

**CHRISTIANITY AND THE POSTMODERN TURN
A CRITIQUE OF POSTMODERN EPISTEMOLOGY**

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The opinions expressed in this thesis do not necessarily reflect the views of the South African Theological Seminary.

DECLARATION

I hereby acknowledge that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted to any academic institution for degree purposes.

Hock Lee

Hock S Lee
May 2009

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SUMMARY or ABSTRACT

This thesis is loosely based on the main arguments raised by postmodern and orthodox theologians as discussed in the book, *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*. However, it is not my intention to interact with the book. Myron Penner (2005:29) correctly stated that the crux of the matter was the concept of truth, and whether Christianity could be said to be true in a meaningful way after making the postmodern turn. But what is truth? More specifically, how does the postmodern claim to truth impact orthodox Christian beliefs? In order to understand the issues, let alone answer the questions, we need to investigate the theory of truth or epistemology. Therefore, the main thrust of this thesis is the survey of contemporary epistemology, and in particular, the critique of postmodern epistemology.

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CHRISTIANITY AND THE POSTMODERN TURN

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I. INTRODUCTION

“The atheistic or at least non theistic character of their thoughts is not modified by religious motifs that emerged in the later thought of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida. So it is widely assumed, by friend and foe alike, that the central themes of the postmodern philosophers and the central loci of orthodox Christian theology are mutually exclusive. While this is true of the (anti) religion postures of the philosophers named above, I am not sure it is true of their central themes.”

Merold Westphal, *Onto-theology, Metanarrative
Perspectivism, and the Gospel*

It is often thought that postmodern philosophy has continued the modern tradition of opposition to Christian theology. Whereas modernism has attempted to impose upon Christian beliefs, the perceived requirement of verification, based on rationalism and empiricism, postmodernism, conversely, seems to deny the existence of any universal truth systems. Brian Ingrassia (1995:1) succinctly puts it like this: Modernism tried to elevate man into God’s place, postmodernism seeks to destroy or deconstruct the very place and attributes of God.

Myron Penner (2005) in his book *“Christianity and the Postmodern Turn”* brought together six Christian scholars to explain and debate postmodern philosophy, and the apparent dominance of this, on Christian thinking, within Anglo-American culture. The selected Christian scholars held positions that ranged from a fundamental rejection of postmodern philosophy to general acceptance.

The key issues raised in “*Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*” include questions such as: “What happens to the philosophical values of truth, knowledge and reality in light of accepting postmodern values?” and “Is there a concept of reason left?”

Douglas Geivett (2005: 51), one of the six Christian scholars engaged in the debate, represents the “Biola School” tradition, who believes in the notion that Christian theology is largely based on foundationalism. Therefore, it is perceived by Christians endorsing Geivett’s viewpoint that Christian theology is potentially subject to postmodern destabilizing influences. The following examples appear to reflect this conviction.

- The rejection of metanarratives, which appear to suggest that orthodox Christian philosophy and epistemology appears to be under threat (Adams 1998: 522). The traditional coherent presentation of the orthodox system of belief, developed through the centuries, based on deductive reasoning and the interaction of the Bible, have to give way to relativistic theology (Guarino 1993: 37-40). Relativistic theology appears to be the theology of liberation and numerous socio-political systems. The core Christian message is no longer normative; instead, truth is subjective and relevant only to the culture and society of the day (Grenz 2001: 40).
- Foundationalism seems to be replaced by nihilism (Nietzsche 1968:1). Christian foundation such as scripture, creeds and confessions, and ecclesiastical traditions appear to be no longer meaningful. Biblical text cannot be understood with certainty since the “postmodern condition” concerning the theory and practice of interpretation is “incredulity towards meaning” (Lyotard 1984: xxiii). In this respect, Lyotard claimed that the model of knowledge, as a progressive development of consensus, is also outmoded.
- Absolutism seems to be replaced by relativism. Christian morality and theology are relative to the people who embrace them (Carson 2005 : 31-32). Hence the rise of moral and theological plurality, assuming that no

one perspective has the dominant position in church, and no single unique outlook on reality accounts for the world we live in.

- The concept of truth, including biblical truth, seems to have no correspondence to objective reality (Moreland 2004: np). Hence, the search for truth appears to be a vain exercise and the reader should be content with individual/ personal interpretation. Systematic theology should be replaced by “edifying” theology, which aims at a continuing conversation between the reader and scriptures, rather than discovering truth.

Merold Westphal (2001: xii), another contributor in “*Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*”, defended postmodern views, claiming that Christians, generally misunderstood postmodernists. Quite remarkably, Westphal (2000: 6-10) even appears to support the worldviews of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida. He further contended that postmodern thinking is useful and could be of service to Christian theology (Westphal 2000:8).

As one would expect from a debate such as this, there are diverging views leaving much room for further reflection. Penner, in his closing remark, said that he hoped the controversies and dialogue generated in “*Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*” would lead Christians to reflect more substantially on their theology. The crux of the matter, according to Penner (2005: 25), is the concept of truth, and whether Christianity can be said to be true in any meaningful way, in the light of postmodern philosophy.

Taking the cue from Penner, I seek to analyse, critically, the concerns raised by orthodox Christians on the impact of postmodern thinking on Christian theology. The fundamental issue according to Geivett (2005: 37) is epistemology. Epistemology, the study of the theory of knowledge, is one of the main topics in philosophy, and Christian theologians are interested in the subject because of their concern with the knowledge of God.

I do not intend to interact with Penner’s book or the six contributing authors. However, the issues raised by the authors are useful, and they are referred in this introduction as a preface to my thesis. The issues are expressed in the following questions:

- i. What is postmodern epistemology?
- ii. Why is epistemology important to Christian theology?
- iii. What is the shape of Christian theology as a result of applying postmodern epistemology?
- iv. What is the impact of postmodern epistemology on hermeneutics?
- v. Is postmodern epistemology the “best” approach to the understanding of Christianity?

In order to address the first question, an understanding of the development of Western epistemology would be helpful, beginning from the Enlightenment project and the Modern thinkers.

I.i. Enlightenment Project and Modern thinking.

Westphal (2003: xiii) has emphasized that postmodern thinkers’ criticisms are not leveled against Christianity per se, but against modernity and the Enlightenment project. More specifically, the bone of contention is the modernist project on legitimization or what epistemologist called foundationalism.

To understand the modernist project, we must first turn to Rene Descartes (1595-1650) who is considered to be the father of modern philosophy. Descartes in “*Meditation on First Philosophy*” described a method of arriving at epistemic certainty by starting with doubt (Descartes 2005:np). Once an indubitable belief has been established through reason, the belief would then be used as a starting point on which other beliefs are built on (Descartes 2005:np)). Eventually, a “metanarrative” is constructed that would be classified as certain knowledge.

This, in a nutshell, is foundationalism. The thesis of the foundationalist is justification, and the concept of evidence for supporting one's belief.

Since Descartes, there were many other philosophers such as John Locke (1632-1704) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) who contributed to epistemology but they were essentially foundationalistic in nature. However, Kant realized that there were limitations in the approach. He concluded that human reason cannot extend the concepts and principles of reason beyond the limits of perception or sense experience.

Despite the limitations voiced by Kant, the rational philosophy of the modernist, comprising a synthesis of pure rationalist and empiricist thinking, persist throughout the nineteenth century. The modernist demand for founding knowledge on reasoning and sensibilities has enormous influence on religion, and, particularly, Christianity (Clark 2003:42). Christian doctrines were subjected to critical assessment forcing Western theologians to rethink their theology as they were traditionally understood. One of the key theologians that responded to modernism is Friedrich Schleiermacher and his theology is best understood as Christian faith making peace with modernist rationalism.

However, Kantian epistemic limitation lingers on and the related issues would be fully resurrected, a century later, by postmodern thinkers.

There seems to be dissatisfaction with Modern worldview and its epistemology since the beginning of the Twentieth Century (Veith 1994:19). This is due to the apparent failure of the Modern agenda which believes that absolute knowledge is humanely obtainable, and humankind is progressively overcoming problems (Erickson 1998:17). The notion that modernity can lead us to utopia has been shattered by the pain of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and the numerous ongoing wars (Rosenau 1992:5). Therefore, the emergence of postmodernism is probably the response to the upheaval of modernism (Smart 1993:99-102).

The key concepts behind postmodernism, and in particular, its epistemology, are discussed next.

I.ii. Postmodern thinking

In his book entitled, "*Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Use of Modern Atheism*", Westphal speaks of the "Gang of Six" that shaped the main thinking in postmodern theory. The six are Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard and Rorty. The works of the first three, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida, appear to be foundational and encapsulate the main thrust of postmodern philosophy, including epistemology. This resonates with Ingraffia's (1995) analysis in "*Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology*."

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) agreed with Kant that the real world is inaccessible to reason or experience. However unlike Kant, Nietzsche rejects the idea that there is a real world out there that can be discovered objectively. Since we cannot possess absolute knowledge, we can only approach an approximate "truth" via a multiplicity of perspectives (Nietzsche 1968: 481).

Unlike Nietzsche, who believed that there is no distinction between the real and apparent world, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) believed that there is no distinction between the ontological definition of the knower and the known (Heidegger 1969: 35-37). Heidegger proceeded to show that the modernist concept of the knower being distinct from the external object is false (Heidegger 1960: 59-86). There is knowledge in this world because we exist and not because there is some truth independent of our existence. Therefore, apparently, knowledge according to Heidegger is not about an objective thing in the external world, but a human construct.

While Nietzsche attempts to deconstruct the difference between the real and apparent world and Heidegger differentiates between objective and subjective truth, Derrida attempts to deconstruct language and the concept of meaning. Modernists tend to assume that language is merely a neutral medium or tool that enables us to grasp knowledge, but postmodernists such as Derrida, claim that language is the only access to knowledge and is itself knowledge (Derrida 1982: 15).

Knowledge, according to Derrida, is merely a linguistic construct performed by a community that speaks the “knowledge-language” whether it is science, history or theology.

What the postmodern philosophy appears to claim regarding epistemology, is nothing short of saying that there is no objective epistemology!

This then leads to the next question, why epistemology, whether modernist or postmodernist, is important to Christian theology.

II. The Christian Theology and Epistemology

According to Geivett (2005: 50), Christian theism has a propositional structure, that is, a system of beliefs based on a number of propositions such as God’s existence and the Bible being free from all errors, etc. These propositions form the inherent foundation from which the skilled theologian constructs doctrines and other complex theological assertions. An example of how this structure works is as follows:

When an orthodox Christian is asked how he/she knows that God is speaking, a typical response is a reference to the Bible. And when pressed further as to how he/she knows that the Bible is not mistaken, an appeal to the inspiration of the text is often offered. However, that argument is circular as it is self referencing. Hence, the orthodox Christian has faith statements such as the Apostle’s creed as a starting point, a prolegomenon, which states one’s believe that the Bible is trustworthy. This then is a proposition in the community’s epistemic system.

The Christian using this epistemic approach has effectively adopted some concepts from modern philosophy such as a modest form of foundationalism but he/she is not strictly a modernist. Stanley Grenz (1998:10-11) claims that many conservative American theologians in the twentieth century, such as Gordon Lewis, Bruce Demarest and Wayne Grudem, adopt such a concept. For the purpose of this thesis, I shall label such Christians as the Christian Modernist (CM).

The CMs justify their beliefs by appealing to the Bible, and the use of reason, including empirical evidence such as fulfillment of prophecies. Employing this foundationalist approach, CMs claim that their discipline is a “science.” (Noll: 1991, 98).

However, Christian theology need not rely solely on this approach, and an alternative based on postmodern epistemology appear possible.

II.ii. Appropriating Postmodernism

Westphal claims that whilst the postmodern philosophers may be atheists and may even be enemies of the faith, their central themes could be appropriated and useful to Christian theology. And he warns us against Christians that based their theology on modernist methods rather than “biblical” (Westphal 2001: xvi)

The argument appears to be along this line: the modernist’s influence has led to the quest for foundations for all academic disciplines including theology. This results in the development of theological prolegomena, which is the attempt to formulate how theology is possible and to demonstrate its universal validity. This is achieved by satisfying the modernist demand for establishing a foundation of knowledge either through an appeal to reason (rationalism) or sense experience (empiricism).

What this means is that modern metanarratives, such as historical criticism, which is based on modernist philosophy, seem to support the theological structure. However, this tradition suffers the criticism that the reality of God is replaced by the logos of modernity. Hans Frei expresses this notion succinctly when he talks of modern theologians gaining the whole world, the world of academic respectability, but losing their own souls (Vanhoozer 2003: 19). Postmodern philosophy questions the modernist's demand for this foundation or legitimization, and appears to free theology from the clutches of modernity. Therefore, it appears that Christian theology could employ postmodern concepts to critique all metaphysics, where God is reduced to some humanistic rationalism such as Descartes' *causa sui* or some humanistic perception, such as Locke's empiricism. At this juncture, we ask the third question, what is the shape of Christian theology as a result of applying postmodern epistemology?

There are various contemporary postmodern theologies that have incorporated some of the concepts in postmodern epistemology described above, and they include:

- Postliberal theology also commonly known as the "Yale School" and its representative theologians, George Lindbeck, Hans Frei and Paul Griffiths.
- Deconstructive theology and the "death-of god" theologians represented by Thomas Altizer, Mark Taylor and Carl Raschke.
- Reconstructive theology, a form of process theology, which emphasizes postmodern notions in the philosophy of Alfred Whitehead and as represented by David Griffin and David Tracy.

These theologies are radically different from the traditional concepts of God as understood by orthodox Christians. Vanhoozer (2003:18) even suggested that postmodern theology is, ultimately, a denial of orthodox Christian doctrine. If postmodern thinking is adopted, it appears that the traditions of orthodoxy

ranging from Aquinas to Calvin and Luther would no longer be acceptable and may need to be revised.

Apart from theology, there are other key areas in the Christian agenda that seems to be affected, such as hermeneutics. Hence the fourth question, what is the impact of postmodern epistemology on hermeneutics?

III. Hermeneutics and Epistemology

Alvin Plantinga (1993:11-12) in *Warrant: The Current Debate* claims that the ahistoricism of analytical philosophy has impeded the progress in epistemology, and what is needed is history and hermeneutics. All six authors who argue the various positions in the *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn* appeal to Scriptures in one form or other and the main dissenting point is in hermeneutics. Since the orthodox Christian says that scripture communicates truths about objects and situations in the external world, which we can know through reading of it, hermeneutics is the key to epistemology. Undoubtedly, the discussion on epistemology, especially postmodern epistemology, would not be not complete without hermeneutics.

Kevin Vanhoozer (2005: 188) has claimed that exegesis is the soul of theology and that he evaluates a theological system or worldview by examining how that system affects the process of biblical interpretation. There are a number of hermeneutical issues raised by postmodernism which include:

- (i) Postmodernism claims that language is a self referential system that has no center or stable structure. What this means is that there appears to be no fixed meaning in the text and if there is, it is indeterminate. Instead, according to the postmodernist, we have a variety of meanings none of which have primacy over the rest.
- (ii) Postmodernism claims that the author's intention cannot be recovered and hence the meaning of the text as defined by the author is

irrelevant. The notion that the author created the textual meaning is a repressive social construct and hence must be ignored so that the text is free from bias.

- (iii) Postmodernism claims that since the reader is the product of cultural and social conventions, the reader will inevitably read into the text his/her own grid or worldview. The reader's role therefore is not limited to making sense of the text but extends beyond the text, to the reader's response.

As a result of postmodern epistemology, not only has orthodox theology been dismissed but the traditional way of reading and understanding the Bible seems outmoded. This leads to the final question, is postmodern epistemology the "best" approach to Christianity?

Addressing the final question is the task of my thesis, the details of which are in the next section. The task is a critique of postmodern epistemology.

V. Thesis Summary

In the main text of the thesis, I shall present, in detail, the issues postmodern epistemology raises, and the possible responses from orthodox Christian theologians. I shall contend that:

- Postmodern thinking may highlight and make one fully aware of his/her presuppositions and belief systems and Christians may learn and benefit from the postmodern criticisms of the Modern philosophical framework. However, postmodernism is inadequate as a philosophical framework for orthodox Christian theology and cannot be adopted without radically changing the ethos of orthodoxy.
- The postmodernist philosophy of epistemological indeterminacy is, however, nothing new, unconvincing and is merely another form of skepticism. The Bible narrative of creation and eschatology concerns universal world history and the truth claims of the Gospels, in particular,

Christology, transcend ethnicity, gender, culture and politics. Orthodox Christian's truth-claims relate to universals and operate outside mere prior interest communities or local ethnocentric interests.

- Postmodern hermeneutics, which is largely based on deconstructionism in literary criticism and language games may make a text interesting reading, but does not communicate the meaning intended by the author. While postmodernism may deny such a discourse is possible, the communicative agent implied in the text exists. Hence, the Biblical text has literal meaning and relevance to the reader.

I shall proceed as follows: Firstly, I shall describe (in Chapter 1) the advent of modernist philosophy and the Enlightenment project of Descartes, Locke and Kant. Then I shall present the orthodox Christian epistemology of Aquinas, Luther and Calvin. This will be followed by a discussion on the main features of postmodern themes, particularly the works of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida, specifically relating to epistemology.

Then I shall examine the criticism on postmodern epistemology, firstly from the Christian modernist model of Douglas Geivett in "*Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*" employing resources from analytical philosophers such as Keith DeRose and Alvin Plantinga. I am particularly interested in their analysis on skepticism, which appears to describe the main tenets of postmodern epistemology. I shall also be investigating other Christian responses including the critical realist model employing resources from Roy Bhaskar.

Next, in Chapter 2, I shall consider a number of contemporary postmodernist theologies that have incorporated some form of postmodernist criticism, again from the perspective of epistemology. They include postliberal theology of George Lindbeck, deconstructive theology of Thomas Altizer and reconstructive theology of David Griffin. Then I shall examine and critique the main themes of each theology with respect to orthodox epistemology.

Furthermore, in Chapter 3, I shall consider the main features of postmodernist hermeneutics, with particular emphasis on literary criticism. This is essential to the understanding of postmodern epistemology because, according to the postmodernist, epistemology is hermeneutics. I shall examine post-structuralist and deconstruction themes by Derrida. I shall focus on hermeneutical issues arising from the author, text and the reader. This shall be followed by my analysis of counter arguments from the communicative and speech act theory of John Searle. In the comparative analysis, I shall provide an example, the interpretation of the Book of Jonah by Eagleton, including a critique from the orthodox Christian perspective. I shall argue from the orthodox Christian's perspective that the postmodernist's claim of the indeterminacy of meaning, and the relativistic relationship between the author, text and the reader, are inadequate. More importantly, I shall discuss the role of divine agency in communicating meaning in the linguistic process. I shall demonstrate that the position of the non representative view of the postmodern linguistic theory is untenable, as it fails to consider the multifaceted nature of language and meaning.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I shall summarise the key postmodern epistemic themes and their criticisms of Christian epistemology, and argue that a theology that correlates with postmodernist philosophy deviates from orthodox belief. I shall demonstrate that orthodox theology does not require such man made revision anymore than God needs a makeover.

IV. Limitations

There are three limitations in my thesis which shall be noted. Firstly, the engagement with the works of some of the key postmodern authors, such as Heidegger or Derrida, are through scholarly interpretations commonly accepted by the academia and not the original German or French texts. In itself, these interpretations would not be inhibiting my analysis because the general themes from the postmodernist writers are well documented and accepted.

Secondly, I have confined my analysis to the influences of postmodern thinking on theology, as that influence is transmitted by Anglo-American Christian philosophers and theologians. I have not included other perspectives such as Feminist or Latin American/African/Asian due to the constraints of the thesis.

Thirdly, the orthodox Christian epistemology that I am defending has a wide and variable definition and would mean different things to different communities. I have briefly defined orthodoxy in the glossary and the main epistemic themes are the infallibility of the Bible (a unique, God inspired narrative that has universal meaning and truth), the atoning work of Christ (the 'atoned' reader is capable of determining truth) and the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual (there is divine agency in the communication process).

CHRISTIANITY AND THE POSTMODERN TURN

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Chapter 1

"...For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

John 18:37-38

1.0 Introduction

Pontius Pilate asked what truth is, and the question is just as relevant today as it was two millennia ago. The issue is not the essence of truth but its possibility. What does it mean for a statement to be true? This has been a subject of much debate, where the traditional view of truth as objective and knowable is no longer accepted.

Douglas Geivett (2005:40-51) claimed that the heart of the postmodern debate, regarding the Christian belief and truth, is epistemology. Keith DeRose (2005;18) tends to agree, when he said that some postmodern sensibilities are aligned with the position of epistemological skepticism. According to Westphal (2001:76-88), postmodernists are really targeting the modernist s' faith in reason, faith in the human capacity to achieve truth (epistemology), and the themes of the enlightenment philosophy.

In order to grasp fully the debate surrounding epistemology, there is the need to explore its development. However, epistemology is an extensive field, and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a full description. What I hope to

achieve is to introduce key concepts since the Enlightenment that would facilitate my critique on postmodern epistemology.

