimo, finds justification in something Nietzsche said in order to propose one way that God's weakness is a shared weakness. He states:

"In one of the longer fragments on nihilism from 1800s, Nietzsche

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<sup>54</sup> Rollins, Peter, 2009, email, April 18

<sup>55</sup> *Weakness of God*, 29

asks whether nihilism is compatible with some form of faith in the divine and conceives of the possibility of a pantheistic religiosity, since ‘after all only the moral God is denied.’”<sup>56</sup>

Though Vattimo – or any other weakness theologian – never runs with the idea of pantheism, it is interesting that Vattimo chooses to bring it up. Such a belief would be far more consistent with a deconstructed view of God, with a weak God. Pantheism allows for God to share in His weakness with all whereas monotheism still keeps Him separate from everyone, transcendent and above His creation. Pantheism, it would seem, would truly cry out “God is dead,” but still allow for a weak God.<sup>57</sup> However, it seems that so far no weakness theologian has gone this route and has kept God as separate from everything else in creation.

Thus, deconstruction has found its way into the postmodern branches of Christianity. Though not all postmodern Christians embrace deconstruction, there is no denying that it has begun to make its mark on postmodern Christianity. However, one must question if such a belief is justified. For instance, if deconstruction is inconsistent with itself or incoherent with reality, then can it properly be applied to Christianity? Can a broken piston fix a damaged engine? Many of the critiques postmodern Christians place against the modern church are valid (e.g. lack of living faith, dead beliefs, intellectualism, lack of a cry for social justice, ignoring the oppressed, etc.), but if deconstruction is broken, if it is false, then the attempt to synchronize it with Christianity is ultimately in vain.

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<sup>56</sup> *After Christianity*, 11

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 3

### The Fallacy of Deconstruction

The overall problem with deconstruction – even though deconstruction seems to work as an adequate explanation for a fragmented society and provides an interesting explanation of Christianity – is it runs into some serious logical errors, the first of which because it is self-contradictory. To put it bluntly; deconstruction teaches that all things can be deconstructed except deconstruction. In order to say, “all things are fluid and open to interpretation” it must make a non-fluid and non-interpretative statement, meaning that the statement itself is neither fluid nor open to interpretation, thus negating the statement. Is it possible to deconstruct deconstruction? Is it possible to say that such a theory works for modern culture, but won’t work for future cultures? If it is possible, then the central theory – that there is never an absolute interpretation – must be false. In a possible future where deconstruction no longer applies to society, the society would be able to obtain an absolute interpretation. This shows the self-negation of deconstruction.

The self-contradictory nature of deconstruction goes well beyond its own internal inconsistencies and more onto the inconsistencies of the proponents, namely that they spend multiple pages attempting to explain how texts cannot be understood. Derrida even teaches that logocentrism – the term he uses to explain the belief that an author can convey meaning to the reader – is nothing more than a myth.<sup>58</sup> If, however, logocentrism is truly a myth, why is Derrida not only taking the time attempting to write essays conveying what he means, but even providing a definition for logocentrism? The point in composing an essay, giving a lecture, or speaking in general is to convey one’s thoughts and feelings – thus, to say, “logocentrism is a myth” is logocentric in that one is using

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<sup>58</sup> *Teach Yourself*, 105

solely language to convey meaning. The deconstructionists attempt to convey their meaning that language has no meaning by using language, thus showing they are highly inconsistent.

The significance of being both inconsistent in delivery and self-contradictory is that it shows deconstruction cannot be true. If it is impossible for Derrida or other deconstructionists to avoid the use of absolutist language in describing how language is non-absolute, then it shows their critique of language is most likely false. Moreover, the fact that they must clarify their position and convey the meaning of what they say – an activity they claim is a myth – shows the impossibility of actually believing in a deconstructionist way of thinking. If the belief cannot be actualized then the belief is not true. It is the equivalent to someone being anti-gun use and proceeding to shoot people who disagree with his stance; he must use the very thing he criticizes. Likewise, deconstructionists must attempt to convey the meaning that meaning does not exist, which means a solid building block of their beliefs is the very thing they are attacking. Deconstruction, by being self-contradictory, attacks its own foundation and delivery method.

