

Paul Gosselin

Flight From the Absolute

Cynical Observations on the
Postmodern West

volume II

S A M I Z D A T

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Some may object that we ought not to use the word «myth» at all for our definition goes beyond what many critics have previously described as myths. For those who believe that science employs reason and religion expresses feelings and that these differences can be seen in the construction of rational theories by scientists and in the formulation of irrational myths by theologians, our discovery that scientists also produce myths under our definition is abhorrent. These opponents charge that we have misused 'myth' by stretching its scope beyond normal use. In reply, we admit that our definition covers more territory than many, but we claim justification for this extension on the basis of our theory of metaphor. In the examination of religious myths, one can find underlying metaphors, the root-metaphors that were diaphonic and suggestive and then were taken literally to produce myths. In our examination of scientific language, we found a similar use of metaphor; scientists had built theories upon root-metaphors and then had taken these theories to be descriptive of the way the world really is, only later to discover that their theories were inadequate and were replaced by more adequate theories. If one claims that we should not call scientific theories myths because they are based upon reason whereas religious myths are constructed out of the association of ideas, then such a differentiation can only be made in ignorance of the failure of the hypothetical-deductive view of scientific explanation and of the extreme difficulty that philosophers of science have in demonstrating the 'rationality' of contemporary scientific theories. Theories are often retained in spite of negative evidence and of known inconsistencies, and sociological factors like the methods by which theories are accepted enter into the judgment about whether a theory is adequate or not. (MacCormac 1976: 131-132)

In moving from experience of social life to conceptualization and intellectual history, I follow the path of anthropologists almost everywhere. Although we take theories into the field with us, these become relevant only if and when they illuminate social reality. Moreover, we tend to find very frequently that it is not a theorist's whole system which so illuminates, but his scattered ideas, his flashes of insight taken out of systemic context and applied to scattered data. Such ideas have a virtue of their own and may generate new hypotheses. They even show how scattered facts may be systematically connected! Randomly distributed through some monstrous logical system, they resemble nourishing raisins in a cellular mass of inedible dough. The intuitions, not the tissue of logic connecting them, are what tend to survive in the field experience./ (Victor Turner 1974: 23)

Table of contents

Foreword	iv		
1 / Phantom Ethics	2		
Ethical Animals	9		
Drafting the New Catechism	17		
Voices From Under the Rubble	22		
Flight From the Real, Take Two	30		
2 / Essentials	44		
Can We Talk?	50		
A Weary Cosmology	66		
Ruts in the Mind	73		
Beyond "Common Sense"	79		
Development and Birth	81		
3 / Origin of Modern Man	90		
Elements of Comparison	92		
Trespassing the Critical Threshold	99		
Gut Reactions	107		
Once Upon a Time...	111		
The Quest for Deep Time	126		
4 / The Peter Pan Effect	134		
Overcoming One's Hang-ups	148		
Indicators of Cultural Penetration	155		
Beyond the Ethnocentric View	172		
Establishing the Cast of Characters	180		
5 / The Quest For Sacred Aura	190		
Deconstructing a Mantra	196		
A Matter of Method	201		
Decrepit Fortress Walls	226		
Lakatos and the Hard Core	232		
An Origins Myth Adrift	246		
Accelerated Spin	261		
Kurt's Ambivalence	288		
6 / The Popper Affair	298		
Mea Culpa	305		
An Outsider Above Suspicion	313		
Evasive Action	318		
Mythologics	328		
The Inquisition Gets a Makeover	335		
Setting Up The Target	343		
The French	351		
7 / Conclusion	358		
8 / Annex: What is a "Creationist"?	372		
9 / Bibliography	375		
10 / The Origins Debate	410		
The Creationists	410		
Creationist Science Journals	413		
Intelligent Design	413		
Independent Critics	414		
11 / Notes	416		
12 / Index	546		
Acknowledgements	564		
Technical Considerations	566		

Foreword

The previous volume of this work examined the assertion that postmodernism is actually an invisible religion, a religion in fundamental denial of its own religious nature. One trait contributing to this invisibility is the postmodern rejection of any social/political utopia or explicit creed.