1.1 Modernist Epistemology

I shall begin the investigation on epistemology with Rene Descartes (1596-1650), often considered the founder of modern philosophy. (Lex Newman 2005)

The philosophical issue which Descartes appeared to be wrestling with was skepticism. (Descartes 2005: Ch I, §.1) Skepticism is the view that humans do not or cannot know anything or at least, we do not know as much as we think we do. Descartes' argument is as follows:

- (i) We cannot depend on our sense or sense experience to arrive at knowledge, because our senses can and do mislead us. For example, a thirsty desert traveler may think that he/she has found water but only to discover that it was a mirage. Descartes (2005: Ch I, §. 6) used the illustration of a dream experience. In this illustration, he stated that he could not be certain, on the basis of his senses, whether he was indeed sitting by the fire, holding a paper in his hands or merely dreaming, and in reality, fast asleep. The classic contemporary equivalent is John Pollack's (1999:2-5) brain in the vat story. In this instance, a person could not be entirely be certain that he/she is not merely a brain hooked up with advance technology, and its being is merely an illusion. The movie trilogy, "Matrix" is another contemporary variation of the same theme.
- (ii) Descartes' solution seemed to rely on reason. (Descartes 2005: Ch 2 ¶9) His approach to certainty was to first doubt everything until there was nothing left to doubt. Subsequently, his reasoning enabled him to arrive at the famous proposition, "*cognito ergo sum*, I think, therefore I am". This statement is true even if one is dreaming, since a person must exist to dream. What Descartes had established is a truth that

appeared to be absolutely certain, and immune from doubt, that is, thinking entails existence. From this proposition, he proceeded to build the philosophy of knowledge based on reason. However there is still a problem; while an individual has knowledge of his/her own existence, the presence of anything else is unknown. Since the only means of interaction between us and the external world is through our senses, is there a reliable correspondence between the sense experience and the external world?

Descartes' solution was to propose the necessity of God. We may have confidence in our sense experience because God, who is good, would not deceive us. Therefore the correspondence between our senses and the external world is "guaranteed" by God.

Descartes remarked, "...I see the certainty of all other things depends on this (knowledge of God) so that without it nothing can be perfectly known... If I did not possess the knowledge of God...I should thus never have true and certain knowledge about anything but only shifting and changeable opinion."

(Descartes 2005: Ch 5 § 7:69).

Descartes subsequently proceeded with an epistemological system for establishing knowledge as he claimed, "I now seem to be able to lay down as a general rule, that whatever I perceived very clearly and distinctly is true."

(Descartes 2005:Ch 3, § 7:35).

Summarising, Descartes' fundamental argument was as follows:

- (i) There exists a good and non deceiving God
- (ii) A good and non deceiving God implies that I am not in error when I clearly and distinctly perceive.
- (iii) Hence, I can establish knowledge when I can clearly and distinctly perceive.

The argument appears attractive to the Christian but to the philosopher, the whole basis of the argument rests on the 1st proposition, the existence of God which has not been “proven.” Descartes obviously was fully aware of this, and at the end of the fourth paragraph of the 3rd Meditation; he presented an ambitious plan to prove using reason, God’s existence.

“...to remove even this slight reason for doubt, as soon as the opportunity arises I must examine whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver.”(Descartes 2005:Ch. 3, § 7:36).

However, there appears to be a further problem. Descartes’ argument for the existence of God was based on reason (clear and distinct perception), but relied on God’s existence to ensure his reason is error-free. Hence the argument appears viciously circular and this is commonly termed the Cartesian Circle. There are complex defenses against the charge of circularity such as bonded and unbonded doubt interpretations. For a description of these defenses, see Lex Newman’s (2005 § 6.2) “Descartes’ Epistemology” . It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the defenses of Descartes’ arguments. It is sufficient to state, at this stage, that Descartes approach eventually forms the main theme of the modernist project, rationalism. For the purposes of this essay, “rationalism” is defined as the doctrine of reason, which serves as a starting point for knowledge of the external world.

John Locke (1632-1704) a contemporary of Descartes, defined knowledge differently, as a perception of our own ideas. Locke proposed the principle of empiricism, that is, all of human knowledge arises from experience. (Locke 1994: Ch2, §2) He claimed that the mind is a *tabula rasa* or blank sheet until experience in the form of sensation fills the sheet with ideas and eventually knowledge.(Locke 1994:Ch 2) This does not mean that human knowledge is limited only to what can be directly experienced. We can certainly think of a dragon even if we have never seen one. Locke’s claim is about the ultimate source of our knowledge, which is our idea. A distinction is made between

simple and complex ideas, and we often employ our intellect to conjure complex ideas from the simpler components. For example, the dragon could well be compounded from the concepts of a lizard and a dragonfly.

Locke in *Essay II*, proceeded to demonstrate that every idea could, in principle, be derived from experience. Experience is described by Locke as having an external and an internal component. External experience or sensations are impressions which we perceive with our senses such as colour, sound, motion etc. Internal experiences are reflections or mental impressions of the external objects of sensations such as believing, doubting, knowing etc.

Knowledge then, according to Locke, is the agreement or disagreement of a particular experience with our ideas) It is the conformity of the proposition (ideas) with our observation, experience, and the testimonies of witnesses. Essentially, Locke is appealing to the principle of causality, and the most probable model to explain the cause and effects of a phenomena. However, our explanation as to what produces knowledge is never certain (Locke 1994: xiv,1-2). This is because the evidence that leads the mind to judge, is only probably true, as there is no guarantee that it must be true.

Summarising, Locke's fundamental argument was as follows;

- (i) All human knowledge is derived from sense experience, and we cannot conceive anything apart from our experience.
- (ii) In order to affirm the existence of external things, we need to demonstrate through probable relationships between the cause and its effects.
- (iii) Knowledge then is established with the agreement or disagreement of our ideas.

However, just as with Descartes, Locke's argument also appears circular. If knowledge is the perception of the agreement or disagreement of ideas, we

appear confined to the circularity of our own ideas since there is no external reference to weed out error.

The difference between the rationalism of Descartes and the empiricism of Locke is the extent in which we depend on the sense experience to gain knowledge. The rationalist says that knowledge is obtained mainly through pure reason, conversely the empiricist asserts that experience is the beginning of knowledge. It is useful to summarise the two epistemic viewpoints in the following proposition format:

Rationalist's epistemology

Proposition I - knowledge is established through pure reason, in particular, clear and distinct perception.

Proposition II – to realize the external world one must appeal to an external element, for Descartes, it was the veracity of a good and non-deceiving God.

Empiricist's epistemology:

Proposition I – knowledge is established through experience, which is both a sense experience and mental reflection.

Proposition II – to realize the external world, one must appeal to the principle of causality and the probability that one's judgment is correct.

It was the dispute between the rationalist and the empiricist that drew Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) into the fray. Kant accepted that all our knowledge began with experience (Kant 1933: B1). But he appeared to be troubled by the empiricist's position on causality, as there seemed to be no necessary connections between causes and effects. (Kant 1933: A1-2/B 3-4)) For example, if one observes lightning occurring before a storm with some regularity, this pattern of experience may encourage the observer to expect a

similar occurrence every time. However, we know that the relationship between lightning and a storm is not a *necessary* connection, because lightning could happen without a storm and vice versa.

The *necessary* connection cannot be deduced from experience alone, but needs something else. As stated previously, Kant acknowledged that knowledge begins with sense-experiences which are collectively termed “synthetic propositions”. They are, however, not universal as the “lightning” example shows. What is needed is something additional and independent of experience, which Kant termed “a priori”. Hence, Kant’s fundamental question on epistemology as argued in his book, “Critique of Pure Reason” is, “are synthetic judgments a priori possible?” (Kant 1933: B19,55)

And Kant’s answer is, yes it is possible. To give credence to his argument, Kant appealed to the notion of space and time. Taking the example of lightning, one can observe its occurrence in time, that is, yesterday, tomorrow or a year ago. One can also observe its occurrence, spatially, that is in Africa, the US or any part of the world. Hence, according to Kant, anything perceived in space or time must conform to certain principles, and these principles are *necessary* conditions. These principles are also synthetic because they are connected to experience, and a priori, because they are necessary and universal.

In addition, we make or organize the empirical world using a priori judgment in our minds (Kant 1933: B128, 128). For example, when we look at an apple, our sense of vision transmits visual data about the apple to our brains and an image of the apple is formed in our mind. According to Kant, our ability to form the apple imagery in our brain is a priori judgment. Our knowledge of the apple is what appears to us in our conscious mind. There is a distinction between appearance and ‘reality’, between the way things appear to us and the way they really are (Kant 1933: B306, 266). According to Kant, we cannot know the external world (*noumena*) as it is, only that which is based on appearances (*phenomena*) (Kant 1933: B307, 267-268).

Taking another example, we know and describe lightning in terms of our perception such as a bright flash of light, destructive etc. We may even measure lightning indirectly using observable scientific instruments, and propose scientific theories about it, but we may never know what lightning “really” is.

This then, is Kant’s epistemology in a nutshell. It is called transcendental idealism, a position that claims that the external world only conforms, and is limited to our knowledge. (Kant 1933: B42, B49-50, B56-57) This is in contrast with the epistemological position of realists who claim our knowledge conforms to the external world.

Kant wanted to defend the certainty of human knowledge from skepticism, the existence of God, and immortality of the soul from an apparent lack of a priori evidence, but ended up concluding that there is a limit to knowledge. Human reason cannot extend the concepts and principles of reason, beyond the limits of human perception or sense experience.

Summarising Kant’s epistemic viewpoint in the propositional format, we have:

Proposition I – knowledge is established through experience, the perception of the senses, and reason, a purely mental faculty.

Proposition II – it is not possible to realize the external world because of the limits of human perception.

1.1.1 Reflections

Despite the limitations voiced by Kant, the rational philosophy of the modernist, comprising a synthesis of rationalist and empiricist thinking, persisted throughout the nineteenth century. The modernist claims that if a belief is to count as knowledge, it must be justified by certain and indubitable evidence. (Wood 1998: 84) This is the basis of classical foundationalism, an

epistemic position that claims a belief system must be supported by such evidence.

William Clifford (1845-1879) claimed that "...if I let myself believe anything on insufficient evidence, there may be no great harm done by the mere belief; it may be true after all, or I may never have occasion to exhibit it in outward acts. But I cannot help doing this great wrong towards Man, that I make myself credulous. The danger to society is not merely that it should believe wrong things, though that is great enough; but that it should become credulous, and lose the habit of testing things and inquiring into them; for then it must sink back into savagery." (Clifford 1879: 185-6)

It is not difficult to understand the reason behind the modernist's criticism of Christianity, especially when the former's views are based on the concept of the omni-competence of human perception. It is important to note that the philosophy behind the modernist worldview, which includes modern science, is classical foundationalism.

In the next section, we shall describe the development of Christian epistemology and the influence of foundationalism.

1.2 Traditional Christian Epistemology

One name that stands out above all others, as the scholastic thinker, par excellence, is Thomas Aquinas. His thinking remains the standard well into the twentieth century (Olson 1999:331) The influence of Aquinas on Christian theology is wide. Vanhoozer (2007: 19) states that "evangelical theologians live in the house that Thomas built", which means that most evangelical theologians embrace some form of classical theism based on Thomas Aquinas. We begin our investigation with Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) who claimed that philosophy, and in particular, reason, may be used legitimately to demonstrate the truths of theology, as reason is a gift from God (ST, Ia q32 a1).

Aquinas was sympathetic towards, and influenced by Aristotle, to whom he customarily referred to as 'the philosopher.' (Aquinas 2008: § 1a q2 a1) He applied the natural philosophy of Aristotle, with the revealed theology of the Bible. Aquinas believed that Aristotle's basic logic and metaphysics were correct, and were helpful guides to Christian theology. (Olson 1999: 335). In addition, he believed that natural philosophy is comparable with modern science, and by using it we could gain knowledge. (Cairns 1996; 238)

Aquinas postulates a cognitive faculty naturally capable of acquiring knowledge of the object. He claims that knowledge is obtained through two stages of operation, namely, sense perception in human cognition followed by reason (Aquinas 2008: § 1a q84 a2). It is through the senses that we first become acquainted with existent, material things and through the special power of the intellect; the sense image (phantasm) is understood (Aquinas 2008: § 1a, q85 a1).

Aquinas' epistemic concept is similar to that advocated by Kant. However, unlike Kant, Aquinas believed that our knowledge was dependent not on innate ideas, but on the direct perception of the external world (Aquinas 2008: § 1a, q85 a7). Aquinas described the faculty of understanding the sense-experience, "*intellectus agens*," as an active intellect, which is inherent in humans because they have been created by an all knowing, intelligent being, God. (Aquinas 2008: § 1a, q79 a3).

However, being a moderate realist, Aquinas held that universals exist only in the material object, since we can only know such objects through our sense perception. A universal is a characteristic or quality that is common among particular objects, such as the redness in apples and roses. A realist on the other hand, believes that universals have a separate existence apart from the individual objects. In other words, the colour red exists regardless of whether apples or roses exist.

Aquinas disagreed with this. And as a moderate realist, he believed that there was a limit to human knowledge, just as what Kant had concluded, but from a different perspective. The limit relates to universals. For example, according to a moderate realist, the object, say the red apple, exists only in our minds as a universal. What we perceived as red does not exist outside our mind, since the apple could well be colourless in reality. Applying this to theology, Aquinas claimed that humans could never totally grasp God's being, because we cannot possibly "contain" his being in our finite minds.

Summarising, Aquinas' fundamental argument was as follows

- (i) All human knowledge is derived from sense perception, and we cannot conceive anything apart from our sense-experience.
- (ii) We also have reason, a faculty of the mind, to decipher the sense data or image.
- (iii) Therefore, we can know the existence of external things because of our God given intellect that interprets the sense experience.

Aquinas' philosophy, generally labeled as scholasticism, was not always accepted by the wider Christian community, and the Reformers certainly challenged this viewpoint. (Clark 2003: 39) Martin Luther (1483-1546) a leading figure of the Reformation, was opposed to the philosophical approach of Aristotle and Aquinas in the early years. This was because the theologians of his day, such as Aquinas, had overemphasized reason and logic in matters of faith and theology. (Rosin 1980: 137) Initially, Luther rejected the importance of reason as practiced by the medieval scholars. (Luther 1976: vol 31: 37) However, in his later years, Luther changed his mind, and accepted that philosophy, or what is commonly termed natural theology, does enable a believer to legitimate knowledge. Whilst Christian theology is ultimately grounded on Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*), Luther believed that God is the

giver of all theological understanding, including philosophy (Luther 1976:vol 12:311-312).

Luther wrote extensively to address specific problems, but did not produce a comprehensive systematic theology. His theology emphasizes paradoxes such as God's wrath and mercy, sin and salvation, etc., and specific biblical issues such as those connected with the *Catechism*. The systematic theology of the Reformation was left to later theologians to develop, such as Luther's close associate, Philipp Melancthon. (Olson1999: 379)

As for Christian epistemology, Luther was also a moderate realist, and believed that one could have an abstract concept (universal) and a particular or individual thing. (Rosin 1980: 136) As Luther did not specifically write on epistemology either, we shall refer to a later reformed theologian who did, John Calvin (1509-1564).

Calvin appeared to follow the tradition of Luther in his criticism of philosophy. He seemed to emphasize this by saying, "...How lavishly in this respect have the whole body of philosophers betrayed their stupidity and want of sense? To say nothing of the others whose absurdities are of a still grosser description, how completely does Plato, the soberest and most religious of them all, lose himself in his round globe?." (Calvin 1599: § I.v.11)

Calvin finds that even the most wise philosophers could not compare to the "sacred reading," which has within itself the power to move the very heart of the reader. (Calvin 1599: § I.viii.1) His emphasis on scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit is typical reformation thinking. According to Calvin, God's purpose in the scriptural teaching of his infinite and spiritual essence is to refute even subtle speculations of secular philosophy. (Calvin 1599: § I.viii.1) Even those who have attained intellectual excellence, cannot reach the theological eminence, which is the domain of the Gospel.

However, Calvin was not against human reason, but he wanted to appropriate wisdom and philosophy towards Christian theology. Thus, in the commentary on I Corinthians, Calvin wrote,

"For whatever knowledge and understanding a man has counts for nothing unless it rests upon true wisdom; and it is of no more value for grasping spiritual teaching than the eye of a blind man for distinguishing colours. Both of these must be carefully attended to, that (1) knowledge of all the sciences is so much smoke apart from the heavenly science of Christ; and (2) that man with all his shrewdness is as stupid about understanding by himself the mysteries of God as an ass is incapable of understanding musical harmony."

Calvin was highlighting what the real foundation of human knowledge was. For he was differentiating "true wisdom" (*vera sapientia*) from human methodologies (Calvin 1599: § I.i.1) It was that basis of "true and sound wisdom" (*vera ac solida sapientia*) which Calvin was seeking, the only foundation from which epistemology could be safely grounded. Reason, and philosophy, have their place, but that place does not take priority over revealed wisdom.

Calvin's contribution to Christian epistemology comprised the concepts of "divine sense" and "divine accommodation" as described in "*Institutes of the Christian Religion*" The concept of divine sense is based on the theological assumption that human were implanted with the awareness of God. This is done so that humans cannot plead ignorance when it comes to divine judgment.

Calvin's argument for divine sense was as follows;

- (i) The belief in a god appears to be universal among humans of most cultures.
- (ii) The diversity of religious practices presupposes some basic concept of divinity or supreme power in the universe.
- (iii) Even those who object to the existence of god, appear to understand and appreciate the idea of a supreme being.

The concept of divine accommodation is based on Calvin's understanding of the weakness and hence the limitation of human knowledge. He stated that, "The blindness under which [people] labor is almost always mixed with proud vanity and obstinacy." (Calvin 1599: § I iv 1 47) Calvin observed that humans cannot seem to rise above themselves, but instead, measure God by "the yardstick of their own carnal stupidity." (Calvin 1599: § I iv 47)

Calvin's argument for divine accommodation is as follows:

- (i) Humans do not have the capacity to know the essence of God.
- (ii) Scripture talks of God communicating with humans and they understood something about God.
- (iii) Therefore, God must have allowed himself to be understood by humans under their own capacity.

While Calvin's argument may appear theological rather than philosophical, the implications with respect to epistemology are clear. Calvin appeared to say that there is indeed a limitation to knowledge, just as what Kant claimed. However, the limitation is due to the fallen nature of humans, and a divine agent could breach this limitation partially, enabling us access to some knowledge.

It is useful to summarise the traditional Christian epistemology propositionally as follows:

Proposition I – knowledge is established through divine agency/inspiration, in conjunction with human experience and reason.

Proposition II – to realize the external world, one must appeal to divine intervention through inspiration and illumination.

1.2.1 Reflections

The key tenet in Christian epistemology, since Aquinas and Calvin, is divine inspiration, that is, God's intervention, enabling humans the capacity to know. Human rationale is also valued although not to the same degree because Christians believe that there is order in God's creation and creation can be understood to a significant extent (Allen 1989: 26)

Contemporary Christian philosophers such as Plantinga (2000) have defended divine inspiration, according to the Aquinas/Calvin model. The model relies on the doctrine of 'original sin' where humanity suffers from cognitive-affective disorder, but as a result of Redemption, the Holy Spirit heals us, enabling us to know the external world.

The epistemic arguments offered by both Aquinas and Calvin have a structure that is foundationalist in nature, since the arguments are about how beliefs are justified. However, they differ from classical foundationalism in the criteria for justification. Classical foundationalism demands indubitable justification or evidence, whereas Aquinas/Calvin offered probable justification in the form of divine inspiration.

Plantinga (1993), together with Wolterstorff (1976), are major exponents of reformed epistemology, a position which rejects the modernist demand for indubitable evidence for knowledge. Reformed epistemology refers to the philosophical position that belief in God is properly considered a basic belief, and therefore no argument for His existence is needed.

The reformed epistemologist therefore rejects classical foundationalism (a modernist's invention), as holding the impossible view that a properly basic belief must be incorrigible. The basic belief that the reformed epistemologist hold is "most probable" and not indubitable.

In the next section we describe the postmodernist's epistemology that rejects foundationalism in all its form whether classical or modified.

1.3 Postmodern Epistemology

Many scholars such as Westphal (2001: xi), Ingraffia (1995: 7) and Rosenau (1992: 12) have attributed the postmodern foundational concepts, particularly regarding epistemology, to Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida. There are certainly others who have significantly contributed and helped shape postmodern epistemology as we know it today. But the works of the above three philosophers would be sufficient for the purpose of this essay.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), like Kant, distinguished between two worlds, namely the real (*noumena*) and the apparent (*phenomena*) (Nietzsche 1990: 1, 9). However unlike Kant, Nietzsche rejected the idea that the real or the essence of a substance, had a role to play in our inquiry because what is "real" and what is "hidden" was determined by our own intellectual projection. According to Nietzsche, truth did not exist experientially beyond the contingency of human values. Truth itself was considered subjective; a value established in history which needed to be examined, to uncover its original purpose.

Nietzsche developed his critique of the "historically constructed" truth by redefining the relationship between truth and idealization. He asserted that since our sense experience is based on our physical senses, we cannot claim that our experience is identical to the external world, because the experience is merely a product of our senses. (Nietzsche 1990: § 15) Instead of objective truth, we have a multiplicity of perspectives based on human experiences and interpreted by the conventions of communities. (Nietzsche 1968: 481) Nietzsche extended this argument to cover all "truth structure" such as space,

time, identity etc, which are mere concepts or idealizations that we project to the external world, so that we can understand them in human terms.