The other problem with deconstructive thinking is that it ignores the fact that humans can know *some* things. Regardless of cultural upbringing, people can know the equation  $2+2=4$ . Though the numbers might look different through various cultures, the concept will remain consistent. The language can be different no matter the culture, but mathematics will always remain the same. Though this does not necessarily disprove deconstruction completely, it does hinder the idea that *everything* is deconstructable. One cannot deconstruct mathematics, that is, make it progress and make it better. One cannot

make  $2+2=4$  in any better fashion (or worse fashion). One cannot make mathematical concepts progress, nor can one invent mathematical concepts, only discover them. This example would indicate that humans, at a bare minimum, could know some things without having to deconstruct them, that is, they know some things free from cultural bias or other biases.

The fact that some things cannot be deconstructed challenges the deconstructionist to then list what can be deconstructed. What constitutes constructed knowledge? Classic knowledge teaches that there are some facts in the world that are independent of human construction.<sup>59</sup> If one jumps off a building, one will fall. Though some societies might attempt to say one can float into the air or can defy gravity, the truth is that if one jumps off a building, one falls to the ground. This cannot be deconstructed, it cannot be improved, – gravity is an absolute law that transcends cultures and societies.

There are other areas of knowledge that simply cannot be deconstructed. What about religion or ethics, two areas of study that are constantly under attack by deconstructionists? When Derrida or others argue that both can be deconstructed, they are assuming that humans constructed these things to begin with. However, if humans did not construct these ideas then they would be left outside the realm of deconstruction. The deconstructionist, in his belief, is left assuming quite a bit without actually justifying his belief, namely that all things can be deconstructed.

The final critique that can be laid at the doorstep of deconstruction is that it offers absolutely no hope for society because it has no beginning point. As mentioned, Caputo

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<sup>59</sup> Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 20.

says that deconstruction opens up the door for improvement, but improvement that is never actualized. Change must always come – in deconstruction, the moment a person feels he has achieved his goal he must immediately change his position and work toward a new goal. When applied to bettering society, this means the orphans, the widows, and the hopeless must hear that society will work toward helping the destitute, but will never fully achieve it. Such a system has been attributed to Nihilism (via Gianni Vattimo) for a reason; the hope it speaks of is always pursued, but never actualized.<sup>60</sup> There is no hope in a system that calls for change, but admits that true change will never come.

### **In Defense of the *a priori***

All of the above points to one central idea that deconstructionists ignore; *a priori* beliefs exist, which means not everything in human knowledge has been constructed. Deconstruction seeks to change the foundation and to work toward a perfect building without ever achieving a perfect building.<sup>61</sup> The alternative belongs to the field of the *a priori*, which teaches that it is okay to remodel buildings, but the foundations must same because the foundations cannot change. Just as one cannot construct a building without first anchoring it to the ground, one cannot construct thoughts (culturally structured or otherwise) without anchoring those thoughts into intrinsic beliefs. Deconstructionists simply take for granted that the *a priori* does not exist and never address this field of epistemology, a field that provides an adequate alternative to deconstruction.

Before elaborating on the concept of *a priori* knowledge, one must also

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<sup>60</sup> *Beyond Interpretation*, 34

<sup>61</sup> Jacques Ranciere, *The Philosopher and His Poor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.

understand that certain things in knowledge are mind-independent. Paul Boghossian explains, “In the case of Jupiter’s having over thirty moons, we can go further: it’s not merely that it looks to be universal, it also looks to be completely *mind-independent*: it would have obtained even if human beings had never existed.”<sup>62</sup> Boghossian points out that there are certain things in the universe that exist and have their own property even without human knowledge. If he were asked the question, “If a tree falls in a forest and no one hears it, does it still make a sound” he would answer in the affirmative. He would argue that the tree holds properties independent of human existence and therefore makes a sound when falling. One, however, can take this argument further and apply it to areas in knowledge that deconstructionists attempt to deconstruct. If something is mind-independent then that something has no need to be “deconstructed” out of its cultural bias because it is unaffected by bias to begin with.