The twentieth century saw the climax of the modern religion, followed by the slow erosion of its influence. The American novelist Kurt Vonnegut provides an entertaining case study of a modern individual's ideologico-religious conversion/drift into postmodernism. In a collection of articles published under the title **Wampeters, Foma & Granfaloon**s, Vonnegut gives us a remarkable thumbnail sketch of the evolution of his view of life and provides a good example of a wider shift in beliefs during the twentieth century resulting in the challenge of the Enlightenment's legacy by a new belief system. Vonnegut relates that in his youth he had been an optimist, believing in Progress, confident that science would lead to Nirvana. He believed that scientists would soon find out how everything worked and would eventually make everything go better. He had expected that before he was twenty-one, a scientist would have taken a photo of God which would be subsequently published in the *Popular Mechanics* magazine. All the great mysteries of life would be solved. But this initial optimism was laid low by the harsh realities of war and everyday life and led to pessimism and a deep questioning of Enlightenment dogma. As it turned out, in his twenty-first year Vonnegut witnessed the firebombing and annihilation of Dresden¹ in Germany during World War II. He notes with irony that his generation witnessed scientific truth being dropped on Hiroshima. Vonnegut confesses, in a speech at a high school graduation, that as a result of these events he then had an intimate conversation with himself and provides us with a glimpse (1975: 162):

"Hey, Corporal Vonnegut," I said to myself, "maybe you were wrong to be an optimist. Maybe pessimism is the thing." I have been a consistent pessimist ever since, with a few exceptions. In order to persuade my wife to marry me, of course, I had to promise her that the future would be heavenly. And then I had to lie

about the future again every time I thought she should have a baby. And then I had to lie to her again every time she threatened to leave me because I was too pessimistic. I saved our marriage many times by exclaiming, "Wait!; Wait! I see light at the end of the tunnel at last!" And I wish I could bring light to your tunnels today. My wife begged me to bring you light, but there is no light. Everything is going to become unimaginably worse, and never get better again. If I lied to you about that, you would sense that I'd lied to you, and that would be another cause for gloom. We have enough causes for gloom.

(1975: 163-64) I know that millions of dollars have been spent to produce this splendid graduating class, and that the main hope of your teachers was, once they got through with you, that you would no longer be superstitious. I'm sorry I have to undo that now. I beg you to believe in the most ridiculous superstition² of all: that humanity is at the center of the universe, the fulfiller or the frustrator of the grandest dreams of God Almighty. If you can believe that, and make others believe it, then there might be hope for us. Human beings might stop treating each other like garbage, might begin to treasure and protect each other instead. Then it might be all right to have babies again. Many of you will have babies anyway, if you're anything like me. To quote the poet Schiller: "Against stupidity the very gods themselves contend in vain." About astrology and palmistry: They are good because they make people feel vivid and full of possibilities. They are communism at its best. Everybody has a birthday and almost everybody has a palm.

Seeing the supreme Truth of Science laid low, Vonnegut³ therefore turned to the postmodern religion. The door is now open to mysticism and even the occult.⁴ And if the Enlightenment pre-empted the old Christian horror of superstition, postmoderns are not encumbered by such scruples. In the twentieth century, one encounters thinkers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, who were both precursors of postmodernism while remaining closely committed to a materialist cosmology. Existentialism can be seen as a precursor of postmodernism with its relativization of modern collective ideologies as well as in the central place it gives to the individual and his subjectivity. Existentialism remains firmly rooted in modern (materialist) cosmology, but represents nonetheless the birth pangs of something new. Thenceforth, the process of breaking away from ideologies devoted

to the establishment of collective utopias⁵ is initiated, those ideologies that so dominated the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries. Later on, hippies and the Me generation pursued this shift away from dominant social post-war ideologies (capitalism vs. Communism) in their protests against the Vietnam War ("Hell no, we won't go!" ["Gotta look out for Number One..."]).

It should be noted that the postmodern phenomenon discussed here is much wider and deeper than the university and academic scene, the world of thinkers. Postmodern intellectuals are only one expression of postmodernism and are not the ultimate source of this cultural current. If postmodern symbols and rhetoric have managed to impact pop culture this is indicative of a broad response to the modern view. Intellectuals aren't the only ones to have found the modern belief system deficient and to have attempted to find "something else", some other way to figure out life. It is no coincidence then to find postmodern presuppositions widely disseminated by the arts and pop culture. While still crediting intellectuals as the source of all wisdom, the French sociologist François Cusset notes (2005: 12, 13):

One finds "French theory"⁶ in neighbourhood, ethnic or even sexual activism, in novels or even in mainstream movies, and of course in the world of constantly mutating art forms. [...] Experimental music by DJ Spooky quotes Gilles Deleuze on his album covers, but develops his own theory of the musical object; or between the Baudrillardian hypothesis of the simulation of the real and the copy with no original and the basic argument put forward by the three episodes of the **Matrix**, the Wachowski brothers' film (1999), which is of course less Baudrillardian as it picks up on common issues, using the specific resources and narrative techniques of cinema.*