Nietzsche's famous remark about truth is quoted below:

“What then is truth? A movable army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short, a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration, and which, after they have been used for a long time, strike a people as firmly established, canonical and binding: truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions, metaphors which have become worn by frequent use and have lost all sensual vigor, coins which, having lost their stamp, are now regarded as metal and no longer as coins” (Nietzsche 1976: 146)

Nietzsche continued his criticism on religion, and argued that the transcendental truth about the future world that described the redemption of humans was a particular invention of a powerless group of people, the Jews. This was merely an attempt to gain power over their oppressors, be they Romans or Persians. Far from being universal truths, the Judaeo-Christian ideas were merely perspectives, based on particular experiences that conferred seemingly superior values on human behavior such as meekness, submissiveness, renunciation of worldly ambition etc., which formerly were deemed worthless. (Nietzsche 1989: 31)

Nietzsche's criticism may be summarized as follows:

- (i) We have falsely projected our perceptions of God on this “real” world, creating a ‘make believe’ divine world (Nietzsche 1968: 586).
- (ii) We invent this divine world because we are weak and powerless. We need some security in the “divine” like Linus’

security blanket in Schulz's "*Peanuts*" series (Nietzsche 1968: 576)

- (iii) Through the concept of the "death of God," the ontological distinction between real and apparent world is removed (Nietzsche 1974: 125).

Summarizing Nietzsche's epistemic position; his perspectival approach implied that knowledge was limited in the sense that there were always other explanations. One may be able to appreciate other features of "reality" by moving from one perspective to another, rather than from being locked into one perspective (Clark, 1998: 850). Nietzsche's perspectivism emphasized the anthropomorphic character of human knowledge, which recognizes both its limitations and its potentialities (Breazeale, 1997: xlviii).

However, what we would have achieved through this approach appears to be a subjective and particular knowledge which is open to competing views with no resolution. It should be noted that this process of perspectivism tend to yield towards relativism and nihilism.

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) envisaged that the task of epistemology was to "divide the whole realm of 'being' into its different modes of reality [Wirklichkeitsweisen]... the characteristics of the different forms of reality must be sharply demarcated and determined, including the appropriate method of knowing and its limitations." (Heidegger 1969: 186) According to Heidegger the central issue of epistemology, and probably the whole of philosophy was the meaning of being or ontology. He suggested that ontology had priority over epistemology, because it leads to the question, "how can we seek knowledge, if we do not understand, firstly, how and why we exist?" (Heidegger 1960:1-9).

Heidegger's interest in the meaning of being, appeared to be influenced by John Duns Scotus (1265-1308), particularly, Scotus' understanding of the traditional categories of being propounded by Greek philosophy. (Heidegger

1915) According to Heidegger, Scotus realized that objective reality was determined by the observer's understanding, and the conditions of subjectivity (how does the observer interpret the object were all important (Heidegger 1969: 318-319, 337) In other words, it is not merely what the external world appears passively to our senses but also what we actively read into the external world. The question of being becomes the question of the meaning of being, as we project our understanding on the external world.

However, in order to understand the meaning of being, Heidegger saw it necessary to start with the analysis of human existence because human understanding was the only access to the external world. (Heidegger 1960: 7-9) We are always aware of our surrounding environment (the external world) and because of this self awareness; Heidegger introduced a philosophical concept of "Dasein" which represented humanity.

Heidegger explained, "The essence of Dasein lies in its existence.

Accordingly, those characteristics which can be exhibited in this entity are not 'properties' present-at-hand of some entities which 'looks' so and so and is itself present-at-hand... So when we designate this entity with the term 'Dasein,' we are expressing not its 'what' (as if it were a table, house, or tree) but its Being"(Heidegger 1960: 42)

Heidegger claimed that an object such as a table or tree was merely "present-at-hand," that is, it had certain fixed properties in time, a definite 'what.' But a human being is whatever it decides or has decided to be, Dasein is its [own] possibilities." (Heidegger 1960: 42)

The key to understanding the meaning of being now lies in the interaction between Dasein and the surrounding environment. Heidegger proceeded to show that the modernist concept of the knower being distinct from the external object is false because *Dasein* is "Being in the world."(Heidegger 1960: 59-86) Dasein and the world are not two distinct entities that are independent of each other; instead, they are closely related. This is because

we (*Dasein*) project ourselves, our whole existence, into the world and understand everything in the world according to the projection that we make ourselves. (Heidegger 1960: 184) There is knowledge in this world because we exist and not because there is some truth independent of our existence.

The classic example Heidegger used was the hammer (Heidegger 1960: 67). The hammer which comprises a heavy metal head and a wooden handle, has no meaning of its own except when it is used, say, to drive a nail by a human. Hence, one of Heidegger's astonishing statements was human or *Dasein* itself is the locus of knowledge that, "there is truth in so far as *Dasein* is and as long as *Dasein* is." (Heidegger 1960: 227) Therefore, apparently, knowledge according to Heidegger was not about an objective thing in the external world, but a human construct.

Heidegger claimed that Kant had been mistaken. The question of the 'scandal of philosophy' is not the inability to provide proof for an objective reality, but the demand for such proof. The mistake is due to the inadequate understanding of *Dasein*, and the view that the external world is independent of *Dasein*.

Much of the criticism of Heidegger has centered on the alleged lack of a sufficient epistemological justification for his claims. Bertrand Russell (1989: 303), expressing the sentiments of many mid 20th century analytical philosophers, stated that Heidegger's concepts were extremely obscure, and his speculations were typical of existentialism or existential philosophy. Roger Scruton, a prominent contemporary philosopher, stated that:

"His [Heidegger] major work, *Being and Time*, is formidably difficult--unless it is utter nonsense, in which case it is laughably easy. I am not sure how to judge it, and have read no commentator who even begins to make sense of it." (Collins 2001: 7)

Heidegger appeared to be an externalist, an epistemic position that claims that we might know an external object by practical interaction with it, and does

not need to justify the belief that we know (Esfeld 2001: 56). He embraces the identity of consciousness but holds that we are in direct relation to things-in-themselves, even if we have no idea what the things-in-themselves are. The problem with this position is that it is hard to see how the relation is cognitive. (Esfeld 2001: 57) It still seems like we end up knowing only about appearances, about things we create in our interaction with things-in-themselves, but not about the mind-independent world.

Heidegger's philosophy on epistemology may be summarised as follows:

- (i) Epistemology is really about ontology. Knowledge begins with the understanding of the meaning of "Being."
- (ii) Truth is not to be found in correspondence to fact, but in the practical experience (authentic existence) of the knower.
- (iii) The emphasis on the existentialist approach over propositional truth entails the rejection of the subject-object distinction.

While modernists tend to assume that language is merely a neutral medium or tool that enables us to grasp knowledge, Derrida claimed that language is the only access to knowledge, and is itself knowledge (Derrida 1982: 15). According to Derrida, when we use language (speech or writing) to refer to reality, that reality is linguistically formulated, and therefore indeterminate. Meaning is not something preexisting in the mind that we struggle to express. Derrida has made the well-known statement, "there is nothing outside text," which apparently means that what we know about things, we know through language (Derrida 1976: 158).

Derrida's second tenet was that words rest on nothing — not on speech, intention, deep grammar or social usage. We cannot define a word except in relation to other words, and these in turn call on other words, and so on. Derrida later expanded this point by adding that "there is nothing outside

context.” (Derrida 1993: 136) This means that one cannot even ask about the meaning or truth of a discourse outside of a specific text. Derrida's mission was to show that texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs and practices do not have definable meanings, and will always exceed the boundaries they currently occupy. He took it as self-evident that language is a closed system of signs, without a centre, that logic, perception or social behaviour cannot provide the grounds for language, which is the primary reality. No arguments can counter this assertion. Derrida who did not construct any philosophic system, was opposed to such systems, and indeed disliked the inbred world of academia. Hence knowledge is merely a linguistic construct, performed by a community that speaks the “knowledge-language”, whether it is science, history or theology.

Derrida has claimed that his critics misunderstood him, thinking that he attempted to destroy any notion of objective truth. This interpretation of Derrida was denied by himself on numerous occasions. Despite the claims of some of his most avid supporters and critics, Derrida maintained that he was not attempting to dispel all claims or beliefs in truth. Rather, he was trying to point out that the modern metaphysical assumptions that have served as objective referents for language are inherently problematic. In other words, Derrida was trying to demonstrate that the act of representation in language is a lot more complicated than is popularly conceived. Instead of trying to deny the possibility of objective reality, he wanted to point out the deep complications that arise when one considers how words relate to the world outside of us.

Against this alleged misunderstanding, Derrida explained:

“Deconstruction is always deeply concerned with the ‘other’ of language. I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the exact opposite. Every week I receive critical commentaries and studies on deconstruction which operate on the assumption that what they call “post-structuralism” amounts to saying that there is nothing beyond language,

that we are submerged in words-and other stupidities of that sort. Certainly, deconstruction tries to show that the question of reference is much more complex and problematic than traditional problems supposed. It even asks whether our term "reference" is entirely adequate for designating the 'other'. The other, which is beyond language and which summons language, is perhaps not a referent in the normal sense which linguists have attached to this term. But to distance oneself from the habitual structure of reference, to challenge or complicate our common assumption about it, does not amount to saying that there is nothing beyond language." (Derrida 1982: 123-124)

In spite of his explanation, Derrida's supporters have consistently perceived him differently, and they saw epistemology as mere linguistic conventions. (Eagleton 1983: 105, Lyotard 1984: 81). Foucault (1980: 132) maintained that it was not possible to distinguish between truth and ideology, truth and power and so there was no real possibility of any absolute uncorrupted truth. It is interesting to note that Derrida (1979: 103), himself once said that "there is no such thing as a truth in itself. But only a surfeit of it. Even if it should be for me, about me, truth is plural." Therefore did his critics misunderstand him?

Perhaps, but John Searle's (2000) quotation on Derrida during an interview with Edward Feser, provides a possible reason for the apparent confusion, "With Derrida, you can hardly misread him, because he's so obscure. Every time you say, 'He says so and so,' he always says, 'You misunderstood me.' But if you try to figure out the correct interpretation, then that's not so easy. I once said this to Michel Foucault, who was more hostile to Derrida even than I am, and Foucault said that Derrida practiced the method of *obscurantisme terroriste* (terrorism of obscurantism). We were speaking French. And I said, 'What the hell do you mean by that?' And he said, 'He writes so obscurely you can't tell what he's saying, that's the obscurantism part, and then when you criticize him, he can always say, 'You didn't understand me; you're an idiot That's the terrorism part. '." Derrida's philosophy on epistemology may be summarised as follows:

- (i) Language is the only access to knowledge and is itself knowledge.
- (ii) Since truth is a linguistic convention, there is no absolute truth but a multitude or plurality of “truths.” (Dancy & Sosa 1993: 92)

The postmodern epistemology may be summarized as follows:

Proposition I – knowledge cannot be established objectively and uniquely through human experience or reason.

Proposition II –the external world does not exist outside human experience as the external world is a human construct.

1.3.1 Reflections

John Franke (2005:107-108) alleged that the heart of the postmodern ethos is the attempt to rethink the nature of rationality and epistemology that is described in the modernist project. He further explained that the rethinking resulted in producing a “chastened” rationality that is more self critical than the “version” developed by the modernist. Chastened rationality according to Franke (2005: 108) is characterized by the move from the realist to the constructionist’s view of truth and the world. Postmodern thinkers believe that we do not view the world from an objective vantage point, but project our world through the concepts we bring, including language. Our language functions as social conventions, when describing the world, and this description varies with our perspective of the world. Westphal (2005: 151) added that postmodernism has been seen as antithetical to Christianity, because of the postmodernist’s adherence to relativism, and abandoning the difference between true and false.

Both Franke and Westphal provided a succinct description of the philosophies of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida, and postmodern epistemology in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*. A summary of the key elements is as follows:

- i. Reality does not exist independently of the human mind, that is, there is no such thing as objective reality.
- ii. Language communicates meanings which do not refer to objects or situations in the external world, but are human constructs.
- iii. Knowledge is subjective and the truth of the knowledge is dependant on motive, culture and period/era of the person who is making the claim.
- iv. Since there is no absolute and objective truth, the best we can do is to adhere to some form of perspectivism.

1.4 The Key Epistemic Issue and the Christian Response

The table below compares the epistemic position of each of the groups previously discussed.

	Proposition 1	Proposition 2
Modernist	Knowledge is established through experience and reason	To realize the external world, one must appeal to classical foundationalism
Traditional Christian	Knowledge is established through divine agency/inspiration, in conjunction with human experience and reason	To realize the external world, one must appeal to divine intervention in conjunction with a form of foundationalism.
Postmodernist	Knowledge cannot be established objectively and uniquely through human experience or reason	The external world does not exist outside human experience as the external world is a human construct

Although the traditional Christian does not condone the modernist epistemic view, nevertheless, both agree that knowledge and the external world can be known. The postmodernist, on the other hand, is a skeptic. This is the key issue. A response to the postmodernist is a response to skepticism (DeRose 2005).

In the next section, I shall present two replies, one from the Modernist Christian and another from the Christian critical realist. The philosophy of each group will be briefly described, followed by their corresponding responses.

1.4.1 The Christian Modernist's Philosophy

The Christian modernists, of whom Douglas Geivett is one, based their methodology on the modernist presuppositions, but with some modification, resulting in "chastised" or "modest" foundationalism. The modest foundationalist does not require certain and indubitable evidence for justifying his/her basic beliefs as the classical foundationalist does, but merely adequate evidence based on coherence will suffice.

For example, the belief in God cannot be based on certain and indubitable evidence in the classical foundationalist's sense, since God is not evident to human sensory perception. However, there is no need to satisfy the classical foundationalist's demand because, as most contemporary philosophers agree, it is logically indefensible (Clark 2003: 156). But we can contend, logically, that the cumulative force of various kinds of evidence (although individually not indubitable) could mutually reinforce the likelihood that the belief in God is reasonable.

The Christian modernist's truth-claims relate to universals and operate outside communities or local ethnocentric interests. The Bible narration concerns universal world history and the truth claims of the Gospels, in particular, Christology. These transcend ethnicity, gender, culture and politics. While I recognize and accept that there are varieties in theological methods and possible adaptations of postmodern ideas such as the individual's worldviews and

sensitivities, the central Christian beliefs and themes are indubitable, and any variations are merely variations of the same theme.

The approach is the essence of modest foundationalism, and when applied in Christian theology, it is also commonly termed as traditional Christian theism (Geivett 2005: 50).

1.4.1.1 The Christian Modernist's Response

The Christian Modernist (CM) rejects the notion that humans, in spite of their limitations, (postmodernist termed it as human or socio-cultural "situatedness") cannot arrive at objective truth. According to the CM, rationality or analytical philosophy is a God given tool for discovering his truths, just as Aquinas, or Calvin had claimed centuries ago. In addition, God himself "intervenes" through his Holy Spirit, enabling humans the capacity to seek objective truths.

A typical approach which the CM may adopt in his rebuttal of the postmodernist claim is presented next.

The CM needs only to defeat the premise "Reality does not exist independently of the human mind, that is, there is no such thing as objective reality," to cast doubt to the rest of the postmodernist's epistemic claims.

However, the premise needs further clarification for an adequate response. If it means a complete denial of objective reality, and everything is a social construct, then the statement itself is problematic. There is a world whose properties are not merely social constructs since the universe existed before humans did. For example, are the "laws" of gravity a social construct which humans can change? Any postmodernist who adheres to such views is invited to attempt changing the "laws" of gravity and step out of a tall building.

Alternatively, the premise could be taken as a form of epistemic skepticism, not denying objective reality or reality as mere social construct, but claiming that our perception of the world is not as secure as we think. (DeRose 2005: ch6) There

are plausibly two arguments associated with this form of epistemic skepticism, they are, indistinguishability and paucity of evidence. (Speaks 2004) A response to the postmodernist's claim, therefore, is a response to the two skeptical arguments.

The argument arising from indistinguishability

Let us suppose that “*reality*” is a world where external objects exist, and “*social construct*” is a world where there are no external objects. As a finite human observer, which brings some bias to our own perception, and cannot fully distinguish between reality and social construct, the skeptic's argument is as follows:

- (i) If an agent cannot distinguish between the two worlds, then the agent cannot know which of the two situations exist.
- (ii) We cannot distinguish between “*reality*” and “*social construct*”.
- (iii) Therefore, we cannot know whether “*reality*” or “*social construct*” exist.
- (iv) Since external objects are supposed to be “*reality*” and not a “*social construct*” we cannot know if external objects exist either.

The argument arising from paucity of evidence.

- (i) For an agent to know that a proposition such as “external objects exist” is true, that agent must have evidence which rules out the possibility that “external objects exist” is false.
- (ii) Our only evidence about external things is sensory perception
- (iii) Sensory perceptions can be misleading (such as mirages), and what is perceived as an external object may not exist.
- (iv) Therefore, we do not have evidence that rules out the possibility that an external object does not exist.
- (v) Therefore, we cannot know if an external object exists.

It should be noted that both the above skeptical arguments begin from premises about what is required for knowledge, and proceed to demonstrate why we fail in our beliefs about the external world. In addition, in the response to the skeptic, we do not need to convince the skeptic that they are wrong, it is sufficient merely to cast doubt about the skeptic's position. This is because radical skepticism is irrefutable, since such a skeptic can deny his critic any knowledge as the basis on which to begin the debate.

The support for the CM's approach is based on the work of G.E. Moore (1959) and Donald Davidson (1989) adapted to Christian theology.

An appropriate response is the claim that it is more plausible that the skeptic's conclusion is false, than it is that his/ her premises are true. Therefore, we take the skeptic's argument as not a successful support for its conclusion, but to demonstrate that one of its premises is mistaken. This strategy is commonly termed as the Moorean response.

Using the previous example, we assert that the premise (ii), "We cannot distinguish between reality and social construct" is very likely to be false, because the conclusion, "we cannot know whether there are any external objects" is intuitively not plausible. Moore demonstrated this by showing his two hands and arguing that we can know we have hands (Hands being the external object).

Moore's famous quote, "I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a gesture with the right hand, 'Here is one hand,' and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, ' and here is another.' ... But now I am perfectly well aware that, in spite of all that I have said, many philosophers will still feel that I have not given any satisfactory proof of the point in question...If I had proved the propositions which I used as premises in my two proofs, then they would perhaps admit that I had proved the existence of external things.... They think that, if I cannot give such extra proofs, then the proofs that I have given are not conclusive proofs at all...Such a view, though it has been very common among philosophers, can, I think, be shown to be wrong. ... I can know things which I cannot proof; and among things which I certainly did know....were the premises of my two proofs. I

should say, therefore, that those, if any, who are dissatisfied with these proofs merely on the grounds that I did not know their premises, have no good reason for their dissatisfaction.” (Moore 1959: 144)

Although there are many contemporary philosophers such as Stroud (1984) and Wright (1985) who disagree, there are still many others such as Pollock (1999), DeRose(1999) and Pryor (2004) who are sympathetic to Moore. It is beyond the scope of this essay to present contemporary criticisms and rebuttals of Moore. The point is Moore’s argument is defensible.

We can now proceed with our argument by denying premise (ii) as follows:

- (a) We know that humans can distinguish between reality and social construct.
- (b) We believe, via “a coherence of truth structure,” that (a) is true.
- (c) If (a) is not true, then we would not have believed, as the “coherence of truth structure” would indicate so.

What is the “coherence of truth structure?” We shall turn to Donald Davidson for the answer. Davidson (1989:153) states that it is possible to articulate an account of knowledge through a proper understanding of the interrelationship between belief, truth and meaning. Davidson’s strategy comprises the hypothesis that our beliefs cannot all be false. Each belief individually may be false, but it is not possible to hold that *all* beliefs can be false at the same time. This is because of the veridical nature of beliefs, as long as the belief coheres with a body of beliefs. “ I urge that a correct understanding of the speech, beliefs, desires, intentions, and other propositional attitudes of a person leads to the conclusion that most of a person’s beliefs must be true, and so there is a legitimate presumption that any one of them, if it coheres with most of the rest, is true,” (Davidson 1989: 146)

To complete the response, we now state the CM’s structure of religious beliefs, which is a combination of the philosophies of Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, previously discussed, as follows:

- (i) Reality exists independently of the human mind, and we can grasp it, because God has given us the faculty to do so, but the knowledge is partial, due to our fallen nature.
- (ii) Reading scripture communicates to humans, truths about objects and situations in the external world, which in turn, produces knowledge.
- (iii) Knowledge is objective and absolute. The truth of the knowledge is independent of motive, culture and period/era since the source is God himself.
- (iv) Since there is absolute and objective truth, we could employ a methodology such as reason, together with the help of the Holy Spirit to uncover this truth.

Putting it all together, the argument against the postmodernist's claim is presented below;

- (a) There is a strong possibility that premise (ii) from both the "argument from indistinguishability," and the "argument from paucity of evidence" is mistaken because their conclusion (iv) & (v) is false. (Moore's response).
- (b) We believe premise (ii) is mistaken because our belief-coherence structure indicates that premise (ii) is incompatible with our beliefs. (Davidson's coherence hypothesis)
- (c) Our belief-coherence structure is based on the basic belief that God is non-deceiving and benevolent and he enables us, although finite and fallible, to know the external world.

How might the postmodern skeptic respond to the above argument? By denying:

- (1) Moore's response- since the skeptic maintains we do not know that external object exist, we do not know that we have hands.

- (2) Davidson's hypothesis-since the skeptic can challenge the reliability of all our beliefs and their veridicality.
- (3) The premise of knowing that there is a non-deceiving and benevolent God.