The belief in the *a priori* begins with the realization that humans are within the world and attempting to interpret actual objects, unlike the Kantian view expressed earlier, which stated that humans shape their view of reality according to the context they find themselves in. A belief in the *a priori* does allow culture to shape views of reality, but it differs from Kant (and subsequently Gadamer and others) because it teaches that the view of reality can be compared to an objective reality. Quee Nelson, writing through the viewpoint of a frustrated student talking to a postmodern professor, says:

“...in fact, real things in themselves *are* possible objects of experience for you! The world is not in your head! Your head is in the world. And if your head is lying on the railroad tracks, then everybody in the world agreeing, all at once, to call a *train a raisin* isn’t going to soften the blow. There’s a whole lot more to reality than mere perceptions of the mind or linguistic

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<sup>62</sup> *Fear of Knowledge*, 13

social conventions. Rocks existed long before there were any ‘perceptions of the mind’ or linguistic social conventions, and they’ll probably exist long after.”<sup>63</sup>

Nelson shows the absurdity of deconstruction’s finest point; if reality is a social construct, if language shapes the reality of human experience, and if words cannot mean anything, then humans should be able to experience reality in the way they see fit. Individuals should be able to say, “This is a pillow and not a car” the moment before their car impacts an object and their perception should make such a saying a reality; the person should be able to walk away from the crash unharmed because he imagined the car was actually a soft, fluffy pillow! Reality, however, is independent of human constructs; humans can describe what they see using different words, but they cannot change the properties of what they see. Though cultural biases might change the perception of reality, reality itself does not change and the experience with reality (or *a priori* knowledge of reality) can alter one’s cultural views.

To understand why a belief in *a priori* knowledge (or properly basic beliefs) works as a solution to deconstruction, one must first understand what the *a priori* is. Though there is no one concise definition, Alvin Plantinga offers up the best definition by saying that an *a priori* belief is, “...a self-evident proposition [that] a *properly functioning* human being can’t grasp it without believing it.”<sup>64</sup> Boghossian further explains that *a priori* beliefs are the essential building blocks to know things; he argues that one must have *a priori* knowledge of one’s own existence in order to truly believe

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<sup>63</sup> Quee Nelson, *The Slightest Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Dog Ear Publishing, 2007), 84.

<sup>64</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 109.

that one exists. He states:

“Not every belief needs to be supported by some independent item of information that would constitute evidence in its favor: some beliefs are *intrinsically* credible or self-evident. . . What non-circular evidence could one adduce, for example, for the belief that one is currently conscious?”<sup>65</sup>

What both Plantinga and Boghossian argue for, then, is the belief that the *a priori* is knowledge that is intrinsic within the human mind that helps form other knowledge based upon experience. Though later beliefs might be tainted by a cultural worldview, one can always retreat to the *a priori* in order to find a proper view. Likewise, one’s view of the *a priori* might be biased by culture, but because such a view is naturally intrinsic, through reasoning one can overcome one’s bias and come in contact with the reality of the *a priori*.

To have intrinsic knowledge means that not all knowledge is constructed, but instead has a base from which it works. For example, if someone forms the belief that belief *Q* is true, in order to justify his belief he might appeal to justification *P*. If questioned about *P* he could then turn to basic belief *R* as justification. If questioned about *R* he could make the appeal that *R* is properly basic and intuitively known by all humans and therefore needs no evidence to validate its existence. This would mean that certain bits of knowledge can be “deconstructed” *per se*, but this is only so the person deconstructing can get back to his basic knowledge. If his beliefs *P* and *Q* are *sequitur* with *R*, then he knows that both *P* and *Q* are true and justified. This justification is because with a belief in *a priori* (intrinsic) knowledge one believes in a foundation of knowledge.

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<sup>65</sup> *Fear of Knowledge*, 117

### **Renovation-ism**

Though deconstruction is illogical and does not function within society, it is still attractive because points there are some culturally specific beliefs that can be deconstructed (improved upon and picked apart), but this doesn't necessarily mean deconstruction is the best method to use in critiquing cultural practices. One could simply renovate ideas without having to deconstruct them. Going back to a building analogy, one would acknowledge that a building needs to be renovated; it could be a remodeling in order to make it look nicer or it could be a complete restructuring in order to make the building more stable, but the person would be attempting to renovate the building in such a way that it fits a certain standard. Once the standard was met, the renovation would be complete. Likewise, in epistemology, once an idea meets a certain criteria – such as matching up with an *a priori* belief – it could be accepted as truth.