One issue that sociologists sometimes focus on regarding the "Révolution Tranquille"⁷ which took place in Quebec in the 1960-1970s is the old Church-State relationship, which had existed since the founding of New France (somewhat reworked after the British conquest in 1759), and which was discarded by twentieth-century modern elites. Previously the Catholic Church had owned and run all health-care and most education in the province as well as having great influence in politics. The "Révolution Tranquille" is generally considered as an administrative revolution, that is to say involving a non-violent transfer of powers within Quebec's major social insti-

tutions (such as education and health care) from the Catholic Church to the State (and the rising liberal elites). But this is only one side of the issue and in this process, the secular State (if not the political system as a whole) has subsequently replaced the Catholic Church in ideologico-religious terms as well. Despite the changeover to the modern view, the centralized Catholic model, which for generations of French-speakers had been a central fact of life, has remained an unquestioned social pattern for the ideological management of the masses in most secular French-speaking societies.⁸

In France, of course, this transfer of powers occurred nearly two centuries earlier (and much more violently), during the French Revolution and later on at other critical moments such as the battle over the establishment of secular public schools in the early twentieth century. In both cases, the State took over, in ideologico-religious terms, the central role once played by the Catholic Church. These considerations also provide an explanation, in the author's view, of the gravitation, in French-speaking societies with a Catholic tradition, towards "la pensée unique", that is, mainstream intellectual conformism dictated by a prestigious hierarchical elite. It is therefore a religious tradition dominated by the equation: one territory/society = one religion/church.⁹ This ideological framework can also be linked with recent anti-cult laws in France, which merely repeat the old Catholic pattern of exclusion (e.g., the Catholic attitude towards the Protestant Huguenots).

In this tradition, alternative ideologico-religious discourse is always viewed as "unsettling". Despite the great value placed on "critical thinking" in French-speaking societies, the French have always liked their intellectual or moral authorities haloed with the highest scientific or academic prestige and whose learned discourse, coming from on high, reveals, to the mere mortals below, how to think or behave. Could it be that, among the French, intellectuals, the Académie française or the CNRS¹⁰ have replaced the synods and holy conclaves¹¹ of past centuries? It should be noted that the transition from the old Judeo-Christian cosmology to the modern belief system has also been marked by a transition in language. Previously, the term for a belief system was the word "religion". In the modern context, the term "ideology" is used, indicating a transition to a belief system based on a materialist cosmology. Considered from an anthropological point of view, it is actually irrelevant whether a cosmol-

viii ogy is deistic, Lamarckian or Darwinian. The fundamental issue is the cosmology's explanatory function.

I have been criticized for presenting in the previous volume, a somewhat negative or selfish view of the scientist's role. No doubt such views are scandalous as they call into question the modern image of the scientist as "holy man". Basically, we claim no more than that the scientist is confronted, like all other men, with human reality in all its ambiguity and contradictions. Is it "scandalous" to suggest that the scientist is in fact an ordinary human with ordinary personal desires and needs? Indeed, we must understand that the image of the scientist as a "holy man" is an ideological product derived from the Enlightenment, as it sought to establish its seat of authority, its aura or sacredness.

That said, the fact remains that many scientists do still identify with the ethical and intellectual ideals of the eighteenth-century pioneers of science. The search for objectivity and truth then remains a powerful motivating concept, present in the professional practice of the scientist and from researchers methodical labours and ethical commitments, many useful discoveries emerge in technology as well as in medicine, to the benefit of humanity. Raising the issue of science's ideological role in the modern and postmodern context no doubt carries a hint of scandal, but in the author's opinion, this simple fact needs to be slowly digested in order to sort things out. It is not a matter of despising the work and contribution of scientists to civilization, but it is necessary, in my opinion, to take a step back from scientism,¹² which is ubiquitous in the French-speaking world and has deeply influenced rest of the Western world as well.

