



Paul Gosselin

Flight From the Absolute

Cynical Observations on the
Postmodern West

volume I

S A M I Z D A T





Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Gosselin, Paul, 1957-
Flight from the absolute: cynical observations on the postmodern West /
Paul Gosselin.
Translation of: Fuite de l'Absolu. volume 1

Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-2-9807774-3-1 (v. 1)

1. Postmodernism. 2. Cosmology. 3. Civilization, Western. 4. Religion
and civilization. I. Title.

B831.2.G6713 2012 149:97 C2012-901723-X

Translated from the French: *Fuite de l'Absolu: Observations cyniques sur
l'Occident postmoderne. volume 1 (2006)*
Cover: Detail drawn from *Le triangle invisible*
by Constance Cimon, 2002 - Acrylic on canvas.
Cf: www.samizdat.qc.ca/arts/av/cimon

Samizdat 2012©
Succursale Jean-Gauvin
CP 25019
Quebec, QC
G1X 5A3
www.samizdat.qc.ca/publications/

Layout and cover by PogoDesign





*"O weariness of men who turn from GOD
To the grandeur of your mind and the glory of your action,
To arts and inventions and daring enterprises,
To schemes of human greatness thoroughly discredited,
Binding the earth and the water to your service,
Exploiting the seas and developing the mountains,
Dividing the stars into common and preferred,
Engaged in devising the perfect refrigerator,
Engaged in working out a rational morality,
Engaged in printing as many books as possible,
Plotting of happiness and flinging empty bottles,
Turning from your vacancy to fevered enthusiasm
For nation or race or what you call humanity;
Thought you forget the way to the Temple,
There is one who remembers the way to your door:
Life you may evade, but Death you shall not.
You shall not deny the Stranger."*

T. S. Eliot (Choruses from 'the Rock' 1982: 117)

*"O world of spring and autumn, birth and dying!
The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.
All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death no nearer to God.
Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust."*

T. S. Eliot (Choruses from 'the Rock' 1982: 107)





Art of the mosaic

A picture or pattern produced by the arrangement of small coloured pieces of hard material (*tesserae*), such as stone, tile, or glass in a limited space.

figurative: a combination of unrelated elements, giving form to a new concept.





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Foreword

A scant century or two ago in the Western world, religion had great influence over several strategic social institutions such as education, justice, science, health care, the arts and culture. But since then things have changed. During the course of the twentieth-century, secularization has marginalized the Judeo-Christian tradition in the West. In most cases, a secular perspective now dominates major social institutions, though the United States may in some respects be considered an exception to the rule that applies elsewhere in the West. It would appear that in general terms the major influences in the West are secular and religion has been relegated to the private sphere. But if one looks past the surface, it is obvious that the yearning for meaning still haunts Western man. Even though the cultural context has changed, ultimate questions remain just as relevant in the twenty-first century as they were in Antiquity or during the Middle Ages. Is it possible that materialism (and its numerous ideological derivatives) has not eliminated religion, but, in the current context, supplanted its functions and has joined, wittingly or not, in the process of providing answers to the question of meaning?

Though the modern or materialist worldview was initially just an idea in the minds of a small group of influential thinkers of the Enlightenment, as time passed it came to shape the attitudes and behaviour of the educated classes and, eventually, of entire societies. This worldview has penetrated the Western psyche so deeply that it has become an invisible, self-explanatory presupposition. Many take it for granted.

In a discussion with an intellectual, I sometimes ask: "How do you define postmodernism? How do you distinguish between modern and postmodern outlooks?" The answers to these questions

typically vary according to the fields of interest or educational background of the person. A relevant definition, in the field of literature or architecture, may be of little interest in anthropology or history. In the present work we will be primarily concerned with postmodernism as a system of beliefs.

What then is a worldview, an ideology, or a religion?¹ It is primarily a system of belief developed to give meaning to human existence both on an intellectual and emotional level. Initially, a worldview involves a **cosmology**, i.e. a set of presuppositions concerning the order of the world. A cosmology provides the conceptual framework in which human existence is given meaning. One could say that a cosmology is the stage where the theatre of life is played out. It often, but not always, takes the form of an origins myth. A materialist cosmology², for example, offers a rather narrow framework (or a smaller box) while the various theistic cosmologies propose boxes comprising additional dimensions, that is categories of beings unknown (or discounted) in a materialist cosmology. Cosmology thus has, as a main function, to establish the limits of the conceivable world. It provides the basis on which one can begin to answer the big questions of human existence, such as the reasons for human alienation and suffering. Cosmology then supports and prefigures moral codes, and even eschatology,³ which are typically part of the development of a mature religion or worldview.