Though such a renovationist system is far from perfect, what it does do is allow for the possibility of actual knowledge. It teaches that though cultural influences can sometimes taint one's knowledge, one can always find a way to surpass those influences. It accepts that Baudrillard is partially correct in that the media creates a false reality, but it offers hope (unlike Baudrillard) to escape the false reality and find the real reality. It accepts Gadamer, Nietzsche, and Derrida's complaints about society determining the understanding of a text, but argues that one can find actual meaning in the text if one looks hard enough. It is a system that allows for hope of knowledge.

Thus, deconstruction, though popular, ends up being nothing more than a failed system that has not considered viable alternatives. It teaches people that an author can never convey meaning through speech or text, yet proponents offer up multiple speeches

and books attempting to convey the meaning that there is no meaning. It is self-contradictory and hopeless. A better alternative is to believe in an *a priori* justification of knowledge that allows individuals to progress toward an absolute standard, a standard that can be actualized. A belief in *a priori* knowledge gives knowledge to a world in desperate need of it after being ravaged by the grasp of deconstruction.

### **Contra Caputo**

Though deconstruction fails as a philosophical belief, it is still important to evaluate the claims made by weakness theologians and show how Christianity responds to the critiques. The bible presents a view opposite of Caputo's, namely that the weak are made strong in God's power and that the oppressed can place hope in God's powerful justice.

It must first be noted that Caputo is completely wrong in asserting that God is not in control; the Bible makes it quite clear that God is sovereign over all of creation and in complete control over it. In fact, God created all things for Christ and for His glory (1 Corinthians 8:6). He goes beyond that though; He is not some Deistic version of God who creates and walks away. Rather, Colossians 1:17 indicates that God holds all things together and without His constant grip on creation, it would simply fall apart. In His sovereignty, God maintains everything in creation (Hebrews 1:3). Even when God speaks of Himself to Job, He declares that He can exert absolute control over all of creation, such control and power that mere mortals cannot fathom (Job 42-43). Caputo should make no mistake; God is powerful and sovereign over all creation.

God holds this sovereignty over creation because, contrary to what Caputo stated, God created out of nothing. Regardless of the problem of infinite regress and the

principle of a self-moved object being logical fallacies in Caputo's argument, the Bible clearly indicates that God created all things out of nothing. Isaiah 48:12-13 states that God was the first mover and that He gave motion to all of creation. Paul is even clearer on the point when he says that all things that have existence were created through Christ (Romans 11:3). The elements must be temporal as God and God alone holds the title of "Alpha and Omega," indicating His eternality and His timelessness (Revelation 1:8). John even states plainly that all things that exist, or all things created, were created by the Father through Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3).

The belief in God's creation *ex nihilo* is also found in early Christian beliefs. The anonymous author of *The Epistle to Diogenes* argues that all things material are in a state of decay and need a Creator, that is, they are not eternal.<sup>66</sup> He goes on to state that God is the Creator of all things and that all things have their beginnings in Him.<sup>67</sup>

There are other Christian writings that express how God created everything, including the elements, out of nothing. Hermas' *The Shepherd*, Aristides' *Apology*, Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*, and many other writings deal with God's creation out of nothing. This wasn't just a few Christians writing this; it was a universal belief among those in the early Church. Thus, God has sovereignty over creation because He created it out of nothing; He alone is eternal.

Caputo's fear of a powerful God is ultimately unfounded, as God is good in His power and not corrupted. There is no denying that the human experience of power is

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<sup>66</sup> Anonymous, *Early Christian Writings: Epistle to Diogenes*, ed. Ed Betty Radice (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), 143.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 146-147

almost always a negative one. The old saying is, “Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The more power earthly leaders gain, the more totalitarian they become. This is almost a constant rule. Thus, Caputo and other weakness theologians fear that if God is powerful He too will be an oppressor and unable to relate to the oppressed. Such fears, however, are completely misguided.