Every argument must proceed from some premises, and if the postmodern skeptic calls all relevant premises into doubt, then we cannot reason with him/her. As stated previously, we do not have to convince the skeptic; merely provide a reasonable defense for our position.

Whilst past philosophers such as Descartes and Kant attempted to refute the skeptic, contemporary epistemology tends to take a different attitude towards skepticism. (Pollock 1999: 5-6) We know the skeptic is wrong because if we do not know that, we do not know anything else, which is not possible. Instead of trying to convince the skeptic, we use their arguments to alert us to our own erroneous premises. In other words we use the skeptical argument as a *reductio ad absurdum* for our analysis. (Pollock 1999: 7)

The second response, from a Christian Critical Realist's viewpoint, is presented in the next section.

1.4.3 The Christian Critical Realist's Philosophy

The postmodernist may have claimed that we only know the external world as a socially constructed concept, by projecting our own culturally conditioned experience into the world. However, common sense tells us that the various manifestations of the external world, such as trees and mountains are not mere social constructs. Trees and mountains are materially created by real structures and mechanisms in the biophysical world. A position that accommodates both the common sense view of reality, and sensitive to some social constructed concepts, is critical realism, developed by Roy Bhaskar (1978, 1989). Critical realism appears to be the *via media* between modern and postmodern

epistemology. The critical realist agrees with the modernist that there is a real external world that we can discover, but at the same time, concedes that we are not neutral or detached observers, but see things according to our pre-conceived worldviews or socially constructed concepts, as claimed by the postmodernist.

However, we can mitigate the effects of our preconceived bias by critiquing our assumptions and interacting with others, hence the term “critical” in critical realism. Warner (1993) described the process as the convergence theory of truth where there is a gradual convergence from socially constructed models to the way the world actually is. Critical realism subscribes to three key epistemic tenets as follows:

- (i) Ontological realism – Reality exists independent of us, however our knowledge of the external world is different from the world as it really is.
- (ii) Judgmental rationalism – We can make judgment about knowledge, although we may have different understandings of some part of reality. We make rational judgments about which understandings best fit the real world, and all perspectives are not equal.
- (iii) Epistemic relativism- Our judgments are socially and historically dependant and greatly influenced by our social environment. (Bhaskar, 1978; Scott, 2005).

According to the critical realist there may be things that are real that we only have partial knowledge of, and even things that exist that we may not know. Knowledge is always a “work in progress,” and subject to revision.

1.4.3.1 The Christian Critical Realist’s Response.

The Christian critical realist (CCR) accepts, together with the postmodernist, that our knowledge is socially constructed to begin with. However, unlike the postmodernist, we can make rational judgments and have epistemic grounds to

prefer one knowledge claim from another, progressively moving closer to the truth. Sayer (1992: 83) concludes that:

“The world can only be understood in terms of the available conceptual resources, but the latter do not determine the structure of the world itself. And despite our entrapment within our conceptual schemes, it is still possible to differentiate between more and less practically-adequate beliefs about the material world. Observation is neither theory-neutral nor theory-determined but theory-laden. Truth is neither absolute nor purely conventional and relative”.

The CCR’s main strategy is the denial of the postmodernist’s proposition that either *we can know something absolutely and omnisciently, or we must give up claims to knowledge of objective truth*. The reason why that claim appears so convincing is because the postmodernist can always show that finite human beings know nothing absolutely and omnisciently, there is always more to know, either in the thing itself or in its relations with everything else.

The CCR response is that finite and fallen human could know some objective truths even if it is partially, and that would neutralize the thrust of the postmodernist’s claim. (Carson 2002: 18)

An example illustrating the point can be used from the common experience of knowledge acquisition. A student begins to study a new discipline such as philosophy. Progress is expected to be slow initially but after years of study, the student merely masters the elementary steps. Further advanced studies may help absorb more complex concepts, but we do not assume the student will eventually have an absolute grasp of the discipline. In fact, at higher levels of learning, the student soon realizes how many issues in the discipline that are still disputed. However, the process of knowledge acquisition can progress, despite the partial grasp of some underlying principles.

The main weakness of the critical realism methodology is the social constructs or models from which we understand objective reality, commonly described as epistemic relativism. Inevitably, there would be more than one possible competing model that purports to explain reality. How do we tell which of the

competing models is the correct one? Wright (1992: 67) talks about judging against a set criterion such as “continuity of historical meaning” in New Testament theology, but the criterion is far from being ‘normative,’ or having unanimous support from experts in that field. However, it is nevertheless an approach that provides an appropriate response to the postmodernist’s skepticism.

1.4.4 Issue of Human Finitude

Although much of the postmodernist epistemology is rejected by orthodox Christians, I believe Christians can and should learn from postmodernity, This include the emphasis, and reminder that human reason is limited or using the postmodern term, ‘*situated.*’ After all, as Vanhoozer (2005 : 83-84) correctly pointed out, the idea is not new or unique to postmodern thought; the Bible anticipated this much earlier, and we already know that humans are finite (Gen 2;7) created a little lower than the angels (Ps 8:5), we lack the knowledge of angels, let alone God. Vanhoozer (2005: 84) reiterated, “Postmodernity has not discovered anything that was not already available, at least implicitly, in Christian scripture and tradition.”

The issue then is what is the impact of the “situated and contextual nature” of the human condition on epistemology for Christians who do not subscribe to postmodernism?

The Christian critical realist (CCR) believes that the issue of human “situatedness” is important in our understanding of knowledge. We can grasp knowledge, but the knowledge that we possess currently is fallible. Hence, we need to be open to criticism and consider alternative approaches and viewpoints. By interacting with alternative approaches, we modify our knowledge and through this process, gradually “converge” to the truth. The CCR does not reject

foundationalism per se, especially the modest form, as it is considered as one of the many epistemic methodologies.

It appears that there are a number of difficulties with the approach. Firstly, in the process of interacting with competing claims, there seems to be no satisfactory way of adjudicating for the “most probable” view (Stinnett 1992: 107). Hence, an impasse. Lonergran (1972: 123) a noted CCR suggests that, while this may be the case, the problem is relatively unimportant if the seekers are “authentic” in their search for truth. Therefore, with the openness for God’s guidance, the development of knowledge would eventually approach the truth. However, by resorting to divine guidance as a proposition, the CCR’s approach, essentially, seems no different from the epistemic claims of the classical theist.

Secondly, human knowledge, according to the CCR, is inherently fallible and we can only hold what we know provisionally. Does this mean that the Christian’s knowledge on soteriology, and Christology, key tenets in the faith, are merely provisional? Would this not suggest that we cannot be certain that Christ had offered salvation to all? While emphasizing that our grasp of knowledge is fallible, the critical realist also claims that not all knowledge is equally fallible (Danermark 1997:25). In Christian or religious epistemology, there are a variety of sources in tradition which include creeds, doctrine etc, that point to the reality of God. How does one decide which of the sources are less fallible? Although the CCR “requires” us to consider numerous sources within and apart from the Christian tradition, there appears to be no clear means of evaluating references outside the Christian tradition. (Martin 2001: 256)

The Christian modernist (CM) accepts the issue that humans are finite and fallible, but that does not mean that we cannot seek truth beyond social-cultural construction. According to the CM, we are fallible because, sometimes, we can mistakenly believe a false proposition or one that has insufficient evidence. In addition, the evidence we can have is defeasible and there is a measure of risk

involved. (Geivett 2005:47) In spite of the said fallibilities, the CM claims that foundationalism (the modest variety), is an approach where we can justify our beliefs and overcome some of the uncertainties due to human limitations.

This is because the legitimacy of an agent's epistemic beliefs is not *solely* dependent upon the agent's capacity to adduce indubitable evidence.(Pritchard 1970: 65) The agent is merely required to exhibit the ability to adduce *some* appropriate degree of evidence.(Pritchard 1970: 65)

Knowledge is pragmatic and we need to know the truthfulness of our beliefs in order to act responsibly and effectively. Using Geivett's (2005: 46) example; if we desire to cross to the other side of a busy street, we need to believe that it is safe to do so. However, it is not enough to believe it is safe to cross, we want some evidence that the proposition that it is safe to cross is true. We do this by looking out for traffic, thus "justifying" our belief.

1.5 Summary

I find that the CM's position based on modest foundationalism provides a more convincing approach to knowledge, especially with regards to religious epistemology. Christian tradition believes in the immutable God and core beliefs such as the redemptive work of Christ, which does not vary with time, culture or social construction. The CM's modest foundational approach provides us with this epistemic anchor for our beliefs since the truth-claims relate to universals and operate outside communities or local ethnocentric interests. The Bible narration concerns universal world history and the truth claims of the Gospels, in particular, Christology. These transcend ethnicity, gender, culture and politics. While I recognize and accept that there are varieties in theological methods and possible adaptations of postmodern ideas such as the individual's worldviews and sensitivities, the central Christian beliefs and themes are indubitable, and any variations are merely variations of the same theme.

What about the apparent lack of acceptance of foundationalism among wider academia? Many analytical philosophers disagree. James Pryor (2001) states that foundationalism's prospects look much better than they did 25 years ago and have made a successful comeback. Michael DePaul (2001) claims that foundationalism is alive and well within Anglo-American analytical philosophy, and remains the dominant position. Perhaps the ultimate sign that foundationalism is on the rise is the conversion to foundationalism of Laurence Bonjour, a well known coherentist.(Porter 2006: 4)

Therefore, the Christian modernist approach (modest foundationalism) is the preferred epistemic approach, and response against the postmodernist's claims that (i) truth is merely a linguistic convention, (ii) the denial of absolute truth and (iii) we merely end up with a multitude or plurality of "truths."

CHRISTIANITY AND THE POSTMODERN TURN

A CRITIQUE OF POSTMODERN EPISTEMOLOGY

Chapter 2

“What is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms. ... Truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions...”

Friedrich Nietzsche,
On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense

2.0 Introduction

Westphal claims that whilst the postmodern philosophers may be atheists and may even be enemies of the faith, their central themes could be appropriated and useful to Christian theology. And he warns us against Christians that based their theology on modernist methods rather than “biblical” (Westphal 2001: xvi)

The argument appears to be along this line: the modernist’s influence has led to the quest for foundations for all academic disciplines including theology. This results in the development of theological prolegomena, which is the attempt to formulate how theology is possible and to demonstrate its universal validity. This is achieved by satisfying the modernist demand for establishing a foundation of knowledge either through an appeal to reason (rationalism) or sense experience (empiricism).

What this means is that modern metanarratives, such as historical criticism, which is based on modernist philosophy, seem to support the theological structure. However, this tradition suffers the criticism that the reality of God is replaced by the logos of modernity. Hans Frei expresses this notion succinctly when he talks of modern theologians gaining the whole world, the world of academic respectability, but losing their own souls (Vanhoozer 2003: 19). Postmodern philosophy questions the modernist’s demand for this foundation or legitimization, and appears to free theology from the clutches of modernity.

Therefore, it appears that Christian theology could employ postmodern concepts to critique all metaphysics, where God is reduced to some humanistic rationalism such as Descartes' *causa sui* or some humanistic perception, such as Locke's empiricism.

Vanhoozer (2003) after concluding that the postmodern approach to faith is based not on historic faith, and a refusal to accept orthodox Christian doctrine, asked the question, "What, then, is the condition of postmodern theology?"

He believed that the best way to answer the question was to contrast postmodern theology with its traditional counterpart, just as we have done for I epistemology in Chapter 1

In this Chapter, I shall describe a number of postmodern theologies or typologies and their main epistemic assumptions. Then I shall critique both their epistemologies and the corresponding theological models based on the traditional understanding and practice of the Christian faith.

The postmodern theologies that will be investigated are Postliberal, Deconstructive, and Reconstructive theologies. It is evident that the three theologies mentioned are but a small sample of the wide range of theologies that subscribe to postmodern sensibilities. However, for the purpose of this essay, I believe the three would be a good representation of postmodern theology.

2.1 Postliberal Theology

It appears that the first use of the term "postliberal" was coined by Hans Frei in his dissertation on Karl Barth (Frei 1956: 430-434). Although Frei's work is about the development of Barth's theology and not the structure of postliberalism, the stage was set for the consideration of a 'new' theological option that incorporated some aspects of Barthian's thinking, such as primacy of God and Christocentricity. Another key figure in the development of postliberal theology is George Lindbeck. In his book "*The Nature of Doctrine*," Lindbeck (1984) offered what he considered to be the proper approach to establishing theology. He contributed to

the foundation of postliberal theology based on a cultural-linguistic approach to religion and a rule theory of doctrine. Although commonly called the “Yale School,” postliberal theology is not a particular descriptive label, and it is not strictly a Yale invention but a loose coalition of interest that originated from scholars in that school. (Hunsinger 2007: 42)

Why “post” liberal and what is the difference? The term “postliberal” suggests that this theology has some roots in liberal theology but has gone beyond it (Olson 1996: 31). Whilst liberal theology conforms to modernists’ philosophy and places such thinking alongside scripture and tradition as a norm for Christian belief, postliberal theology rejects the modernist approach. Postliberal theology rejects the enlightenment emphasis on the primacy of human reason and empirical methods and instead, places authority on biblical narrative as shaped by the community of believers such as the story of Jesus, his redemptive life, and resurrection. The key principle, as expressed by Lindbeck (1984: 135), was “the ancient practice of absorbing the universe into the biblical world,” in other words, the text absorbs the world. This means that the narratives in the Bible, as understood by the Christian community, create the “world” for the Christian. Christianity is a language and culture in which the believers see the world and provides the interpretive framework for living the Christian life.

Although the above discussion suggests that postliberal theology has affirmed the primacy and significance of the biblical narrative, do postliberals affirm the *truth* about the Christianity? The classic example of the debate on the truth issue can be found in the exchange between Carl Henry and Hans Frei over the question of whether the empty tomb was fact or fiction. (Placher 1999: 392)

Frei remarked,

“If I am asked to use the language of factuality, then I would say, yes, in those terms, I have to speak of an empty tomb. In those terms I have to speak of a literal resurrection. But I think those terms are not privileged, theory- neutral, transcultural...and of a reality always and everywhere for me, as they are for Dr. Henry...I am looking for a way that looks for a relation between Christian

theology and philosophy that disagrees with a view of certainty and knowledge which liberals and evangelicals hold in common. ” (Placher 1999: 392)

2.1.1 Postliberal Epistemology

The truth claims appear to be an issue in postliberal theology, particularly among the critics who assert that postliberals are deficient in their epistemic understanding of Christian truths. Such critics include Ian Barbour, Bloesch, Childs and McGrath, to name a few. (Dorrien 2001: 22) Therefore, what does the postliberal believe regarding the question of truth? There are at least three positions widely held.

Firstly, some postliberal thinkers hold to the principle, or at least the general approach, of Frei and Lindbeck. In this approach, the postliberal answer to the truth question is that scripture is true in the manner of its distinctively mixed genre and that biblical truth is about the capacity of the text to draw readers into a Christian framework of meaning. Scholars who hold to this position include Garrett Green, Stanley Hauerwas and William Placher. (Dorrien 2001: 23) This form of postliberal philosophy is based largely on the work of Wittgenstein, whose "language games" hypothesis emphasized that meaning arises as a function of learning the internal coherence of a language. (Thiselton 1980: 124)

Secondly, some postliberal theologians sought to recover a premodern understanding of truth in order to defend the claims of Christian faith. One of the main proponents of this view was Bruce D. Marshall, who in his recent book *“Trinity and Truth”* maintained that theology must return to the Trinitarian theism of Thomas Aquinas. (Marshall 2000: 6) However, Marshall argued that even Aquinas was wrong in trying to apply natural philosophy to Christian epistemology, in particular, the notion that truth means “correspondence with reality.” Marshall (2000: 4-5) claimed that we do not need an epistemic model to determine truth, as truth itself is conceptually basic.

Thirdly, some theologians of the postliberal school argue that postliberal theology as a whole is overly preoccupied with epistemological debates and is too much focused on conserving tradition. Those who hold such positions, such as Kathryn Tanner (2000) and Serene Jones (2000), work with a postmodern understanding of culture with a particularly strong commitment to feminism. They are, in effect, rethinking the relation of postliberal theology to liberal theology in way that go beyond or counter classic liberalism.

However, the above distinctions are not rigid; the movement remains very fluid. George Hunsinger argued that with respect to the question of truth, even Frei and Lindbeck differed. (Hunsinger 2003: 44) There is, nevertheless, a common thread that weaves through the various postliberal positions on epistemic truth. Hunsinger (2003; 44) described the postliberal position with regards to truth as, "...that form of traditionally based rationality in theology for which the question of truth and method are strongly dependent on questions of meaning, and for which questions of meaning are determined by the intratextual subject of Scripture."

The heart of the matter when it comes to "truth" is whether the Christian faith and in particular, Christian doctrine comprises a set of true or false propositions (cognitive propositionalism) or merely a mixture of dispositions of the heart (experiential expressivism) and regulations interpreted by the faith community that govern Christian speech and life (cultural-linguistic) (Olson 1996:33)

Postliberals see cognitive propositions which are favored by the Christian modernist as literalism, the biblical narrative read in this manner as univocal and normative. Carl Henry (1979: 103-128) provides a good example of cognitive propositionalism in his essay, "*Is the Bible Literally True?*" and such an approach, according to the postliberals, is regarded as untenable. (Hunsinger 2003: 46) Postliberals, instead, would largely agree with the doctrine of expressivism, that is, religious language merely expresses non-cognitive religious experiences, and goes further to embrace a pragmatist theory of truth. (Hunsinger 2003: 46) To

understand the pragmatists' claims about truth, it is best to summarise William James' work through his own words;

"The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite assignable reasons... 'The true', to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as 'the right' is only the expedient in the way of our behaving. Expedient in almost any fashion; and expedient in the long run and on the whole, of course." (James 1975: 42,106)

Why does the postliberal adopt the above approach to truth claims?

A possible explanation is given by Marshall (2000: 3-7) as follows:

- (i) The church's claim that its doctrines are true has been challenged, and the right of the Christian community to hold their beliefs seems not to meet the epistemic standards of modernity, in particular, classical foundationalism.
- (ii) Christian thinkers, both theologians and philosophers have responded to the modern challenge arguing over the modern notions of truth and epistemic justification. However, this debate appears to be inconclusive, according to the postliberals.
- (iii) The strategy, in order to meet modernity's epistemic standards, appears to be a reinterpretation of the Christian claims, resulting in the worst of both worlds. Modern epistemic demands are being met only partially, and what remains is not Christianity as it is traditionally known.
- (iv) The postliberal claims that a better approach to truth is based on theological convention rather than modern epistemic standards. By acknowledging the meaning that the Christian community ascribes to doctrines, as being the primary criteria of truth, we are free from the shackles of modernity, and we need not be bogged down by the modern philosophical debate about meaning, belief and truth.
- (v) The key method in the Christian community involves learning the story of Israel and Jesus from Scripture and interpreting the world accordingly. According to Lindbeck (1984), the biblical story or narrative is the "world" that is the interpretative framework within which

believers live their lives. Christian doctrine therefore is not a collection of true propositions but a language or culture within which the believers characterize the truth, therefore the truth, is but a social or cultural construct.

2.1.2 Critique of Postliberal Epistemology

There are a number of criticisms that I shall highlight concerning the postliberal approach. While I do not propose to provide a full range of criticism, it is sufficient for the present purpose to present some of the more commonly noted criticisms. Postliberals appear to suggest that the narrative form of Scripture has special cognitive significance, that is, it can represent the external world, i.e. reality. Whilst scriptural narrative is capable of representing many things, narrative alone (literary form) is not sufficient, and believers require a level of precision and systematization that only a systematic discourse is capable of providing. (Fodor 2005:238) This is because Christian faith makes claims of universal truth not just communal beliefs. There is also the need to address ontological questions when addressing truth with respect to realism such as the occurrence of miracles. The cultural-linguistic approach appears inadequate for this purpose.

Another concern is how the narrative of the Christian community and its “language” relates to other worlds. For example, does the “world” of the community supplant the contemporary world? Does the community’s “model” illuminate and transform the understanding of the world we commonly know? Or does the interaction between the Christian and contemporary world give rise to the prospect of mutual criticism and correction? It is not clear how the postliberal attempts to “absorb” the world with his/her theological model, and if no attempts are made to engage with the wider issues of the “real” world, there is the danger that the postliberal may betray his/her own ideals.(Fodor 2005: 239)

The postliberal maintains that the biblical text shall be read through the lenses of the community, that is, a realistic narrative consistent with the long established ecclesial practice. This raises the question whether the authority of scripture resides with the text itself or the understanding of the principal community of believers over time. If the latter, which Christian community should be the final arbiter of “truth” when there are competing views?

The main concern is the ‘theory’ of truth. Whilst much of postliberal theology’s criticism against existing theories of truth serve as a platform for reform and correction, an alternative model of theological truth seems to be absent. For example, Frei (1993) acknowledged the validity of asking the ontological question, “What actually happened at Jesus’ resurrection?” However, he was not convinced that a historical answer could fully account for the miracle. Similarly, Lindbeck (2002) accepted the epistemic requirements of Christian truth claims and the need of a “modest” or “limited” notion of truth theories as inspired by Aquinas. But, according to Fodor (2005: 240) the postliberals have been less than forthcoming as to what should be a definitive theological account of truth.