A mature worldview or **ideologico-religious system** is based on a cosmology and involves an explanation of human alienation as well as strategies which attempt to mitigate or resolve this problem in some fashion. These strategies may be conceived as leading to a final resolution, a Utopia. Final resolution can take many forms, for example Progress, the return of the Messiah, Nirvana, the New Jerusalem, the unification of the Islamic nations under one Caliph, the five Hindu heavens,⁴ a classless society or cyberspace.⁵ The strategies referred to by various worldviews when attempting to remedy human alienation obviously do not make any sense if taken out of the context of their own cosmologies. For example, the Marxist utopia of classless society would basically be seen as heresy in the context of Hindu cosmology. We thus postulate that a religion is an attempt to impose order, to give meaning to the world. Whether this system refers to the supernatural or not is of no real consequence. A materialist cosmology can just as easily establish an ideologico-religious system as a cosmology referring to the supernatural. In its development, a religion is integrative, that is, it con-

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vi stitutes an attempt at a total response to the questions of existence. This attempt may be more or less successful depending on the historical context and the subjective perceptions of its coherence or contradictions in the eyes of the individual. We postulate here that it is impossible to understand the ethical system, the morality of an ideologico-religious system without first understanding its cosmology, since the presuppositions inherent in a cosmology prefigure and provide the basis for further development of taboos, ethical precepts, concepts of alienation, various themes of artistic expression as well as the eschatology of a religion.

The **modern** ideologico-religious system, an outgrowth of the Enlightenment, dominated the twentieth-century in the West and in its early stages set aside Christianity. It asserted that science was now the true source of knowledge and salvation. In the past, clerical hierarchies or the Bible had been considered the guarantors of Truth, but in the modern world Science took over this function. Reason and the empirical world were expected to provide the foundation of all knowledge worthy of interest. To ensure the logical coherence of this system of beliefs, it was necessary, in fact inevitable, to call upon an origins myth⁶ legitimized by the prestige of science. Although a materialist worldview has dominated the West since the beginning of the twentieth-century; in the background concepts drawn from the Judeo-Christian cultural heritage have remained in use.⁷ For example, the Christian concept of Time as meaningful (History⁸) was maintained and, in the modern context, repackaged under the term "Progress". Initially a theological concept, this concept was reformulated in materialistic terms. When the modern view arrived at the apex of its influence, many assumed that in a generation or two scientists and technologists would lead us to an era of prosperity and peace where technology would perform miracles to eliminate illness as well as push back the conventional limits of human existence. Today, after Auschwitz,⁹ the H-bomb, the reappearance of "eradicated" diseases such tuberculosis, the development of genetically modified organisms and the emergence of various environmental problems linked to technological progress, observers are more cautious. On the practical level, politics has become central and modern salvation has frequently taken a political or social form, attempting to enact collective utopias of some sort.

One should view the development of the modern religion as a two-stage affair. The first stage occurred with thinkers such as

Descartes, Hobbes and Voltaire whose most significant contribution was to set up, alongside the authority of the Bible and/or the Church, the authority of Reason and/or Science. These first-stage moderns were for the most part theologically literate deists¹⁰ who accepted the existence of God (as Creator and providing a basis for human reason). Second-stage moderns rose up when there was a critical mass allowing for a mature materialist cosmology. Once the epistemological authority of Science had been established and it was seen as a source of Truth, then thinkers such as Buffon, Lamarck and later on, Darwin became instrumental in breaking down the last vestiges of the old traditional Judeo-Christian cosmology. This opened the door to thinkers such as Nietzsche who proclaimed "God is Dead!" and, later on, Dawkins who commented that Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.