There are multiple passages that deal with how God loves His creation and loves humans. Most notably is John 3:16, which states that God loved the world so much that He opted to die for it. This shows that the death of Christ was very much the will of the Father and very much the will of Christ (Isaiah 53:7). In fact, though Christ emptied Himself via the incarnation (Philippians 2:7), He still could have called down an army of angels and left the cross (Matthew 26:53). This means that Christ actually did become weak for the weak and lovingly emptied Himself of His power so that the weak could find hope in Him. What shows God’s goodness and love more than the power of Christ? He could have opted not to die, but He chose to make Himself weak and die for humanity. This shows that God is not some fanatical dictator, but instead a loving God who is sovereign over all things.

Another worry implicit in Caputo is that if God is in control of all things, then there is no freedom of choice; He is subsequently responsible for all the wrong sin the world.<sup>68</sup> God is the cause of evil because He wills evil into existence; humanity has no choice according to Caputo. However, returning to Plantinga, one can see via the Free Will Defense that God is sovereign over creation, but allows for freedom of choice as well. Sovereignty, according to Plantinga, merely means God can intervene when He

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<sup>68</sup> *Weakness of God*, 75

desires, but this doesn't mean He directly controlling every single action. Plantinga argues:

“What is relevant to the Free Will Defense is the idea of *being free with respect to an action*. If a person is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain from performing it; no antecedent conditions and/or causal laws determine that he will perform the action, or that he won't.”<sup>69</sup>

Since God is perfect in His knowledge, He knows within eternity what choices humans will make. Though He has foreknowledge and will sometimes influence those choices, ultimately He allows humans to make a choice. God allows some evil things to occur because He plans on working them toward His purpose; the Bible makes no attempt to hide that this world is sinful, but it also shows that God allows this sin to occur for a greater purpose. As Dick Keyes notes,

“Unlike other worldviews that I had considered, I never felt the God of the Bible was asking me to put on rose-colored glasses to upgrade what was wrong with the world. Even the heroes of the Bible were described unsparingly in appalling moral failures – lies, sexual aberrations and murders. I did not have to give up the honesty and realism that I had valued.”<sup>70</sup>

Though God knows all and sees all, He does not *cause* all (as in, God does not cause the evil actions of people). God will allow for that choice to occur so long as that choice can be worked for good according to the purpose of God (Romans 8:28).<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1974), 29.

<sup>70</sup> Dick Keyes, *Seeing Through Cynicism: A Reconsideration of the Power of Suspicion* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 15-16.

<sup>71</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the Free Will Defense, see Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 40-43.

### The Prophet to Postmodernity

In order to respond to postmodern Christianity, one can actually look to the writings of Francis Schaeffer, writings that predate most of the weakness theologians. The reason for this is that Schaeffer saw where the culture was heading and, like Jeremiah, prophesied with tears about what was to come. It is in the teachings of Schaeffer, however, that an answer to postmodern Christianity and a solution to the problems it brings for are found.

Schaeffer bought into the idea of presuppositional epistemology – the system of warrant and *a priori* beliefs. He believed that the primary source of all knowledge about God and creation was through Scripture.<sup>72</sup> Likewise, he taught that knowledge about the world and God could be known through illumination of the Holy Spirit.<sup>73</sup> Finally, he believed that even natural man, without the Holy Spirit and Scripture, could still know *something* because he was made in the image of God and was capable of reason.<sup>74</sup> All of this knowledge is both known *a priori* and enhanced through experience.