Among the French, in political, cultural and intellectual terms the Enlightenment had an extraordinarily deep impact. In these societies, the social prestige attributed to science took on mythic proportions. In this context, any serious questioning of scientism will inevitably be rejected and subject to constraints and taboos, as this would raise numerous ideological and religious issues. Many will persist in rejecting the idea that science now plays an ideological function in the West. The common-sense view tells us science is neutral, objective and pure. It is therefore one hundred per cent empirical, with no links to (or contamination by) religion or metaphysics. This view is widespread and perhaps acceptable only regarding scientific methodology, but patently false if the foundations of science itself are examined. As discussed in the following

pages (chapter 5 in particular), science as a method cannot deny its link with metaphysics and cosmology, since it is based on a number of assumptions, a cosmology, that is, a particular world-view. But many scientists find this basic observation disturbing, as they are not trained as philosophers, but rather as technicians,¹³ whose prime concern is to apply a method designed to expand our knowledge of the physical and biological world around us (and to obtain practical results thereby, if not new technology). As a result, when it is suggested that their method is based on certain metaphysical presuppositions, presuppositions that are linked to cosmology, this takes most scientists out of their "comfort zone", and challenges their public self-image as purely empirical and rational beings, dealing only in "facts"...

In developing our arguments, our intent is not to deny the ethical or moral concerns of scientists. The real question is: What is the postmodern scientists' reference point when resolving these issues? What is their benchmark for assessing good or evil in a particular situation? Which ideologico-religious system will serve as a benchmark for their ethical stance? Ethics doesn't just "appear", like the magician's rabbit drawn out of a hat, but is always linked in logical terms to a particular cosmology. For the sake of argument, we may assume that scientists are well intended for the most part, and that in general the likelihood that (ecological or medical) disasters should occur is limited. But in biotechnology, there is reason to believe that the story is different, since in this field there is no established ethical tradition. One might say it's the Wild West... especially when laboratories may be opened in countries where political interests or the economic interests of the international market are the only law.¹⁴

In the West, scientific and medical research was first developed in the context of the Judeo-Christian ethical tradition.¹⁵ This tradition still retains some influence due to social and institutional inertia, but since the late nineteenth century, this heritage has been greatly eroded and marginalized in many areas¹⁶ and one must ask which ideologico-religious system will replace it to become the dominant influence among scientists and bioethics committees. These are not abstract questions. The French biologist Pierre-Paul Grassé highlights below what happens when scientific elites overwhelmingly adopt a fashionable ideology (1980: 44):

After the triumph of National Socialism, German science gave massive, unconditional support to the Führer. Anthropologists, geneticists, economists and lawyers zealously began to serve their new master. [In a footnote [2] Grassé adds]: Support for their Führer among German intellectuals¹⁷ was massive. In the 1933 referendum, statements by professors from many universities (not all) were combined in one volume. Among the authors of these texts, can be found the name of the famous philosopher, Martin Heidegger, which is both surprising, given the idealism permeating his work and revealing of the mind-set that gave Hitler victory.*

But we should not be too surprised by such an outcome. Scientists remain ordinary human beings. They too must answer the big questions of life and can in no case avoid commitment to an ideologico-religious system. The only question is: Which one will they choose?¹⁸ If we accept that ideas have consequences, then the choice of an ideologico-religious system must be carefully weighed both by the individual and by society. Another issue is that even in the case of researchers identifying in some way with Christianity¹⁹ (or any other monotheistic religion), one must take into consideration the fact that in the postmodern context, Christianity is typically relegated to the ghetto of one's "private life" and will have little or no significant influence on one's professional or public life where the postmodern worldview rules supreme. This differs radically from scientists who lived and did research before Enlightenment influence had totally penetrated the institution of Science.

In the first volume of this essay, we noted that the heart of the postmodern religion is the individual and his/her autonomy.²⁰ It is conceivable that the capitalist system (derived from variations of the English Enlightenment) may have contributed in some ways to the emergence of postmodernism, as from an economic point of view it is useful (and profitable) for the capitalist system to isolate individuals as consumers. The logic of self-fulfilment has its uses not only in psychological, but also in economic terms.

To understand the approach adopted in the following pages, reading the first volume of this essay will obviously be useful, but if for some reason this were to be impossible then here is a nutshell view of ground covered so far. This series of essays addresses a fundamental question: What is a worldview, an ideology or a **religion**? Religion is viewed here primarily as a system of beliefs devel-

oped to give meaning to human existence in intellectual as well as in moral, aesthetic and emotional terms. Initially, a worldview involves a **cosmology**, that is to say a set of presuppositions about the world order or how the world works. Cosmology provides the conceptual framework within which human existence is worked out or, in other words, the stage on which the theatre of life is performed. Cosmology often, but not always, takes the form of an origins myth. Simply expressed, we can say that cosmology provides a box in which human existence is played out and made sense of. A materialist cosmology for example offers a rather small "box", while the various theistic cosmologies offer "boxes" with additional dimensions and categories of beings and levels of existence unknown in a materialistic cosmology. The cosmology's main function then is to establish the limits of the thinkable. It provides many elements that may be used to answer the big questions of human existence, particularly the source of human alienation. Cosmology then provides a basis for, and foreshadows morality and even eschatology, which appear at later stages in the development of a mature worldview.