In the **postmodern** era, elements from the Judeo-Christian heritage have been shed in a gradual underground process, slowly questioning and discarding concepts notably in the areas of morality, universal history (unilinear),¹¹ law, sexual conduct, universal rights and man's status in the natural world.¹² Furthermore, in reaction to modernism, the postmodern worldview has disavowed the collective, universal political projects that characterized the twentieth-century. Political utopias are now *passé*. Cultural relativism has eliminated all moral or political absolutes, except perhaps that of science, at least for the present. The concept of progress has also been deconstructed. The universality of this Enlightenment concept has been denied and it is treated as little more than a Western meta-narrative. Postmodernism is in part a reaction against the rational monotony of modernism, against modernism's faith in technology, in progress and in the postulate of a universal knowledge, which is perceived by academic elites as intellectual "colonialism". Feminism has also contributed to the postmodern current by its rejection of male-influenced Reason, which had been erected on the altar of the Enlightenment. Even science has become a target for deconstruction. Postmoderns propose instead a heterogeneous, fragmented ideology. Postmoderns are wary of universals. If postmoderns reject Revolution and grand political utopias, all that remains for them is salvation found in various forms of sexual or environmental liberation/jihad. While Reason, Truth and Man were at the heart of modernism, there is reason to believe that desire (expressed as self-fulfilment) has become the core value of postmodernism. For this reason, one can view

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viii Existentialism as a precursor of postmodernism in its relativization of modern collective ideologies and in the central place it accords to the individual and his subjectivity, but all the while remaining captive to modern (materialist) cosmology. Existentialism is caught between these two worlds.

One should keep in mind that postmodernism does not reject traditional religion in absolute terms, as did the modern ideology¹³ (in its mature, materialistic forms). In the postmodern context, traditional religion's admission to the public arena is conditional. Religious discourse expressed in this context will be expected to yield to the demands of postmodern syncretism, that is religion must give up any claims of an Absolute, of a universal Truth or else face postmodern "tolerance"... Hard core materialism is thus no longer mandatory. Today, even interest in the occult is no longer taboo and can be legitimately pursued. Nor is there any shame in attempting to get shamanism to coexist with Catholic doctrine and Feng Shui. Postmodern religion is custom-made and the customer is always right... Individuals can, of course, belong to a faith community if they like, but this is considered optional, of secondary importance. Rigid collective ideologies or religions are now a thing of the past¹⁴. In our generation, the *spiritual journey* masks an ideological pick-and-choose approach. Finding Truth is of little concern to postmoderns. The journey itself is what really counts, which boils down to the emotional or aesthetic satisfaction the individual can derive from it. At least this process provides wallpaper and a pleasant colour scheme, masking the inner void...

In the West, postmodern influence is, for the most part, subliminal, non-explicit. Very few people identify themselves as postmoderns and yet one observes that the behaviour and attitudes of the masses are to a great extent moulded by postmodern presuppositions. This should come as no surprise. In medical terms, for example, it is known that individuals can carry an infection without being aware of it. On the ideological level then as well, it is quite possible to be influenced by postmodern thought, its mythology and its presuppositions, without knowingly identifying with this movement. To sort things out, one must then apply some sort of diagnostic test to verify or exclude the presence of postmodern influence. It is important to note here that the subject of this work, postmodernism, is not a movement defined solely by the works of a handful of French intellectuals. Authors such as Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Deleuze and others have of course

taken part in and contributed to this movement, but it precedes them and goes beyond them. It is not a phenomenon defined by the activities of a few scholars. Other actors such as pop culture, media, advertising, the film industry, media elites and others participate, in various ways, in the development and propagation of this ideologico-religious system.

Deconstruction and meta-narrative analysis are the preferred tools of our academic postmodern elites, but if these tools are turned around to target postmodern discourse itself, then such an initiative may turn up a few issues worthy of interest. Years ago American sociologist Thomas Luckmann observed (1970: 70) that a priori all societies have an ideologico-religious system, a system of meaning, a worldview or, to use postmodern jargon, a meta-narrative. In Luckmann's view, the development of personal and social identity always has a religious dimension. If an ideologico-religious system constitutes the infrastructure of any civilization, what then is the religion of the postmodern West? What are its sacred institutions, its rites, its origins myths, its apostles, its believers and its initiations? In the following pages, we will attempt to examine all these unpleasant and neglected questions and look into the heart of our generation.

What will we find there?