Central to Schaeffer’s belief is that “modern man” (what is now called “postmodern man”) had fallen below the line of despair. Schaeffer explains the line of despair as follows:

“Notice that I call the line, the line of despair. Above this line we find men living with their romantic notions of absolutes... This side of the line, all is changed. Man thinks differently concerning truth.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Bryan A. Follis, *Truth With Love: The Apologetics of Francis Schaeffer* (Crossway Books: Wheaton, 2006), 81.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 75

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 88

<sup>75</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who is There*, 2nd ed. The Complete Works of

To Schaeffer, modern man has divorced both grace and nature, with grace (universals) being above the line and nature (particulars) being below the line. The divorce occurred when modern man, who is a particular in nature, placed himself as the center of the universe.<sup>76</sup> In doing so, humans were only able to focus on the particulars. Bryan Follis explains Schaeffer's view by writing:

“Placing himself, rather than God, at the center of the universe and making himself autonomous, man will give up his rationality so he can preserve his rationalism, his autonomy, and his rebellion against God.”<sup>77</sup>

In becoming autonomous, Schaeffer believed that humans made themselves nothing more than machines. The only things that can be known are particulars, or those things that can be experienced. In limiting himself, modern man becomes nothing more than a machine. However, he can't live this way. Though man believes only the lower story is true, Schaeffer argues that man makes a leap of faith into the upper story, or the universals.<sup>78</sup> Though man says he is a machine, he refuses to live as a machine.

Schaeffer points out that this is a big disconnect. “Modern man” must leap into the upper story of experience, rather than live in the lower story. In taking a leap, humanity says, “There are no absolute morals,” but is quick to punish the rapist, the murderer, or other violators of social *mores*. Though postmodernism believes only the lower story to be ‘true’, they irrationally live in the upper story.

Francis Schaeffer, vol. 1 (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1982), 8.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 9

<sup>77</sup> Follis, 37

<sup>78</sup> *The God Who is There*, 61

Schaeffer counters the postmodern view of truth by acknowledging that though it is partially true, it is still illogical. Schaeffer points out that when it comes to understanding a text, one can have substantial knowledge of what is being said without having comprehensive knowledge. He states:

“The simple fact is that no one who takes the trouble to study linguistics really believes that just because we bring our own backgrounds to the words, idioms, and phrases we use, we cannot communicate at all...In human conversation we have true communication, but it is never exhaustive. This is the third and only realistic possibility in our speaking to one another”<sup>79</sup>

Though Schaeffer acknowledges that everyone approaches a text or conversation with a bias, but he says such a bias or “baggage of beliefs” doesn’t prevent significant understanding of what is being said. After all, if significant knowledge could not be obtained, then how could writers such as Derrida, Baudrillard, or Caputo write to tell their audience that communication does not work?

Schaeffer did not make these sayings from an arbitrary foundation; he believed that only Christianity supplied an adequate reason for knowledge. Postmodernity, or as Schaeffer would say, “modern man,” begins with humanity as the center of epistemology. Schaeffer instead argues for a theistic Copernican revolution where man is ripped from the center of the universe and instead acknowledge the true center; God. He writes:

“Therefore, biblical Christianity has an adequate and reasonable explanation for the source and meaning of human personality. Its source is sufficient – the personal God on high order of Trinity.”<sup>80</sup>

For Schaeffer, God acts as the center for all knowledge. Without a belief in God

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<sup>79</sup> *The God Who is There*, 104-105

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* 94

as the foundation for knowledge, humanity is quite lost and quite alone. Since God is personable and the beginning of all knowledge, it follows that humanity can know what is true because God has spoken to humans to tell them what is and is not true.<sup>81</sup> The truth God presents, according to Schaeffer, is not subjective, but instead is “true truth.” Any truth claims that Christianity makes, because they are based in reality, are open to verification.<sup>82</sup>

For Schaeffer, the response to postmodernity is that there is a personal God who reveals all knowledge to humanity. This is the basis of Christian epistemology. The argument for warrant, the argument for *a priori* beliefs, not only finds its origin in a personal God, but rises and falls on the existence of a personal God. Schaeffer adequately provides the cornerstone for all knowledge – God – and subsequently refutes postmodernism in the process.

However, “modern man” as Schaeffer pointed out, brings up some legitimate issues. Postmodernism is correct in pointing out that the Church can often end up dull and dead in its orthodoxy. The problem that many postmodernists see is that a church can have the “right” beliefs, but still harm others and ignore the plight of the helpless. Schaeffer, however, has a solution to this that is consistent with his belief in God as the foundation for knowledge.