2.1.3 Critique of Postliberal Theology

The main criticism will be focused on Christian doctrine. According to postliberal theology, the truth of the biblical narratives is not dependent on any reference to authentic universal human experience or facts of time and space. (Frei 1993)

The narrative appears to be private knowledge from which the Christian community lives, moves and derives its identity. The story of the Bible, the characters, events and language are irreducible and irreplaceable. As a result, Christian doctrine is:

- (i) Non propositional-cognitive, that is, it is not an objective description of reality beyond the biblical story.
- (ii) Subject to change and criticism , hence is never certain or definitive,

- (iii) Merely rules or regulations that govern Christian speech and life, hence it is highly contextual.

Olson (1996: 34) states that the postliberal general disinterest in the objective truth and the space-time historicity of the Bible is a grave concern for most Christians. The concern extends to the question as to whether Christianity, if based on the ambiguity of postliberal doctrine, could offer a definitive claim against various competing accounts of the ultimate reality of nature. While many accept that Christian doctrines may be “second order” affirmations compared with the primacy of Bible narrative, they, nevertheless affirm biblical truths. Postliberals, however, seems to be vague with regards to the ‘truth-values’ of doctrines.

Another issue is the nature of heresy. For example, if a self proclaiming ‘Christian’ denies the sole lordship of Jesus, is he merely breaking a rule or violating truth and affirming a lie? It appears that postliberal theologians have not sufficiently explored the issue of heresies. (Olson 1996:34)

If a Christian were to ask what is the one theme that is absolutely non negotiable it would most probably be the resurrection. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:17-19 states that if Christ has not risen, our faith is futile and Christians would be the most pitiable. Yet postliberals have been vague and ambiguous about the relationship between biblical narrative and time-space history. In other words, the bodily resurrection of Jesus as a historical event and not just a story is essential to the faith but is not affirm by the postliberals. (Olson 1996:34)

2.2 Deconstructive Theology

Deconstruction is a term commonly associated with Jacques Derrida in the sixties which is used in literary criticism and the social sciences. (Derrida 1976:10) When applied to literary criticism, deconstruction changes our understanding of the working of language and in turn, affects the interpretation of the text.

While it is not the purpose of this essay to give an in depth analysis of deconstruction, a brief summary of the main ideas would be helpful.

According to deconstruction theory, the users of language can no longer be considered fully in control of the meaning of the language they use. Language can therefore be said to have its own force, and it appears possible to demonstrate that the language that is used within a text may be different from the use for which it was originally intended.

Derrida's argument seems to be that the nature of language is such that a language-user cannot neatly mean, what he or she *intends* to mean. This can be demonstrated by showing how the use of certain words or certain passages in a text could contradict the meaning the author intends for the text as a whole.

2.2.1 Death of God Movement

In the nineteen eighties, a group of theologians who were inclined towards the philosophies of Hegel and Nietzsche, in particular the death-of-God philosophy encountered the works of Derrida. Consequently, they saw the potential of deconstruction for their cause. Hence, the birth of deconstruction theology. The two key exponents of this theology were JJ Altizer (1982) and Mark Taylor (1982). Derrida's deconstruction provided these death-of-God theologians with an anti-metaphysical account of language, which they could employ to "deconstruct" dogmatic theological claims. Therefore, they could transform such claims into whatever meanings they wished.

It is useful at this stage to survey some of the main theological tenets held by the death-of-God scholars. What is meant by the phrase "death of God"?

Let us begin by revisiting a passage from Nietzsche's *Gay Science* pg 388

"Have you ever heard of the madman who on a bright morning lighted a lantern and ran to the marketplace calling out unceasingly: "I seek God! I seek God!" -- As there were many people standing about who did not believe in God, he

caused a great deal of amusement. Why! is he lost? said one. Has he strayed away like a child? said another. Or does he keep himself hidden? Is he afraid of us? Has he taken a sea-voyage? Has he emigrated? -- the people cried out laughingly, all in a hubbub.

The insane man jumped into their midst and transfixed them with his glances. "Where is God gone?" he called out. "I mean to tell you! We have killed him, -- you and I! We are all his murderers! But how have we done it? ... Do we not dash on unceasingly? Backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an above and below? Do we not stray, as through infinite nothingness? Does not empty space breathe upon us? Has it not become colder? Does not night come on continually, darker and darker? Shall we not have to light lanterns in the morning? ... How shall we console ourselves, the most murderous of all murderers? ... Shall we not ourselves have to become Gods, merely to seem worthy of it?"

Is this any more than a metaphor pointing to the difficulty of speaking about a holy God in human terms? Is it any more than a warning against all idols, all divinities fashioned out of human need, and ideologies? Does it perhaps not just mean that "existence is not an appropriate word to ascribe to God that therefore he cannot be said to exist, and he is in that sense "dead"? The hypothetical meanings suggested still all lie within the safe boundaries of the neo-orthodox or biblical-theology tradition, but the death of God group wants clearly to break away from that.

Langdon Gilkey has listed five marks of the death of God tradition, and they are as follows:

- (i) The problematic character of God and of man's relation to him today.
- (ii) Acceptance of the secular world as normative intellectually and ethically good.

- (iii) Restriction of theological statements to what one can actually affirm oneself, and with this the rejection of certain traditional ideas of tradition and authority.
- (iv) Centrality of Jesus as one who calls us into the world to serve him there.
- (v) Uneasiness with mythological, super-historical, eschatological, supernatural entities, or categories. (Hamilton 2003)

Gilkey goes on to note how each of these five points is a direct attack on a certain portion of the neo-orthodox tradition. Thomas Altizer, (1966; 95-111) claimed that the death of God was an historical event, that it has happened in our time and that we should welcome, even will it, not shrink from it. Altizer offered a radical theology of the death of God that drew upon Hegelian and Nietzschean ideas. He conceived of theology as a form of poetry in which the immanence (presence) of God could be encountered in faith communities. However, he no longer accepted the possibility of affirming belief in a transcendent God. Altizer concluded that God had incarnated in Christ and imparted his immanent spirit which remained in the world even though Jesus was dead

Hence, being a Christian, according to the death-of-God theologian, has somewhat inverted the usual relationship between faith and love, theology and ethics, God and humanity. We are not proceeding from God and faith to neighborly love, loving in a certain way, because we are loved in this way. We move to our neighbor, to the city and to the world out of a sense of the loss of God. We set aside this sense of loss or death, we note it and allow it to be, neither glad for it, nor insistent that it must be so for all, nor sorry for ourselves. And, for the time being, we place ourselves with our neighbor and enemy in the world.

2.2.2 Death of God Epistemology

Gilkey (1969: 40-145) provided a detailed exposition and survey of this theological position. He regarded such positions as lacking theological method because the death-of-God theologians had apparently abandoned the sources of revelation and substituted them with mere literary critical methodology borrowed from Derrida. Gilkey believed that Altizer had failed to persuade anyone of the truth of his system of thought as it lacked any correlation with practical reality. Gilkey has aptly summarized the inadequacy of the death-of-God theology as follows:

“[death-of God] theology has rejected both metaphysical speculation and special religious sources, such as revelation or religious experience, for theological reflection, and it has embraced the secular as providing the materials, insights and criteria for its thinking.” (Gilkey 1969: 121)

The death-of-God movement appears to be neither a viable viewpoint of the Christian faith nor a metaphoric account of the human religious experience, and seems to be a promotion of atheism in Christian guise. It should be noted that a recent work by Howard Munro(2000) attempted to portray Altizer as a Christian mystic, who articulated a form of theism that could be useful to the faith. However, I find this laborious and unconvincing, because the basic epistemic basis for the theology appears non-existent.

2.2.3 Other Deconstruction Groups

The death-of-God movement has no proprietorship over deconstruction theology. By the late nineties, theologians who do not belong to the movement such as John Caputo (1997) and William Johnson (1997) subscribed to deconstruction in their theological methods. Derrida’s work was considered a useful tool by theologians who, unlike the death-of-God school, accepted the traditionally held tenets of faith. They recognized that deconstruction appears to be profoundly theological rather than atheological, an approach that could facilitate the theological task. It seems that the knowledge obtained from deconstruction could produce a better understanding of the human condition and God.

2.2.4 General Deconstruction Epistemology

Why appropriate Derrida's deconstruction in the theological task?

It appears that the deconstruction theologians believe that since God is beyond the physical world He created and yet operates within His creation, Derrida's philosophy could bring clarity to theology. How does it work?

When we talk of the 'reality' of God or 'presence', we refer to either a personal relationship with Christ as Barth does or an epistemological/ontological relationship of subject and object. Either way, the deconstruction theologian claims that it is a mistake to view the 'reality' of God through the lens of philosophical theology, commonly known as onto-theology or simply metaphysics. (Hart 2000: xv) For example, theologians such as Westphal (2001: 5) claim that it is a mistake to identify God simply as "the omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent' because such descriptions, although biblical, are often a philosophical construct.

Derrida seems to offer a way to trace and circumscribe the metaphysics within theology by the use of the transcendental argument. The transcendental argument is itself a philosophical account of "the condition for the possibility of an action." For example, we need to believe that we are free to perform a particular action, such as singing. The belief in the freedom to sing is a necessary condition of the possibility of singing. Putting Derrida's transcendental argument in syllogistic form we have;

- (i) Language is concerned with the communication of meaning
- (ii) Communication of meaning is always incomplete or subject to time-lag, which suggests that meaning is not fully realized at the time of its communication and is always 'deferred'
- (iii) Hence, the condition for the possibility of language as the communication of meaning is non-existent.

Therefore, the deconstruction theologians employ the transcendental argument to criticize the metaphysical way of reading theological discourse such as Scriptures and propose a different approach, the operation of linguistic signs. A sign is an entity which signifies another entity. A natural sign is an entity which bears a causal relation to the signified entity, as thunder is a sign of a potential storm. A conventional sign signifies by agreement, as a full stop signifies the end of a sentence. Derrida's concept of the sign signifies presence or that which is presentable. (Hart 2000: 5) Christian theology, according to Hart (2000: 7) is always a study of signs. If we say God is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent, we are merely imagining God as a presence or a model reality. We can only know God imperfectly, reflected in the mirror of language, and theology must always be a speculative discourse. (Hart 2000: 7)

The deconstruction theologians appear to adopt Derrida's concepts to circumscribe metaphysics, but they do so at a cost. Milbank (1990) and Pickstock (1997) have convincingly argued that Derrida's transcendental argument leads to nihilism. In other words, when applying deconstruction, theology has become not only speculative, it has no objective truth and morality.

2.2.5 Critique of Deconstructive Epistemology.

Derrida himself admitted that, "the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work" (1976:24), and it would not seem surprising that the deconstruction process exposes its own problems. Even by the deconstruction theologian's own account, by attempting to exclude metaphysics, they open the door for it. Derrida argued that any attempt to pass beyond metaphysics remains entangled within metaphysics.(Hart 2000: xxxv) Hart went further and admit that any non-metaphysical theology may succeed in resolving some philosophical and theological traditions but it can never escape entirely their determinations.

Winquist(1986:4), explained that, "It is always difficult to determine, when we espouse a crisis of meaning, whether we are referring to a relational deficiency or

to our own inability to discern relationships in the linguistic transformation of the complex of events that are the original objects of thinking". That is, all our talking, even thinking, about an event, person, truth, etc., is derivative, therefore, 'reality' will never be *complete* in the human discourse. The question then becomes, given a finiteness of language, given that meaning is "deferred," is it possible for humans to arrive at some form of 'truth,' no matter how imperfectly? Derrida denies that Western metaphysics could provide for the sign that will give meaning to all others (the 'transcendental signifier') and for anchoring unquestionable meaning to which all our signs can be seen to point (the 'transcendental signified'). (Eagleton 1983:131) This, together with the transcendental argument, apparently points towards nihilism. This is the main criticism of deconstructive theology.

Graham Ward (2003: 84) conceded that this was the critical point that theology has reached regarding the appropriation of Derrida's thinking on deconstruction. We can never be sure what deconstruction tells us theologically and the labeling of theology as a speculative discourse (as Hart did) is no defense. A good example of the lack of clarity and obscurity when attempting to understand Derrida is the incident at Villanova in 1999. When Derrida met with a group of theologians at the "Questioning God" conference, he seemed to give an impression that he endorsed metaphysics. This came as a shock to theologians who had all along interpreted Derrida as holding to an anti-metaphysical position. As a result of the confusion, many theologians have become more concerned when applying Derrida's thinking to their theologies. (Ward 2003: 84) For those who still think that Derrida is an important conversation partner, further interpretation of his thinking is required, and Ward proposed three possible interpretations as follows:

- (i) Derrida is a nihilist because he believed that there is no transcendental signifier, which is a normative and universal sign that provides meaning to all other signs.

- (ii) Derrida is not a nihilist but provides a deconstructive operation that can be used to include all marginalized, excluded and forgotten positions. Meaning is deferred not void and therefore not fully realized. There is a hope that we could come increasingly closer to a true meaning.
- (iii) Derrida is a sophisticated nihilist. While deconstruction does not necessarily entail nihilism, rendering everything meaningless immediately, the endless deferral of meaning does suggest an absurd world-view that humans will engaged in endless accidental meaning and endemic misunderstanding.(Ward 2003: 86)

Ward (2003: 88) seems to suggest that ultimately, Derrida is a sophisticated nihilist. He sought to maintain the integrity of secular philosophy and yet considered philosophy indeterminate. Human thinking cannot reach God, resulting only in an endless dissemination of the signifier, "God." To endure this indeterminacy is to experience life as a ship sailing endlessly in the dark. Derrida (1993: 81) illustrated this theme as follows;

"Searchlights without a coast...sweep across the dark sky, shut down or disappear at regular intervals and harbor the invisible in their very light. We no longer even know what dangers of abysses we are forewarned...We no longer know whether these watchmen are guiding us towards another destination..."

Therefore, the deconstruction theologian appears to face some serious epistemic issues regarding nihilism. At the time of writing this thesis, a convincing resolution still eludes the deconstruction theologian.

2.2.6 Critique of Deconstruction Theology

How does deconstructed theology describe God and what does it reveal about Him? It appears that there is no one definitive answer, only a plurality of suggestions. The theology of Mark Taylor has a different perspective of God from John Caputo or William Johnson. It appears that deconstruction is more a strategy rather than a system, more tactic than theory. (Aichele 1995: 135) It is

difficult to critique a theological model if the model itself is ambiguous and unclear. Taylor's deconstruction seems to lead to a/theology that is a belief in a non-existent God, a form of Christianity without God. (Taylor 1987: 136) John Caputo has a different approach although based on the same deconstruction process, which resulted in the notion of the "weakness of God." (Caputo 2006: 44) The traditional understanding of God as all-powerful is replaced with the idea of God as an unconditional entity without force, that is, a notion of God not physically or metaphysically intervening in Nature.

Deconstruction theology appears to be embroiled with so much extraneous philosophy and mysticism that I find it is not useful to engage theologically. I concur with Craig Bartholomew (2005:165) when he said that "deconstruction will not be of great help to theological interpretation."

2.3 Reconstructive (Process) Theology

David Griffin (2003:92) stated that reconstructive theology was based on the philosophy of Whitehead and Hartshorne, a movement commonly termed process theology. Not all process theology is considered postmodern. However, it is postmodern if its epistemology emphasizes the notions of Whiteheadian philosophy that rejects the modernist position such as the primacy of sense perception (Cobb 1967: 135,138) For the purpose of this essay, reconstructive theology *is* process theology.

2.3.1 Process Philosophy

What is process theology? Marjorie Suchocki (2003: 3) of the Center for Process Studies suggested that process theology is a relational way of thinking about the dynamism of life and faith based on process philosophy to interpret Scripture, experience and tradition. It appears then that process theology uses four sources, Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, and the distinctive feature is its philosophy.

Process philosophers believed that classical theists such as Aquinas have based their reasoning on Greek philosophy which is inadequate. Another philosophical approach is needed that would include events, occurrences or processes, and that would appear to be more congenial to the Bible. The metaphysics developed by Whitehead is based on the presupposition that the whole of reality is causally interrelated and interdependent. (Whitehead 1967: 25) There are two aspects of Whiteheadian thinking, namely, empiricism and rationalism. (Lee 1984: 307-319) Just as with Kant, Whitehead believed that knowledge begins with experience, observing the world being experienced. However, since the area of experience is limited, we need to search for generalizations. Rationalism or philosophy is the tool for making such generalization. Metaphysics is therefore a tentative formulation of the ultimate 'reality,' generalizing the universal events derived from concrete experience. (Whitehead 1978: 8) Whitehead's metaphysics may be summarized as follows:

- (i) Truth may be explained as a process of a basic unit of reality called 'actual entity' which is a momentary event that is partially self-created and partially influenced by other actual entities.
- (ii) Each 'actual entity' is dipolar, having physical and mental functions. The physical aspect of the actual entity feels or "prehends" the physical reality of other entities while the mental part "prehends" the transcendence. The transcendental objects are abstract possibilities of the universe.
- (iii) Each actual entity is not an isolated or independent being but is present in other entities as interrelated moments of an ongoing process. (Diehl 1997 :§3-7)

2.3.2 Process Theology

Applying this hypothesis to theology, we have God as the supreme actual entity, which exhibit all its functions. To be consistent, God cannot be considered as the

exception to this hypothesis, on the contrary, God is considered the key model of the process principles by which all things are explained. Thus God perfectly 'prehends' all entities in the universe and is himself 'prehended' in part by them. He also has the supreme influence on all actual entities, setting the limits of their creativity and influencing their subjective aims by supplying each one with an ideal "initial aim." God does this by virtue of his "mental faculties" or "primordial nature" in which he envisions all the eternal objects and their graded values, relevant to the actual world.(Diehl 1997:§ 7)

As a result, process theologians have claimed that the traditional Christian views of God are not consistent with the Bible and rationalism, while their model or worldview is a better alternative on which to understand the Christian message. (Cobb,J 1965: 19, Ogden 1966: 70, Pittenger, 1968 :19)

2.3.3 Process Postmodern Theology?

How is process theology, claiming to be postmodern, different from modernity? Reconstructive or process theology is based on metaphysical philosophy but many postmodernists reject metaphysics as a modern construct. Griffin (2003: 95) suggests that it is merely an issue with definition, and the widespread rejection does not apply to Whitehead. Attached below are some of the objections posed by many postmodernists concerning metaphysics and Griffin's response:

Postmodernist's criticism of metaphysics

Presuppose the Kantian's concept that metaphysics is the attempt to describe things beyond all possible experience.

Griffin's Response

Whitehead's metaphysics is an attempt to construct a coherent paradigm in which every element of human experience is taken into account.

As influenced by Heidegger, some have portrayed metaphysics as necessarily committed to the domination of nature. Metaphysics seems to claim the attainment of certainty.

Metaphysics seems to be associated with foundationalism which is rejected by most postmodernists.

Whitehead's metaphysical analysis led him to value other experience, and the notion that everything matters.

Whitehead regards his metaphysical system as a tentative hypothesis, an experimental adventure and that any hint of dogmatic certainty is mere folly.

Whitehead explicitly rejected the idea that metaphysics started from principles that were individually indubitable.

While the criticism leveled at metaphysics by most postmodernists can be dismissed or explained by the process hypothesis as indicated above, fundamental differences remain between the two groups. Process theology is committed to the notion that religion and reason can, and must be reconciled. (Griffin 2003: 96) In addition, the postmodernist seems to deny the philosophy adopted by analytical philosophers such as the correspondence theory of truth and the idea of referential language, that is, statements that have true and false value. The process theologian defends these notions pointing out that their denials will lead to "performative contradiction." As defined by Jurgen Habermas, a performative contradiction is a lack of fit between the content and the performance of the speech act. (Jay 1993: 25-37) For example, the phrase, "all statements must be false" is a performance contradiction because the speaker performs the action of stating something that contradicts the truthfulness of the speech act. The issue of language, hermeneutics and speech act theory will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

2.3.4 Key Process Theological Claims

Process theology appears to have made two principal claims which will be examined, as follows:

- (i) Classical theism is inadequate and is largely non-biblical
- (ii) Process metaphysics offers a superior synthesis for Christian faith.

Process theologians such as Hartshorne (1953: 16) claim that Christian theology demands that at least five major questions concerning God need to be satisfactorily addressed, namely;

- (i) Is God eternal? –Eternal in the sense that some aspects of God’s reality are immutable and completely independent of anything outside Himself.
- (ii) Is God temporal? – Temporal in the sense that some aspects of God’s reality are changeable, that is, while everlasting, He surpasses Himself and all creation. In the process view there is no finality of definite events, but a new totality of each moment. (Hartshorne 1973: 136)
- (iii) Is God conscious ?– A distinct being with the highest degree of self-awareness
- (iv) Is God all knowing? – Knowledge of everything there is to know, both actual and potential. In other words, omniscient.
- (v) Is God world-inclusive? - having all things or entities as constituents. A supreme being who exceeds the world but is always interacting with it.

Process theologians who answer affirmative to the above five questions end up constructing a God who is bi-polar, an abstract side that is eternal, omniscient, all powerful etc; and the concrete side, demonstrating plurality, possibility and temporality. The process theologian’s metaphysics have eventually led to Panentheism. Panentheism is a belief system which posits that God exists and is the eternal animating force behind the universe. They regard the classical theism’s view of God as immutable, passive and self-sufficient, as static, unresponsive, unrelated to time and irrelevant to humanity. According to the process theologian, classical theism is a syncretism of biblical faith and Greek philosophy; taking biblical ideas such as the God who knows, loves, wills and

creates and merging them with philosophical metaphysics of static perfection. Consequently, process theology appears to result in numerous contradictions. (Hatchett 1966: 264-275)

2.3.5 Critique of Process Epistemology

In this section I shall argue that the process epistemic approach is but another analytical hypothesis, and far from being superior or unique to other epistemic models, it has its own problematic issues in being coherent.