A worldview, or ideologico-religious system,²¹ finds its basis in its cosmology. It involves the attempt to explain human alienation and includes **strategies** that help to mitigate or remedy (in some sense) the human condition. These strategies are designed to reach a final resolution which may take various forms such as Progress, the return of the Messiah, Nirvana, the New Jerusalem, the unification of Islamic nations under one caliph, the five Hindu heavens, the classless society, or cyberspace. The various strategies addressing human alienation proposed by differing worldviews clearly cannot be understood without reference to their own cosmologies. Given such considerations we assume here that religion is an attempt to impose order, to make sense of or give meaning to the world around us. Whether a religion does or does not refer to the supernatural to accomplish this is irrelevant. A materialist cosmology may serve to develop an ideologico-religious cosmology just as well as another referring to the supernatural.

The modern ideologico-religious system is the mature offspring of the Enlightenment and was the dominant worldview in the twentieth-century West. Initially it pushed aside traditional religions [Christianity in particular] claiming that from now on science would be the true and sole source of knowledge and salvation. If in times past ecclesiastical hierarchy or the Bible was viewed as the

guarantor of truth, since the Enlightenment science has taken on this role. Moderns regard empirical data and Reason as forming the foundation of any knowledge worth mentioning. To ensure the logical consistency of this belief system, it was necessary, even inevitable, to develop an origins myth wrapped in the prestige of science. Although a materialist worldview has become dominant in the West since the early twentieth century, nonetheless several concepts drawn from the Judeo-Christian heritage were left undisturbed in the West's cultural closet. For example, the Christian concept that the passage of time has meaning (History) was maintained but, in the modern context, this was called Progress. Initially a theological concept, this was reformulated in materialistic terms. In its most optimistic phases, it was claimed that scientists, educators and technologists would lead us to an era of prosperity and peace on earth, where technology would work wonders, dispelling disease and pushing back the conventional limits of human existence. But since Auschwitz, the H-bomb, the reappearance of "conquered" diseases such as tuberculosis, GMOs and various environmental problems related to industrial development, we are less trusting of such claims. In practical terms, politics was now viewed as a critical issue, "at the heart of all things", that is to say that many moderns viewed "salvation" as primarily political and often taking the shape of social "terra-forming" projects such as capitalism or communism.

Postmoderns have pursued the ideologico-religious offloading process initiated by moderns. Other elements of the Judeo-Christian heritage such as Christian views of sexuality, the concept of universal (unilinear/noncyclical) History,²² law, man's place in nature were eroded and marginalized via a long covert process. Furthermore, in response to the modern worldview, postmoderns reject any political project with universal claims. Cultural relativism eliminates any moral or political universals. Democracy becomes little more than a quaint Western trait. Even scientific knowledge is called into question by some postmoderns, as is the concept of Progress.²³ Postmoderns deny the universality of this concept considering it no more than a metanarrative, a Western myth.

Postmodernism is in part a reaction to the monotony of the modern worldview's rationalism, its optimism and naive faith in technology, in progress and the belief that science provides universal knowledge. Some fled the monotony of modern Reason,²⁴ seeking refuge in the irrational, the occult and even drugs. Although Timothy Leary's psychedelic utopia was short lived, the attraction

of the occult and of dimensions beyond the material world has since grown in the West. If postmoderns have abandoned the grand social revolutions and the great political utopias of the early twentieth century, postmoderns do retain a form of "salvation", a Holy Grail, in various forms of sexual liberation/jihad. While reason and truth were the heart of modernism, there is reason to believe that desire is the quintessence of the postmodern belief system. Postmoderns reject the notion that there may be a truth outside of one's self. It accepts no constraints and insists on one's discovery and creation of autonomous values. Although postmodernism seems to be the largely dominant ideologico-religious system in the twenty-first century, it does have a weakness. Since the concept of self-fulfilment is at the heart of this belief system, its strong position in the West may be linked to the, thus far, prevailing economic prosperity. It is therefore conceivable that a major economic crisis could greatly reduce its influence. Hard to tell. In any case, the West will certainly be put to the test in the twenty-first century as it finds itself caught between the growing ideological power of the Islamic world and growing Asian technological, economic and military power. What effect will these factors have on the West's sacred fetish, its standard of living? As the purported Chinese curse goes: "May you live in interesting times."