### **Christianity is Content-driven Existentialism**

Schaeffer consistently pointed out the importance of *living* the Christian faith and

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<sup>81</sup> *The God Who is There*, 104

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* 100

not just believing it. Schaeffer stated that though doctrine was important, it was not enough. This stemmed from his belief that Christians were to live a supernatural, moment-by-moment existential life in Christ. Schaeffer wrote:

“Doctrine is important, but it is not an end in itself. There is to be an experiential reality, moment by moment. And the glory of the experiential reality of the Christian, as opposed to the bare existential experience, or the religious experiences of the East, is that we can do it with all the intellectual doors and windows open.”<sup>83</sup>

Throughout “recent” (the last two hundred years) Christian history, there has been a divide between rationalists and postmoderns on how Christian spirituality functioned. The rationalist Christians such as Immanuel Kant attempted to show that Christians grew in their love for God by their reason alone, that spirituality is gained *sola ratio*. On the polar opposite are the postmodern Christians, like Peter Rollins, who argue that the intellect has nothing to do with spirituality, but that Christian love and actions is how one grows closer to God.

In the middle is Francis Schaeffer crying out, “It is both reason and experience!” This declaration is due to Schaeffer’s belief that a true Bible-believing Christian would not only believe the right doctrines, but live those doctrines. In fact, he said, “The true Bible-believing Christian is the one who lives *in practice* in this supernatural world...I am not a Bible-believing Christian in the fullest sense simply by believing the right doctrines, but as I live in practice in this supernatural world.”<sup>84</sup>

For Schaeffer, the foundation of all Christianity is found in a content-based

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<sup>83</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *True Spirituality: How to Live for Jesus Moment by Moment* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1971, 2001), 62.

<sup>84</sup> *True Spirituality*, 56

existentialism. It is not enough to believe the right doctrines, but at the same time one must believe the right thing. As he says, “We do not come to true spirituality or the true Christian life merely by keeping a list, but neither do we come to it merely by rejecting the list and then shrugging our shoulders and living a looser life.”<sup>85</sup> Christianity has doctrines, but those doctrines must be lived. If it lacks doctrine, then there is no justification for action.

### **Love is the Conclusion**

When a Christian looks at postmodernism, he is faced with a worldview system that, though attractive, is ultimately false. Though many, such as Nietzsche, argue that everything is simply an interpretation, one can look and realize that such a statement is self-contradictory (it is an absolute statement saying there are no absolutes). Though Derrida is correct in bringing up the problems of interpretation, Schaeffer shows that such an argument is futile. Though postmodernism as a whole questions if humans can know anything, the teaching of warrant and *a priori* beliefs shows that humans can know the world substantially (though not comprehensively). Simply put, Christians should not adopt the postmodern mindset.

Rather, Christians should instead adopt the two greatest commandments, to love God with all their heart, souls, and minds and to love their neighbors as themselves (Matthew 22:37-39), because all law, all logic, all action stems from those two commandments (Matthew 22:40). The Christian response to postmodernity and deconstruction is love for God with their entire being and love for their fellow humans.

Christians must show a love for God with all their heart, soul, and mind. This

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<sup>85</sup> *True Spirituality*, 5

means that their emotions must constantly be in check with Him. Their desires must be run through Him. More importantly, they should reject any and all false doctrines and embrace truth; what other way is there to love God with one's mind? Rather than adopting worldly philosophies or having actions without justification, Christians should instead place God as the center of their lives and allow Him to be the Lord over everything they do; every action, every word, every thought, every book read, everything done should be done to glorify and show love to God.

Christians should likewise constantly display love for their fellow humans. They can love humans by action, by taking care of the poor, by calling out for social justice, and so on. All of this is done, however on the foundational belief in a personal God that has revealed Himself to His creation. In light of this, another way that Christians are to love their fellow humans is by telling the truth about Christ to those who are in desperate need for Him. Christians display their love by both proclaiming and living the truth.

That is the final apologetic and the final response to postmodernity; Christianity provides love, but does so from a place of content. While the postmodern Christian might show love for his fellow man, he has no justification for this love and thus his love ultimately falls short. Only on the absolute foundation of Scripture can Christians show love. The Christian response to postmodernism is love.

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