Process epistemology and metaphysics appear to be based on the Whiteheadian concept of perception, which has two modes, namely, presentational immediacy and causal efficacy. Presentational immediacy is the immediate experience of an external object. It is our perception of the world by means of the senses. (Whitehead 1978: 311) It is not however identical to the entire content of our present consciousness, but only part of our consciousness. Presentational immediacy discloses the world we experience now and not the past or the future, hence, is 'incomplete.' For example, when we first notice a chair we are actually perceiving a 'colored object' in front of us. This is the first mode, the perception of 'raw data.'

Causal efficacy, the second mode, is the awareness of the casual relationship between the object and the subject. Process philosophy states that casual efficacy indicates that some things are occurring in the world and some things are affecting others, in a dynamic way. (Christian 1959; 147) Using the same example above, casual efficacy provides us with the awareness that we know the colored object is a chair. This mode is the conditioning of the present (recognizing the present object is a chair) by the past (from the effects of past experience, such as, being taught previously that the object is a chair)

Both modes of perception must overlap in some way; if not, there is no assurance that the modes are giving us information about the same object. The integration of the two modes is defined by the process philosophy term of “symbolic reference.”(Whitehead 1967: 169) “Symbolic reference” requires the concept of a spatio-temporal (space-time) system, and sense data that is common to both modes.

The first mode of perception (presentational immediacy) appears to be the position traditionally held by the realist, while the second mode (causal efficacy) is commonly held by the idealist. For the sake of clarity, it is useful at this stage to remind the reader of positions of both the realist and the idealist.

The realist holds that substances are real and have nothing to do with ideas. In other words, substances are not ideas nor are their properties reducible to mental qualities such as color or weight despite the relativity in our responses to this phenomenon. For example, one might see red while another sees blue or one feels the rock is heavy while another feels it as light. Which is it? These qualities are not subjective for the realist because they belong to the thing, not to our subjective feelings or mind.

On the other hand, the idealist holds that there are no ‘real’ substances, only representations of substances that we have perceived with our senses and minds. The representation remains uncertain as to its source. The “thing-in-itself” and the representation are not identical, or else they would be one. There is no way to absolutely ground representations as to their source. Hence, the red or blue which we see in an object exists only in our minds and may not exist in the object itself.

Process philosophy apparently attempts to integrate both the seemingly incompatible views of the realist and the idealist through the concept of ‘symbolic reference.’

However, theologians such as Charles Kimball claim that the enterprise is problematic. Kimball (1979: 94-104) claimed that process theory of symbolic reference had two main incoherencies. Firstly, symbolic reference requires the mind to perform an impossible task, namely the ability to focus on both modes of perception simultaneously. Secondly, symbolic reference leads to the self-contradictory epistemological conclusion that we perceive actualities, although they come to us transformed, through a medium. If an object is transformed through a medium, is it still the 'real' thing?

"Perception for Whitehead is mediated, in other words, we do not perceive objects directly but only through a medium. This means that we do not perceive things as they are in themselves, but only modified versions of them. . . Yet Whitehead still opts for realism, because he thinks we have direct awareness of how these objectified entities have been changed by the time we perceive them." (Kimball1979: 103)

David Hildebrand (1993: 20), defending process philosophy, responded in typical postmodernist fashion, claiming that Kimball's interpretation of casual efficacy was faulty and that he misunderstood Whitehead's intentions for 'symbolic reference.' I find that Hildebrand's argument is not convincing as it lacks an effective rebuttal of Kimball's proposition. It is, however, beyond the scope of this essay to provide an in-depth analysis of Hildebrand's response.

I believe that Kimball et al have cast sufficient doubts on the process theologians' epistemology to indicate that their claim of a better understanding of theological metaphysics is untenable.

2.3.6 Critique of Process Theology

But the main criticism of process philosophy and in particular, its epistemic approach is the resulting theology and the claims that it is closer to Christian tradition I shall argue in this section that claims regarding the inadequacy of classical theism, and the superiority of the process hypothesis, upheld by

process theologians, are untenable. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that process theology itself falls short in many areas of adherence to the orthodox Christian tradition.

2.3.6.1 Classical/Historical Theism's Response

It has been noted that process theologians consider classical theism as an inconsistent mixture of Aristotelian philosophy and biblical motifs of divine love and relationship with humanity. Their main objections may be classified as:

- (i) The inconsistency of an immutable God, yet interacting and relating with humanity.
- (ii) The inadequacy of the theology of service and worship
- (iii) The illegitimacy of the use of paradox and mystery to depend on certain difficult positions.(Lindsey 1977: 26,27)

Process theologians appear to regard all traditional Christian views of God's immutability as the Aristotelian 'Unmoved Mover,' a Being that is supernatural, absolute, immutable and timeless, where time and humanity are irrelevant to God's eternity. (Henry 1969: 6) But this is not the God of the Bible or the orthodox Christian's understanding of God. Luther, for example, viewed Aristotle as altogether epicurean since he did not believe that God cared about human affairs or if he believed, he thought that, "God governs the world the way a sleepy maidservant rocks a child in a cradle."(Luther 1967: 264,423) Gilkey aptly summarised the mistaken belief of the process theologians' view of classical theism saying;

"what process philosophers of religion call 'classical theism' is a strange hodgepodge that bears little historical scrutiny; and, as philosophers are wont to do, they seem to think that it has been scholastic philosophy that dominated the religion and piety of almost all of western Christianity until finally a new philosophy appeared in Whitehead." (Gilkey 1967: 449)

Berkhof affirms that the common conception of the Aristotelian Absolute is not the same as the God of the Bible and Christian theology, saying:

“The divine immutability should not be understood as implying immobility, as if there were no movement in God... The Bible teaches us that God enters into manifold relations with man and, as it were, lives their life with them. There is a change round about Him, change in the relation traditionally s of men to Him, but there is no change in His Being... [God is subject to change] in His knowledge and will, so that His decisions are to a great extent dependent on the actions of man...” (Berkhof 1957: 59)

Charles Hartshorne (1964: 13), a leading exponent of process theology, contended that Christian practices such as service, worship and glorifying God are meaningless apart from the process view of God, and the changes that take place in God through His relationship with humanity. However, Hartshorne’s understanding of Christian practices is contrary to traditional Christian understanding from the Bible because;

- (i) Service arises out of obedience and faithfulness not a requirement to meet a divine need. (Joshua 24) The apostle Paul states that God is not served by human hands as if He needed anything (Acts 17:25), therefore, indicating that Hartshorne’s type of service is heathen.
- (ii) To worship and glorify God is not to enhance His nature as suggested by process theology but to offer God praise because He is worthy (Rev 4:11)

Process theologians are not willing to accept the orthodox Christian’s appeal to the incomprehensibility of God or the use of theological antinomy. Hartshorne (1982: 1) said that, “a theological paradox, it appears, is what a contradiction becomes when it is about God rather than someone else, or indulged in by a theologian or a church rather than an unbeliever.”

Contrary to what process theologian claim, antinomies in Scripture are not irrational because of incomplete information or understanding. It should be noted that Whitehead (1967: 263-264) himself allowed the use of antinomy when two

apparently incompatible theories must be applied in a complementary manner. It is only legitimate to object to the use of antinomy if human knowledge is complete, which process theologians themselves would not even ascribe to God.

However, the issue of antinomies in biblical theism is nowhere as paradoxical or contradictory as the dipolar hypothesis proposed by process thinking. The God of the process theologian is exoteric at best, and certainly incompatible with the traditional understanding of orthodox Christians.

McDonald (1965: 415) further added, "We do not find Hartshorne altogether consistent in his own presentation. He seems to suggest that the two sides of the polarities should be kept in balance. But then he tells us that becoming, relativity etc ... [is] primary. In so doing he seems to have fallen into error of making God another name for a being who happens to be, or, worse, of equating Him with the Uncertain and Unpredictable."

According to William Hill, a serious deficiency in process philosophy, despite constant reference to relationship with the universe, is the uncertain notion of God as a distinct entity. Therefore, God has apparently become not a person but a principle. (Hill 1976: 262-263) Other doctrinal issues which process theology seem unable to incorporate in their metaphysics include the Trinity, Incarnation, immortality and the resurrection, all key tenets of the Christian faith. (Clarke 1979: 103) Hence, with process metaphysics, we end up with a theology that does not subscribe to the beliefs of most streams of Christianity that remain faithful to its tradition. (Burrell 1982: 132)

2.4 Summary

Vanhoozer (2005: 85) asked, "How do I respond to specific postmodern views concerning knowledge, truth, ethics and language?" He answered by saying, "I believe in reason. Reason is a God-designed cognitive process of inference and criticism, a discipline that forms virtuous habits of the mind." (Vanhoozer 2005: 87) He went on to summarise his views on the postmodern condition as follows;

- (i) Christians can learn from postmodernity especially about one's limitations as human beings, but;
- (ii) Christians must not 'correlate' with postmodernity or let its concerns and framework determine the Christian's credenda and agenda;
- (iii) Christian thought is faith seeking understanding and specifically through the Bible;
- (iv) The aim of Christian thinking is wisdom, the ability to participate rightly in reality; the norm is the wisdom of God reflected in the life of Jesus Christ. (Vanhoozer 2005:100)

Vanhoozer's statements sum up my position and assessment of the three postmodern theologies. It appears that the postmodern philosophies adopted by postliberal, deconstructive, and reconstructive theologies have resulted in epistemologies that deny the reality of God as traditionally understood, and/or lead to nihilism. While the proponents of these postmodern theologies may claim the bible as a theological source, they also affirm that the nature of all texts of the Christian faith are products of the framework of their times. To the postliberal, the biblical text is subject to humanly constructed cultural linguistic rules, the deconstructive theologian, agnostic mysticism, and the reconstructive theologian, exoteric metaphysics. The respective theologies do not appear to provide a viable alternative to the traditional understanding and practice of the Christian faith.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE POSTMODERN TURN

A CRITIQUE OF POSTMODERN EPISTEMOLOGY

Chapter 3

“Truth excluded all change...It belongs to the essence of truth to be unchangeable and, thus, to be one and the same, without beginning or end.”

Wolfhart Pannenberg
What is Truth?

3.0 Introduction

The debate between Geivett and Vanhoozer in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn* raised a number of issues that have direct bearing on this chapter, in particular, testimony as a source of belief. (Penner 2005: 197) Testimonies are vital sources of Christian beliefs, both oral and written, and the primary written testimony is the Bible. That was perhaps the reason why Vanhoozer (2005:197) in his response to Geivett, remarked, “Finally, I would be most interested in seeing how Geivett’s epistemology works out in practice of biblical interpretation.”

Hermeneutics is related to epistemology. This is because the process of understanding the Bible appears to be similar to the epistemic model of relating an object to a subject, and in hermeneutics, the subject-matter of the text to the interpreter. (Funk 1966: 11) Torrance explained that the Holy Spirit worked through human understanding and spoke of the epistemological relevance of the Spirit, in the understanding of knowledge in Christian theology. (Torrance 1971: 137-192)

Since orthodox Christians say that scripture communicates truths about objects and situations in the external world, which we can know through reading of it, hermeneutics is not only related, but indispensable to epistemology (McQuilkin 1977:75). Allen (1989:17) has indicated that all perception involves interpretation and we cannot collect pure, uninterpreted data. Undoubtedly, the discussion on

epistemology, especially postmodern epistemology, would not be complete without hermeneutics.

In this Chapter, I shall survey the issues in hermeneutics, the postmodern claims, and their epistemic assumptions relating to hermeneutics. This is followed by a critique of the postmodern hermeneutical approach and an example of the postmodernist's reading of the biblical text. The example will be Terry Eagleton's reading of the Book of Jonah taken from the "*The Postmodern Bible Reader*" (Jobling 2001). Although a Marxist, Eagleton has provided some key insights in literary criticism, the central theme in postmodernism, when interpreting Jonah.

3.1 Pre-understanding and Hermeneutics

Pre-understanding may be defined as a body of assumptions and attitudes which a person brings to the perception and interpretation of reality, or any aspect of it. (Ferguson 1986: 6).

Martin Heidegger (1962: 153) was probably the most important philosopher to highlight the issue of pre-understanding in hermeneutics when he said,

...the most primordial kind of knowing, and we genuinely grasp this possibility only when we have understood that our first, last, and constant task in interpreting is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves.

In other words, Heidegger (1962: 191-192) claimed that interpretation was grounded in preconception, and there could not be any understanding without pre-understanding. We agree that it is the basic and preparatory starting point for understanding, since certain background knowledge and experience are needed to understand a particular text. We certainly do not deny or avoid the influence of pre-understanding in the task of biblical interpretation. The question, however, is whether our pre-understanding has colored our hermeneutical task to such an

extent, that recovering the meaning in the text is impossible, as suggested by the postmodernist. I will address this question in the later part of this chapter. In the next section, I will examine the types of pre-understanding that influence our reading of the text.

3.1.1 Historicity and Pre-understanding

Heidegger (1962: 17-44) in his book, *Being and Time*, was not presenting an epistemic methodology on hermeneutics, but a description of the way hermeneutics operated. There is always the presence of pre-understanding that the interpreter brings with him/her in the hermeneutical process. As a result, Gadamer (1965: 269) warned that the interpreter should guard against introducing “arbitrary fancies” and “imperceptible” habits of thoughts in his/her work although such thinking may not be a conscientious decision. A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting some initial meanings on the text. This happens because the reader has always some particular expectations regarding a certain meaning. For example, in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, (Luke 18:9-14) the modern reader would have no hesitation in identifying the Pharisee as the ‘bad’ guy, synonymous with self righteousness and hypocrisy because of the reader’s pre-understanding. With a bit of research, it is possible to see that the original hearer would understand it differently. The original hearer would have seen the Pharisee as the righteous person instead of the “villain,” and would experienced surprise and consternation at the justification of the tax collector. Therefore, due to pre-understanding, the impact of the parable would be partly lost to the modern reader. Obviously, we cannot avoid the problem of historical distance, that is, we may not be able to share fully the thoughts and feelings of, say, the first readers of St. Paul’s epistles. But this does not mean that the problems of history and hermeneutics are insurmountable. Pannenberg (1970: 164-174) asserted that we could have “probable” historical knowledge, and that it was not unreasonable or illogical to work with this knowledge in hermeneutics.

3.1.2 Philosophy and Pre-understanding

We do not only bring with us our understanding, in terms of time and culture, to the reading of a text, we bring along our philosophical positions as well.

According to Thiselton (1980: 6) one of the best known example is Bultmann's use of existential philosophy in the interpretation of the Apostle Paul's view of man (such as 1Cor 15:44). Bultmann (1955: 192-203) refused to interpret 'body' in substantive terms when Paul clearly meant physical being. Instead, Bultmann concluded that man did not merely have a "body", he is "body," that is, mortality is the essence of man. Bultmann was not alone in using existential philosophy in hermeneutics, other New Testament scholars such as Geraint Vaughan Jones (1964: 167-205) and Dan Otto Via (1967: 113-122) did the same. Via, for example, utilized existential thinking to expound the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30). According to Via, the one talent man acted the way he did out of personal safety, because he was paralyzed by anxiety. He repressed his own sense of guilt and projected it onto his employer. Since he refused responsibility, his responsibility was taken from him. Via concluded that the refusal to take responsibility amounted to unfaithfulness, although the man who retreated from risk merely wanted to provide for his own safety. (Via 1967: 119-120)

As demonstrated above, philosophy plays an important role in hermeneutics. Philosophy tends to help us untie knots in our thinking, and prevents wild conjectures and explanations in our readings. (Wittgenstein 1961: §447-467)

However, not every type of philosophy would provide us with the "best" approach in the understanding of the text.

3.1.3 Theology and Pre-understanding

Bernard Lonergan ((1972: 157) emphasized the importance of pre-understanding, and that we cannot find meaning in the biblical text on the basis of an open or empty mind. This is because what we see when we read a text is

merely a series of signs. These signs will have meanings when mediated by our experience, intelligence, and judgment. The hermeneutical process will be influenced by the theology we bring with us, and will subsequently influence our theology. An example is the liberation theology of Latin America. Theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez and Jose Bonino believed that biblical hermeneutics were influenced by both pre-understanding and praxis. It appears that there is no such thing as neutral theology. Bonino (1975: 90-91) claimed,

The sociology of knowledge makes abundantly clear that we think out of a definite context...out of a given praxis...Why is it, for instance, that the obvious political motifs and undertones in the life of Jesus have remained so hidden to liberal interpreters until very recently?

Many Latin American Theologians quite consciously and explicitly interpret the Bible in terms of pre-understanding, that is influenced by Marxist perspectives. Andrew Kirk (1979: §2.1) stated that Marxist interpretation provided an ideological mechanism, which was capable of exposing the intentions of conservative interpreters and of using the biblical text to defend their pre-revolutionary ideas.

Just as with philosophy, theology tends to help us approach religious texts with clarity, but care is needed to appropriate it, so that we do not make the text conform to our theologies.

3.1.4 Language and Pre-understanding

It is interesting to note that Martin Luther had, over two hundred years ago, emphasized the importance of language and its contribution towards biblical hermeneutics. Luther (1972: 34) asserted,

“ There has never been a great revolution of God’s Word, unless God had first prepared the way by the rise and flourishing of languages and learning...I realize through these studies... people are wonderfully equipped for grasping the sacred truths, as well as for handling them skillfully and successfully.”

However, traditional approaches to languages appear to be limited because they tend not to consider the issues of pre-understanding. This does not mean that the traditional approach does not have a positive role to play in hermeneutics. There is limitation in the sense that the traditional investigations are engaged only with the world of the text. Ebeling (1961: 16) claimed that it was possible to understand all the individual words of the text but still not comprehend the message.

A more serious issue concerning hermeneutics and language is the relationship between language and thought. Ferdinand de Saussure (1983: 67-69) claimed there was no direct correspondence between words and things; there was no intrinsic connection between the signifier and the signified. The entire linguistic system, according to Saussure (1983:117) was founded on the principle that the sign was arbitrary. Saussure (1967: 259) said. "Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others...All words used to express related ideas limit each other reciprocally."

From the hermeneutical perspective, the traditional approaches also tend to concentrate on the language of the ancient text, without considering the interaction between the world of the text and the reader. (Thiselton 1980:117) We need to pay due attention to the text we read on linguistic grounds.

3.1.5 Prejudice and Pre-judgment

Prejudice and pre-judgment, for the purpose of this essay, are interchangeable and indicate that a preliminary judgment has been metered before all the evidence has been assessed. In German legal terminology, the term refers to a provisional legal verdict before the final verdict has been reached. Hence, it is not surprising to note that Gadamer (1965: 240) insisted that prejudice or prejudgment did not have the same negative connotation as what was popularly believed in contemporary usage.

It seems that our prejudice and pre-judgment are influenced by our traditions which in turn shape our values, attitudes and sense of authority. Gadamer claimed that the acceptance of authority may not necessarily be blind or irrational. Tradition is no more a liability in hermeneutics than prejudice, and should be readily identified in the hermeneutical process. (Gadamer 1965: 258)

Gadamer (1965: 263) stated that, “every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text is part of the whole tradition in which the age...seeks to understand itself.” This does not mean, however, that we can accept tradition uncritically. There is still the need to distinguish between those judgments which are helpful from those that are not.

3.1.6 Pre-understanding, Prejudice, and Pre-judgment –a summary

I agree with Heidegger that interpretation is grounded in preconception, and there could not be any understanding without pre-understanding. Our initial hermeneutical conclusions may even be considered prejudiced. However as discussed in the above section, prejudice, or even tradition are not necessarily bad or unwarranted. Our findings may be “tainted” but that does not mean that they cannot yield truths of the external world, although perhaps not “final truths.” The history of New Testament studies reveals that there are various “self checking” mechanisms in our learning system, such as critical reviews by peers, which, though not perfect, help improve our understanding. (Carson 2005:54-76) Therefore, although we may bring our pre-understanding, and prejudice to the text we seek to interpret, this does not mean we cannot recover the meaning the text intends to impart. As long as we are honest, reflective and open to change, and remain faithful to the belief that God would lead us to the truth, we can claim that the intended meaning in the text is able to be found. (Klein 2004: 167)

3.2 Postmodern ‘Hermeneutics’

The importance of pre-understanding in hermeneutics cannot be over emphasized, as interpreting a text will be influenced by the reader's philosophy and cultural-linguistic traditions. What does this mean to postmodern hermeneutics? It appears that the postmodernist brings with him/her, two key categories of pre-understanding when reading a text, viz., philosophy, and language, in the guise of literary criticism. While traditional literary critics have focused on the original author's intention, literary criticism has since progressed to incorporate the author, text and reader in its analysis.(Klein 2004:64) As pointed out by Vanhoozer (1998:25), literary theory relied on the assumptions of philosophy and theology, and in particular, epistemology and ontology. To be sure, literary criticism is not the sole domain of the postmodernist, but it is through literary criticism that most of their radical hermeneutical claims have arisen.

3.2.1 The Author

The attention to the author's intent in the biblical text has been the main activity in traditional Christian hermeneutics. Gordon Fee (2003: 23) stated that the first task of the biblical interpreter was exegesis, which was the careful, systematic study of the Scripture to uncover the original intended meaning. Hence, if the meaning of the text is a simple function of the author's intention, it is quite appropriate for the reader merely to discover this intention, in order to understand the text. This would involve examining the author's biography and socio-economic background in order to assess the historical and political circumstances that are assumed to have influenced what the author wrote. Fee (2003: 23) called this the historical task.

The postmodernist, however, rejects the authority of the author and dismisses "the author's intention" in biblical hermeneutics, as naïve. (Thiselton 1992:473) This is because, according to the postmodernist, it would be a mistake to ascribe the final meaning of the text to the original author. Authorship can be both confusing and ambiguous. Apparently, we cannot be certain about the author's

intentions, and his/her beliefs. In addition, the author may not be conscious of the implications of what she/he has written. Dworkin (1983: 259) gave the example of the judge who made a decision with a clear intention, but upon further reading found that the decision had an aspect that was never anticipated. As a result, it seems impossible to determine the relationship between the author and the text. (Barthes 1977: 142) Northrop Frye's (1963: 59) quote seems to summarise the postmodernist's position regarding the author,

" We have to avoid...the blunder that is called the intentional fallacy in criticism. The question 'what did the author mean by this?' is always illegitimate. First, we can never know; second, there is no reason to suppose that the author knew; third, the question confuses imaginative with discursive writing. The legitimate form of the question is: 'what does the text say?' "

However, even if the intention of the original author seems clear, can this intention be recovered? Derrida raised significant objections to reconstructing the author's intentions. According to Derrida, the task of reconstructing the intention of the author is undermined by the nature of the text, the linguistic sign. We have briefly discussed semiotics when we looked at Saussure's work in the previous section. For the sake of clarity, a brief summary is given as follows: in linguistic theory, words in a text are signs that carry meanings that we give them, and the signs have no intrinsic meanings in themselves. Since the linguistic sign is not stable, iterability seems to be a permanent feature of the sign. When a sign (text) is read in a new context, we are unable to decide with certainty whether the meaning (signification and value) belongs to the original author or to the reader. For example, in Dan 7:13, we have the expression, "the Son of Man coming in the clouds" which is repeated in Mark 13:26. Is the meaning intended by the original author in Daniel, the same as that read by the author in Mark? If different, which intended meaning belongs to Daniel, and which to Mark?

Therefore, according to the postmodernist, "the author's intended meaning" is merely the name we give to the interpretations we like best. We are not reconstructing and recovering the author's intention, we are constructing it! One may argue that the traditional interpreter could check the reconstructions of the author's intention against the past, as historians do, as a form of validation.

However, the postmodernist insists, based on Heidegger's epistemology, that no past reality can be found. As AKM Adam (1995: 21) suggested,

"Once again, as with 'author's intention' so with 'the past', when the traditional interpreter insists that the historical records of the past makes his interpretation of a text the best, he is always only talking about his own interpretation of that historical record."

3.2.2 The Text

The text is traditionally considered as written communication, which the author attempted to convey as a precise message to a targeted audience. Fee (2003: 26) encouraged the reader to learn to read the text carefully, and to ask the right questions, so that we could be more intelligent when reading the Bible. In other words, the text is a knowable content, determined by the author.

The meaning of the text just described, was considered by Derrida as a 'book,' which symbolized determinacy, and that the text had fixed meaning. Derrida (1976: 18) suggested that, "The idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing. It is the encyclopedic protection of theology and of logocentrism against the disruption of writing..."

As the above quote suggests, the idea of the book seems to represent totality, and Derrida viewed the idea of the book as theology because it stabilized, controlled and closed down any variation of meanings. It is interesting to note that the Bible is called the "Book." According to Northrop Frye (1982), the whole realm of literature appears to be a self-contained universe, with the Bible as the "Great Code", that provides the key to its deciphering. The Bible then is considered a "closed" book with eternally fixed meaning, and it provided the framework for the wider unity in Western literature (Vanhoozer 1998: 107).

However, Francis Watson (1993: 3) felt that the Bible was a closed book (with authorized determinate meaning) only because it was assumed by theologians that there could only a single correct interpretation. Rather than a closed book, the postmodernist insists that the Bible should be read as an open text.

The understanding of the text as a form of communication between the author and the reader was first rejected by proponents of structuralism, a precursor of postmodern thinking. According to the structuralist, the text is a series of forms produced by the linguistic system and discursive codes of culture, and not by the author. (Culler 1983: 82) The postmodernist goes further than the structuralist; the postmodernist deconstructs the text, leaving no structures in place, and the text is free of constraint or objective content. The postmodern text is a plural text, so open that it results in an infinite number of interpretations. (Rosenau 1992: 35) Stanley Fish (1980: 16-17) astounded many when he claimed that the reader's interpretation did not conform to the textual intentions, but rather, the textual intentions conformed to the reader's interpretation. Fish's point appears to be an extreme version of the concept of pre-understanding, that is, what we see in the text is what we bring to the text, an effect of our interpretative act.

Many postmodernists follow the approach of Fish (1980), De Man (1986), and Foucault (1979), and adopt a deconstructive approach when dealing with the texts. The approach results in a study of "writing" that is not governed by the traditional linguistic rules of context and semantics. In contrast to a "closed" book, a text is an unending labyrinth of signs that is itself enmeshed in other texts. Reading in the deconstruction mode is not to decode the message, but to enter into the thoughtful play of contradiction, multiple references, and ceaseless questioning of conclusions and responses. Hence, the deconstructive approach abandons the ideal of objective literary knowledge, and instead, affirms that meaning is largely the product of human situatedness.

3.2.3 The Reader

Traditionally, the reader played a passive role in the hermeneutical process, and was almost taken for granted. A reader seemed to be at the receiving end of the complex relationship between the author and the text. His/her objective in reading the text was to reconstruct the author's intentions and the various

historical factors in order to arrive at the meanings in the text. (Hirsch 1967a: 227)

The role of the reader began to change in the seventies, as higher levels of cultural engagement took place, encountering texts in a pro-active manner, rather than passively receiving them. (Abrams 1981: 189)

Eventually the reader “evolved,” and interacted with the text in a phenomenological manner, resulting in a two-sided relationship between the text and the reader. Wolfgang Iser (1978: 288) argued that the text had gaps and in the act of reading, and clarified the ambiguities. Stanley Fish (1980: 13) suggested that the understanding of the text was directly influenced by the reader. However, s/he may not have had the absolute freedom to create meaning in the text, but may have been constrained by the professional community. Nevertheless, the professional community itself is not normative, and its opinion is never the final word. The postmodern reader then assumes full control. With the text empty of any objective content, the postmodern reader could construct meanings, holding the right to any interpretation without the restraint of evidence or the intent of the author. Barthes suggested that the reader should be more concerned with “writing” the text than with getting the text “right.” (Vanhooser 1998: 153)

Hayden White, a postmodernist, claimed that historical writings were totally imaginative constructions; historians did not find past facts, they constructed them. White (1978: 82) put it as;

“This question has to do with the status of this narrative considered purely as a verbal artifact purporting to be a model of structures and processes long past... This is not to say that historians and philosophers of history have failed to take notice of the essentially provisional and contingent nature of historical representations and of their susceptibility to infinite revision in light of new evidence... But in general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in science.”

3.3 The Orthodox Christian Response

Vanhoozer (2005:83-84) in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn* had aptly summarized that the Bible had anticipated many of postmodernism's central claims. We already are aware of the human finitude, as we believe that we are created from the dust of the earth (Gen 2:7) and made a little lower than the angels. (Ps 8:5) Apophatic, dialectic, and analogical theologies acknowledge the inadequacy of the human language, while the plurality of languages had already been associated with the Babel incident which represents the critique of the human vocabulary.

We accept that we bring pre-understanding to our hermeneutical process as a starting point, but the use of pre-understanding need not begin with Heidegger's ontology or existentialism or the skepticism of Derrida's philosophy.

Thiselton (1998: 113) raised an important issue, since different forms of pre-understanding seemed to lead on to such diverse ways of reading the biblical text, we need then, to be aware of starting with the "right" pre-understanding. I suggest that the question ultimately leads us back to epistemology. I will argue in the next section that the response to the postmodern hermeneutic claims is a response to the philosophy of skepticism and relativism.

3.3.1 The Author

The question about the author relates to whether we can meaningfully recover his/her intentions. The objections posed by the postmodernist appear to be based on two main pre-understandings, namely; (i) the hypothesis of the unstable linguistic signs, and (ii) the skeptic's view of historicity.

Regarding literary theory, the postmodernist holds that language is mainly about semiotics, and therefore the unstable nature of signs would render interpretation non-deterministic. Clearly, a hypothesis that views language as merely an arbitrary system of differential signs, would make the recovery of any definitive intentions of an author difficult. But we do not have to accept the postmodernist's literary position. Language is not merely semiotics but semantics as well. The

sentence is more than just the sum of its parts, and has a complexity and uniqueness that cannot be explained by semiotics alone. Ricoeur provided an alternative view to how language functioned. He viewed semiotics and semantics as two different characteristics of language, and the distinction between them was the key to the whole problem of language. (Ricoeur 1976:8) Semantics is the study of sentences, and sentences are not simply products of a language system, but meaningful personal actions such as promises, assertions and commands. While postmodern critics tend to reduce semantics to mere “*langue*” (concept behind the sign), they forget that it is “*parole*” (meaningful utterance) too. J.L. Austin held that the best way to understand the world-word relation was to examine the way we use certain expressions. His main point was that many utterances were performative rather than representative. (Austin 1979; 233-252) Searle (1969; 18) claimed that to understand language, we need to understand the speaker’s intention. Since language is also an indication of intentional behavior, language should be treated like a form of action. Searle referred to such statements as speech acts. A speech act is the basic unit of language used to express meaning, an utterance that expresses an intention. Speech acts can also be a word or sentence as long as the rules necessary to accomplish the intention are followed. When one speaks, one performs an act. Speech is not used merely to represent something; it actually does something. According to Searle (1969: 30), understanding the speaker’s intention is essential to capture the meaning of the text. Without the speaker’s intention, it is impossible to understand the words as a speech act.

Therefore, we reject the postmodernist claims of indeterminacy by asserting the author’s role as an agent for communication, from the speech act theories of Austin and Searle.

We now return to the question of historical verification, that is, checking the reconstructions of the author’s intention against the past just as historians would normally do. While postmodernists such as A.K.M Adams may deny this possibility, the objection is based mainly on epistemic philosophy, and in particular, skepticism. We certainly are entitled to reject such claims. A modernist

Christian's rebuttal against skepticism has been discussed previously in Chapter 1.

We shall provide a brief summary of the modernist Christian's defense for clarity. The postmodernist presupposition is that we have no epistemic access to the real world because the world and our language are so interrelated that we can not differentiate between the real and the linguistically constructed one. We could rebut this hypothesis by appealing to a number of schemes, including analytical philosophy and epistemology. However, in this section, our argument will be based on theology.

We begin with the theological presupposition that there is a God, and God is not a linguistic construction, but a transcendental entity. We claim that God knows and communicates to us objective and universal truths through special revelations. God has "broken" through the so called language barrier to the real world. God is independent of language, and we can know God. In spite of our finitude, we can have at least some epistemic access to the extralinguistic and unconstructed world. This theological argument, used as a logical proposition, is sufficient to undermine the postmodernist position. (Smith 2005: 65)

Hence, we can verify the reconstruction of the author's intent, and therefore the hermeneutical task of discovering the author's intention is valid.

3.3.2 The Text

Is there a meaning in the text? Putting this in another way, can language be taken as having a semantic order, a system of meanings that are not merely inventions of the human mind, but a transcription of the realities of nature. The postmodernist, as previously explained, would answer dissentingly, claiming that meaning within language is not fixed nor validated by anything external to language. But we need not accept such a conclusion, since the postmodernist's assertion is merely based on a particular philosophical presupposition, namely, skepticism.

I will argue for an alternative view or presupposition that provides a closer 'match' to the world of language, and yet does not depend on the traditional referential theory of meaning. Traditional referential theories of meaning define the meaning of the word or phrase in terms of the things (or actions, qualities, relations, etc.) that the word or phrase denotes, and affirms the possibility of objective truth and meaning in the text. This theory has weaknesses that are commonly criticized by both postmodernists and philosophers of language. (Hanna 2003: 17-25)

Just as I have argued for modest foundationalism, I will rely on a modest form of referential theory, which is a composite form of referential theory and 'use' theory. This approach has been proposed by Patricia Hanna (2003), to demonstrate the determinacy of meaning in the text. Referential theorists hold that meaning is introduced into language by association with particular components of the language with elements of non linguistic reality. (Lycan 2000:4). "Use" Theory, as postulated by Ludwig Wittgenstein, holds that meaning is determined by the expression of human social behavior, and such linguistic expressions are like rules or conventions of social practices. (Lycan 2000:98)

According to Hanna (2003), "meaning" is not a straightforward correspondence between language and the world, but a complex relationship through practices. Linguistic expressions acquire meaning through a wide variety of practices. These practices are not a manipulation of signs or human conventions, but comprise actual sensory-perceptive experiences. The meaning in a text is shaped by the content and structure of practices that reflect real things. Hanna (2003: 13) claimed that this approach might be termed "commonsense realism". Hanna's approach seems to allow us access to the external world that is unadulterated by language, because the engagement through practice is pre-linguistic, and asserts the status of the majority of commonplace textual meanings as truths about the world. We accept that we may assign meaning to a text, but our 'meaning making' decision is constrained by the truth-conditions of the world, through our experiences. For example, we may be able to devise names and descriptions of, say, elephants, but it is the "reality" in the world that

determines the elephant's "properties", e.g. whether elephants can or cannot fly. In other words, human conventions may determine the name "elephant" but conventions cannot determine the characteristics of an "elephant" such as its ability to fly. Hence, we know that there is meaning in the text because our text is "controlled" by our cognitive-experience of the world.

We may also appeal to reformed epistemology of Plantinga (1983: 63-91) to argue that meaning in the text is possible and determinable. Plantinga asserted that some beliefs did not require to be supported by evidence. Such beliefs are said to be "properly basic." According to reformed epistemology, a belief p is properly basic for S if p has warrant for S . For a belief to be warranted, the belief must have the following;

- (i) Be produced by properly functioning cognitive faculties; that is, my cognitive media such as eyes, ears, brain etc must not be faulty.
- (ii) The faculties must function in a congenial epistemic environment. We may have perfect vision but the environment such as a hologram chamber may deceive our eyes. Hence, a belief that was formed by deceit is not warranted.
- (iii) The cognitive faculties must work according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth. If our faculties are working properly, but the focus is on something else apart from truth, such as feelings or happiness, then the belief is not aimed on truth, and we question the warrant of the belief held.

Such a belief-system is similar to Thomas Reid's idea of common sense, and the philosophical assumption that common sense could not possibly contradict itself. It is interesting to note that Reid (2002: 25-26), also saw the close tie between the dictates of common sense and the structure of ordinary language. We can apply this approach to the apparent issue of text as follows:

The belief that there is meaning in the text is properly basic, because our cognitive faculties indicate that there is meaning, and we know that not all our faculties can be defective at the same time, hence satisfying the first warrant criteria. When reading a book such as the Bible we are trying to ascertain its epistemic content, not merely aesthetics, and we are functioning in an epistemic environment, thereby satisfying the second criteria of warrant. Finally, from a Christian perspective, God created us to communicate and to understand each other, and hence our “design plan” is to interpret God’s word, which satisfies the third condition. Therefore, it is quite legitimate to believe that the text has meaning, and that it can be determined.

3.3.3 The Reader

If there is meaning in the text, author’s intention is recoverable, and the hermeneutical task of discovering the author’s intention is valid, it follows then that the task of the reader would be to understand the author’s message. However, we tend to see the textual meaning in the light of our pre-understanding. Osborne (2006: 29) asserted that this was not by itself a weakness and that in a sense, we are all “reader-response” interpreters. The problem is, that we should not allow our pre-understanding a free reign, or else we begin reading our own meaning into the text. While pre-understanding is necessary, it needs to be controlled in such a manner as to allow the text to deepen, challenge and even change our established ideas. We reject the radical reader-response critic, who claims that since we cannot escape our own pre-understanding, there is no textual meaning, and hence the role of the reader is merely to play, and to create meaning. (See section 3.2.3) The question remains as to how the reader seeks meaning from the text, without being overly influenced by his/her own pre-understanding. Christian interpreters such as Osborne (2006: 324), Larkin (1988: 302) and Padilla (1979: 63-78) spoke of a hermeneutical spiral as follows:

- (i) We begin with an initial study of the text, and after a while, the text 'enlightens' us and our pre-understanding is modified, becoming somewhat different from what it was before the study.
- (ii) We then question the text further, resulting in new understanding, and perhaps new questions would emerge.
- (iii) The process is repeated and the hermeneutical progress continues in a "spiral" development, getting us closer to the meaning of the text.
- (iv) The meaning of the text itself has not changed, we have merely enhanced the ability to understand it more accurately.

However, the above process does mean that we would progressively converge to a singular meaning accepted by everyone. We acknowledge that the process may result in competing interpretations. However, there are ways to determine which interpretative options are the most likely. One of the ways is appealing to the extra-linguistic world through historical methods. (Klein 2004:167)

In section 3.2.3, we note White's criticism on historical reconstruction and writings. Nevertheless, I believe that White has overstated the case. Historical works may be provisional and subject to revision in the light of new evidence, however, this does not mean that history itself is merely a human invention. N.T Wright (1992:86) asserted that, "history consisted of a spiral of knowledge, a long drawn out process of interaction between the interpreter and the source material." Wright (1992: 86) provided a useful example as follows: when we pick up the telephone and hear a voice, we form a judgment or hypothesis as to the caller's identity. Even when the caller reveals his/her name, we may not readily identify the person, since there are people we know with similar names. We are compelled to go round "a spiral of conversation" which eventually leads to identification. Hence, history proceeds with a sequence of hypothesis and interactive "verifications" which eventually converge to knowledge.

Finally, we, as Christian readers, rely on God in our understanding. We believe that God made us in His own image. Therefore, we have the capacity to

transcend pre-understanding, and evaluate the text and understand its meaning. (Larkin 1988: 299) This does not mean there are no

3.4 Reflection

Postmodern hermeneutics seems to subscribe to the theory that it is a self-deluding myth to believe that it is possible to recover the author's intended meaning in a text. Postmodern critics claim that the philosophical and/or literary system used by the traditional interpreters to read the text, are so tainted by their own pre-understanding and preconceived ideas, that they cannot possibly uncover the "proper" meaning in the text. Some postmodernists even deny that there is such a thing as "proper" or "literal" meaning (Fish 1989: 4). I find that the position held by the postmodernist regarding literary indeterminacy, untenable, because it contradicts common sense and daily experience. If literary indeterminacy is true, then we would have a dysfunctional society, as no one could communicate intelligibly with each other. Structures such as buildings and bridges could not be constructed, as the design specifications could not be deciphered. We would not understand public warning signs such as railway crossings, to the detriment of our safety.

The postmodernist's objections to textual meanings may be summarized as the "argument from non-final objectivity." (Poirier 2000: 255) According to this argument, all historical reconstructions including the process of hermeneutics, are necessarily subjective, hence hermeneutical inquiries are better focused on the text or the reader. The rationale behind this argument appears weak, because it seems to comprise two mutually exclusive premises as follows:

- (i) Hermeneutical reconstructions attempt to be objective.
- (ii) Complete objectivity is impossible.
- (iii) Therefore, hermeneutical reconstructions are illegitimate.

Clearly, the conclusion (iii) does not necessarily follow from the two preceding premises, as the question of the legitimacy of the hermeneutical approach, does not flow from the argument. It is like saying one should not use motor oil, as it is not possible to have a frictionless motor engine. (Poirier 2000: 256) The logical conclusion that we can possibly draw from the above premises (i) and (ii), is the rather modest statement, “therefore hermeneutical reconstructions do not attain the final goal of total objectivity,” but not “hermeneutical reconstructions are illegitimate.”

The Orthodox Christian does not deny the impact of pre-understanding on the reading of the text, but rejects the “indeterminacy of the text” hypothesis. Pre-understanding may result in some variance in interpretation, but does not necessarily lead to polyvalence. The orthodox Christian believes that we can recover intended, not relativistic meaning, based on our epistemologies. N.T Wright (1992: 33-46) suggested critical realism, Osborne (2006: 510) proposed probability theories which are a form of externalism, while Geivett (2005:37-51), advocated modest foundationalism. I have argued for modest foundationalism in Chapter 1, and the argument shall not be repeated here. The main point in this chapter, however, is the belief that meaning is recoverable, regardless of the epistemic approach.

3.5 Critique of Postmodern Methodology

In the remainder of this section, I will investigate the reading strategies of the postmodernist. This will include an analysis of the postmodern reading of a biblical text.

As stated in the previous sections, the postmodernist believes that there is an infinite number of interpretations and meanings in any given text. Because there is no final meaning, the text is a world of plural constructions and all forms of interpretations are of equal interest. (Miller 1977: 447) The postmodernist methodology of reading the text appears to involve deconstruction. A

deconstructive reading of the text seeks to discover its ambivalence, blindness and logocentricity. The basic principles and strategies are as follows:

- (i) Find an exception to a generalization in the text, and push it to the limit so that this generalization appears absurd; use the exception to undermine the general theme.
- (ii) Interpret the arguments in a text being deconstructed, in their most extreme form.
- (iii) Avoid absolute statements in deconstructing a text, but cultivate a sense of intellectual excitement by making statements that are both startling and sensational.
- (iv) Deny the legitimacy of all dichotomies, because there are always a few exceptions to any generalization based on bipolar terms, and these exceptions can be used to undermine the dichotomies.
- (v) Nothing is to be accepted and nothing is to be rejected. It is extremely difficult to criticize a deconstructive argument if no clear viewpoint is expressed.
- (vi) Write so as to permit the greatest number of interpretations possible. Ambiguity and ambivalence are not to be shunned but rather cultivated. Obscurity may protect the analysis from serious scrutiny. The idea is to create a text without finality or completion, one with which the reader can never finish (Ellis 1980: 142-148, Wellberg 1985: 234).

3.5.1 Postmodern reading of Jonah

An example of the postmodernist's reading of the biblical text will be Terry Eagleton's interpretation of the Book of Jonah taken from the "*The Postmodern Bible Reader*" (Jobling 2001). A Marxist, Eagleton has provided some key insights in reader-response criticism, and in particular, the application of deconstruction.

3.5.1.1 Synopsis of Jonah

The Book of Jonah is the fifth book in a series of books called the Minor Prophets. However, in content and form, Jonah resembles the narratives of the historical books in the OT rather than the prophetic books. (Smith 1995)

The theme of the narrative is summarized by Hirsch (1906) as follows:

Chapter 1 Jonah is commanded by Yhwh to prophesy against Nineveh. Hoping to escape from this commission by flight into another country, he goes down to Joppa to take a ship for Tarshish (Tartessus in Spain). Yhwh then sends a terrible storm, and the pious heathen mariners, after all their labors to lighten the ship and all their prayers prove vain, cast lots to find out on whose account this misfortune has come upon them. The lot falls upon Jonah, and upon being questioned he answers that he is a Hebrew and worships Yhwh, the God of Heaven; he admits his guilt and requests that he be thrown into the sea. After having prayed to Yhwh the mariners comply with his wish, and when the storm has subsided they give thanks to Yhwh with sacrifices and vows.

Chapter 2 Yhwh prepares a great fish to swallow Jonah, who remains for three days and three nights in the monster's belly; after having there praised Yhwh, Jonah is cast up by the fish upon the dry land.

Chapter 3 Yhwh's command being repeated, Jonah goes to Nineveh, and announces to the city that it shall be destroyed within forty days. Then all the inhabitants, following the example of the king and the nobles, repent in sackcloth and ashes; even the flocks and herds fast and are covered with sackcloth. Yhwh, repenting of the punishment He had intended for them, permits the Ninevites to go free.

Chapter 4 Yhwh's action displeases Jonah exceedingly; he prays Yhwh to let him die. Yhwh comforts him by preparing a "kikayon" (castor-oil plant?) to spring up

beside his booth, which gives Jonah great pleasure. But Yhwh prepares a worm to smite the plant, so that it withers; with the sun beating upon the head of Jonah causing him to faint; he again begs for death. Yhwh then says that if Jonah is sorry for the gourd, which sprang up of itself in one night, and withered also in one night, how much more must Yhwh feel sorrow for the mighty city which contains more than twelve myriads of innocent people as well as much cattle.

3.5.1.2 Eagleton's Interpretation

Chapter 1 Eagleton (2001: 177-182) began by asking the question, "Why was Jonah so reluctant to go to Nineveh in the first place?" Two possible reasons were speculated from the text, either (i) Jonah was afraid that the people of Nineveh might kill him for bringing bad news or (ii) Jonah felt that it was pointless because he understood God would be too soft to carry out the threat. He loathed to embark on a journey when he knew that, eventually, there was no impending disaster to avert. Eagleton rationalized that it could not be the first reason because Jonah was not afraid of death, since he told the sailors to throw him overboard. The second reason, then, must be the correct one. Eagleton suggested that Jonah foresaw from the outset God's action, and that He would change His mind about the impending judgment on Nineveh.

Why did Jonah willingly allow himself to be thrown overboard? Because Jonah wanted to force God to save him, demonstrating that God is too soft-hearted to punish those who disobey Him. According to Eagleton, Jonah calculated that if God rated him as important enough to be the prophet for Nineveh, then God would preserve his life. In fact, disobeying God was a crafty way of complimenting God, to allow Him to display grace and forgiveness. Fleeing to Tarshish was yet another way of reminding God of His absurd plan.

Chapter 2 Eagleton has very little to say about this passage.

Chapter 3 Jonah resumed his task of playing the prophet and was disgusted that his perfunctory denunciation worked. Disgusted, because Jonah knew that Nineveh's repentance was not because of his own work, but God's doing. Eagleton went on to explain that God did so to save Himself the mess, unpleasantness and damage to His credibility as a good God, as a consequence of having put His threats into practice. What had happened was what Jonah knew would happen. God would have spared the city even if Jonah had stayed home. The only reason Jonah was involved was because God needed an excuse to reverse His decision, and had maneuvered Jonah into providing Him one. Poor Jonah had been stomping around the city proclaiming doom but it did not happen. Eagleton surmised that God's view of a successful prophet is an ineffectual one, one whose warnings failed to materialize. Eagleton went on to say that all good prophets are false prophets, undoing their own utterances in the very act of producing them.

Chapter 4 God's action displeased Jonah exceedingly. Why was Jonah angry? Jonah was furious because he felt that he had been shamelessly used as a pawn in God's self-mystifying game. He was angry with God because he felt that God would have foreseen this outcome and yet He played along, using Jonah as a fall guy to let Himself off the hook of His own soft-bellied liberalism. Jonah wanted to die because he could no longer stand the 'injustice' of the situation. If the disobedience on the scale of Nineveh went cavalierly unpunished, but forgiven instead, then the idea of obedience is meaningless. God's mercy makes a mockery of human effort, which is why Jonah preferred death. Eagleton provided another viewpoint concerning Jonah's depression, something which Paul de Man (1979: 121) spoke of, about the discrepancy between the grammatical and the rhetorical, an aporia, "when we do not know whether we are doing anything or not." What this means is that even if Jonah could console himself by thinking his journey was necessary rather than something farcically redundant, he can never be certain.

Eagleton surmised that the Book of Jonah can be read as calling into question the assumption that a well ordered structure exists in practice, the well-defined, autonomous subject of the “otherness” known as “God.” The distinction made by Jonah between what he knew or did, and what God knew and did, is similar to the contemporary dichotomy between us, as agents and our enabling circumstances. Eagleton then read into the text, political meanings, that the oppressed and the less privileged groups, like Jonah, are victims because of the nature of humanity’s political and historical conditions.

Eagleton ended by accusing God of being a bully, taunting Jonah firstly with the comforts of a shady plant then removing the plant, causing distress, all to show that He was not benevolent, after all. Since He could engage in this insensitive trifling, He could well have destroyed Nineveh.

3.5.1.3 Critique of Eagleton’s Interpretation

It is not difficult to see the Marxist pre-understanding that Eagleton has brought into the reading. To Eagleton, God is the final authority and like most postmodernists, authority is to be questioned and challenged . (Rosenau 1992: 163) In fact post-Marxists tend to see postmodernism as subverting authority and decentering the subject. (Ibid) God’s instructions, like all truth claims are merely the product of power games, manipulating into privileged positions by those whose interests they serve. In the Jonah narrative, Jonah seems to represent the oppressed and the under-privileged, who appear to see things far more clearly and rationally than those in authority. But they cannot get themselves out of their predicament, because they are powerless and trapped in their social and political conditions.

In typical radical reader-response fashion, Eagleton deconstructs the Jonah text in such a way that it now reads;

- (i) Jonah is the plebeian, tragic hero, while God is the authoritarian bully.
- (ii) Jonah has every right to flee from God and be angry.

- (iii) His anger is due to his frustration with an authoritarian that seems unable to make firm decisions, but readily changes his mind at the expense of Jonah.
- (iv) The key message is that we live in a world in which we can never know for certain, the consequences of our actions.

Orthodox Christians believe that God intended the biblical text to function not as a mirror reflecting the readers' expressions and meanings, but a window to the "real" world, and meanings of the authors and the text they produced.

A radical reader-response critic like Eagleton would appear to have completely missed the author's intended message in the Book of Jonah which is:

- (i) God's love and concern is for all people, and anyone who is willing to repent and turn to God can find mercy and forgiveness.
- (ii) God's ultimate concern for life and the "bigger picture" is shown in contrast to the concern of man for the material and selfish wellbeing.
- (iii) The priority of mercy and grace over justice, for if God demanded justice on all humanity, who can be delivered?

It seems that the mistake of applying literary theory such as radical reader-response criticism to biblical text, *wholesale*, lies in the tendency of such theories to undervalue or even reject, as this example demonstrates, the transmissive functions of the text as a media of communication.

It is interesting to note that Blomberg (1990:158), claimed, sooner or later most reader-response critics would back away from a fully reader-centered hermeneutic, and insist that every valid interpretation should adhere to specific coherence criteria that fits various details of the text. Even Stanley Fish (1980: 370), a prominent reader-response critic, admitted that no one would readily agree with radical reader-response theory. It is not difficult to see the reason for this as the example of Eagleton's interpretation demonstrates that the original

text has virtually been “re-written” by the reader. Why bother to read the text if we only wish to project our ideas into the text, and gag the author?

But how did we arrive at the author’s intended message as indicated above?

Firstly, we affirm our pre-understanding and assumption that Scripture contains God’s word and the goal of the reader is to discover the author’s meaning. Our belief is based on reformed epistemology and speech act theories. (Sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2) Next, we apply a hermeneutical strategy, the “hermeneutical spiral,” an interactive process between the text and the reader’s pre-understanding, converging to a most likely interpretation (Section 3.3.3). Finally, we verify our interpretation, not by absolute terms, but by the “most probable” criterion of Hirsch (1967: 235-244) which include:

- (i) Adherence to the norms of the language in which it was written.
- (ii) Account for each linguistic component in the text.
- (iii) Follow the conventions for its literary genre.
- (iv) Coherence; it must make sense to the overall story of the text.

3.6 Summary

Epistemology is closely related to hermeneutics, because how we approach hermeneutics depends on the pre-understanding and presuppositions we hold, which are in themselves, epistemic in nature. One may adopt a certain epistemic stance and proceed to interpret through that grid. For example, Bultmann had argued from existentialism, that the biblical texts have meaning only when we engage in the text. (Thiselton 1980: 191) However, just as there are many competing theories on knowledge, there is a variety of pre-understanding, of which not all are equally useful for the purpose of interpreting the biblical texts. I have argued that the postmodernist’s pre-understanding, especially his/her epistemology tends to result in the reading of Scripture that is confusing, and subverts the Christian message.

The postmodernist approach to hermeneutics appears to be based on radical reader-response theory, where the reader has priority over the author, and without any controlling influence from the text. In addition, they tend to suggest that there is no objective message conveyed by the biblical text. Hence, any reading is equally valid and legitimate. I reject this hypothesis because such an approach appears to lead to subjectivism and relativism. Since every interpretation, according to the postmodernist, is equally valid, even if they may be diametrically opposite, the conclusion will lead to *reduction ad absurdum*.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE POSTMODERN TURN

A CRITIQUE OF POSTMODERN EPISTEMOLOGY

Chapter 4

“Christianity has declared itself to be the eternal essential truth which has come into being in time. It has proclaimed itself as the Paradox, and it has required of the individual the inwardness of faith.”

Soren Kierkegaard
Concluding Unscientific Postscript

Merold Westphal (2005; 151) defending Christian postmodernism, admitted that postmodernists are perspectivists. However, according to Westphal, perspectivism is not relativism in the sense that all views are equally valid. However, he claimed that our insights are relative to the standpoint or pre-understanding we hold, hence, in this sense, perspectivism is relativism. To the allegation that the postmodernist has no answer to those who remarked that, “That’s just your opinion,” or “Different strokes for different folks,” Westphal (2003: 7) did not seem to have an adequate response, and appeared to accept that fate. It should be noted that he did assert that he was not suggesting that “we swallow postmodern philosophy hook, line, and Derrida”, but to apply postmodern ideas so that we understand our limitations due to our finitude and fallenness. But, do we have to accept postmodern philosophy to understand our limitations? Douglas Groothuis (2003) argued that the errors of postmodernism outweighed whatever wisdom it possessed.

In this chapter, I will summarize the key postmodern epistemic themes, and my argument that a theology that correlates with postmodernist philosophy deviates from orthodox belief. Instead of providing intellectual support for Christian doctrines, the work of postmodernists undermines the orthodox Christian worldview in the areas of knowledge, truth and textual meaning.

4.1 Epistemology

We have been told repeatedly by postmodernists that modernism/Enlightenment is all bad especially its epistemology. Blanchard (2000: 200) stated,

“Unlike Enlightenment-based modernism, which sees history as rooted in meaning, postmodernism rejects both. For the postmodern man there is no past and no future, there is only a perpetual and dominant present. Nor are there any foundations, fixed certainties or absolutes. Postmodernism utterly rejects the whole idea of a rational cohesive package.”

So what is wrong with the modernist’s epistemology?

I have argued in Chapter 1 that the modernist’s epistemology (in particular, Logical Positivism) is based on classical foundationalism, an epistemic position that claims that a belief system must be supported by evidence. Not any type of evidence, but evidence that must be certain and indubitable. There are two sources that they appeal to, namely;

- (i) Empiricism- a method that depends on cognitive-perception, and derives from information that has been collected under rigid conditions, variables that are operationally defined, and data that is quantifiable.
- (ii) Rationality- a thought process based on clear and coherent ideas that follow through from commonly accepted rules of logic.(Uebel 2006: §2.3)

The modernist’s epistemology also holds the following three core assumptions:

- (i) Reductionism – a process whereby a complex phenomenon can be understood by reducing it to its smallest and most fundamental parts. Once these parts are objectively established, the understanding of the whole can be ascertained.

- (ii) Linear causality- the cause and effect in a phenomenon investigated is assumed to behave in a linear relationship
- (iii) Neutral objectivity- the epistemic process that employs empiricism and rationality would discover a real and objective world that is neutral and independent of the knower/observer. (Jones 2000: 46-47)

The postmodernist criticism is leveled at the modernist's empiricism, rationality and all its assumptions as follows:

- (i) The knower and the known are not independent of each other, because the knower brings with her/him pre-understanding to the known. Not all inquiries are value-free and neutral. This relationship between the knower and the known is the key concept behind Heidegger's philosophy.
- (ii) As a result, time and context-free generalizations are not possible. Rather than there being an independent cause preceding an effect, cause and effect mutually shape each other. It is therefore impossible to distinguish between them.
- (iii) Realities then are merely human constructs, temporary hypotheses that change with time, and are pluralistic. No one can claim his/her hypothesis is correct as all are equally valid. (See Chapter 1)

What then is the postmodernist's model of epistemology?

It appears that there is none! Epistemology is seen as a linguistic convention, and hence the theory of knowledge is reduced to hermeneutics. Since language, according to the postmodernist is the only reality we know, then reality is merely a linguistic habit. Postmodernists such as Stanley Fish (1989: 34) hold that knowledge claims, and therefore, epistemology are intelligible only within the context of a particular community. Knowledge is the result of an agreement among the professionals within the community as a result of social processes that are accepted as the norm.

If the above claims are correct, what is the impact on the traditional understanding of epistemology?

Based on the argument by Keith DeRose, I have demonstrated that the above claims would either lead to absurdity (wild claims) or a form of epistemic skepticism. (DeRose 2005) Epistemic skepticism is the hypothetical claim that we cannot be certain whether we know, via the argument arising from either “indistinguishability” or “paucity of evidence.” We do not have to accept epistemic skepticism. I have argued against the skeptic’s position, applying Moore’s and Davidson’s ideas. In fact, we know that the skeptic is wrong because if we do not know that, we do not know anything else, which is not possible. (Pollock 1999: 10) Hence, we reject the postmodern claim that there is no absolute and objective truth, and the best we can do is to adhere to some form of perspectivism.

Is the modernist’s epistemology faultless then?

No, the postmodernist may have overstated the problem of epistemic indeterminacy but that does not mean we should necessarily accept the modernist approach. The issue orthodox Christians have with the modernist is not about the epistemic access to the external world (realism) but the demand for certain and indubitable evidence (classical or strong foundationalism). The problem with indubitable evidence is that the overly strict standards are too limiting and are self referentially incoherent. (Clarke 2003: 156) For example, the role of memory as a source of knowledge would be difficult to justify under classical foundationalism. (Pollock 1999: 19) It is not possible to provide indubitable evidence that I had met a friend this morning, but I do know (memory beliefs) that it is the case.

I have argued for the Christian modernist approach, which is often referred to as modest foundationalism. In this approach, we reject the postmodernist hypothesis of epistemic indeterminacy and avoid the incoherency of the modernist's foundationalism. Modest foundationalism has the following characteristics:

- (i) The approach affirms a distinction between basic and non-basic beliefs. Basic beliefs are beliefs that do not require evidence, they need merely to be warranted (see Chapter 3). Non basic beliefs can then be supported or inferred from basic beliefs.
- (ii) Unlike classical foundationalism, modest foundationalism accepts as warranted many basic beliefs formed through normally reliable knowledge-forming processes, but fail to meet the rigid demands of certainty or incorrigibility.
- (iii) Modest foundationalism allows a basic belief to be defeasible, that is, an initial idea, which was taken as basic, may turn out to be untenable. In other words, the evidence that support a non-inferential hypothesis need not be incorrigible, merely highly probable, based on the balance of evidences.
- (iv) If a hypothesis that is justified *prima facie* turns out to contradict other well supported hypothesis, then these hypotheses act as defeaters that rebut the initial belief. (Clarke 2003:161-163)

I have demonstrated that the Christian modernist approach based on modest foundationalism is the preferred approach for orthodox Christian. It supports the truth claims of the Gospel as we know it, especially the universal statements about Christology that transcend linguistic conventions, community and local ethnocentric interests. We do not need to provide indubitable claims for our beliefs as demanded by traditional modernists nor do we need to accept the skeptical perspectivism of the postmodernist.

Is there something we can learn from the postmodernist?

We are reminded by John Franke (2005: 111) that because of the limitations and finitude of human nature, our beliefs and epistemology are not immune from criticism. We should welcome and celebrate the fact that all our truth claims could be subject to scrutiny but this does not mean we cannot maintain our convictions and vigorously defend them. After all, the Apostle Peter encouraged Christians to be prepared to give an account of their faith. (1Peter 3:15) We should also be prepared to modify our hypothesis if other hypotheses indicate that the initial beliefs are deficient.

We are also reminded by Heidegger in *Being and Time* that our pre-understanding has an influence on our epistemic processes and methods. While there is a need to recognize the pre-understanding we bring to our analysis, we do not need to treat it as a liability. When controlled, pre-understanding is useful as a tool to commence the building of an epistemic concept which could then be tested to refine our thinking. The process will be summarized when we discuss hermeneutics in the later sections of this chapter.

4.2 Theology

Theologians such as Nancey Murphy and Brad Kallemborg claimed that contemporary theology had moved to postmodernism because the “old” modernists’ philosophical theories and programs had succumbed to difficulties that cannot be resolved. (Murphy 2003: 41) Murphy (Ibid) further asserted that, “When a new picture is offered, it not only provides an alternative and fresh set of resources, but also shows why the older program failed...” Similarly, Dan Stiver (2003: 170) stated that postmodernism was a result of the failure by modernity to build a methodology or prolegomena based on some secure foundation. Hence, postmodern theology is a method of doing theology based on non-foundational or non-modernist’s epistemology. The theology, although postmodern, may not necessarily adhere to skepticism or the more common

postmodernist's position of epistemic indeterminacy as discussed in section 4.1. Franke (2005: 118) spoke of the end of foundationalism for non-modernist theological methods but not "foundations." Such "foundations" may still be grounded in scripture, tradition etc although they are not absolute.

However, is postmodern theology a viable alternative to traditional orthodox thinking?

I have described and critiqued three postmodern theologies or typologies and their main epistemic assumptions in Chapter 2. The claims that these alternative non-foundational methods would provide a more faithful Christian witness to the world at large are not convincing. The three theologies examined are; postliberal, deconstructive, and reconstructive, which I believe are good representatives of postmodern theologies.

4.2.1 Postliberal Theology

Postliberal theologians such as George Lindbeck (1984: 7-16) are dissatisfied with the traditional approaches to theology which, according to Lindbeck, relied on modernist foundationalism, existentialism or a combination of both. The postliberal alternative approach, commonly termed the cultural-linguistic method, has the following characteristics;

- (i) Scripture should not be read as a series of propositional truths and reality, but rather as a book containing moral lessons. Reading the Bible can open up possibilities for re-orientating human experience, hence it is "true" in this sense.
- (ii) Christian doctrine is not a collection of true propositions but a language or culture within which the believers characterize the truth, therefore the truth, is but a social or cultural construct
- (iii) Christian truth-claims are merely rules or regulations that govern Christian speech and life, hence they are highly contextual.

Has the postliberal's alternative approach, based on cultural-linguistic method and rule theory, provided a "better" model for Christian beliefs than traditional modernistic ones?

I have argued that the postliberal theological alternative is far from being a viable successor to the traditional approach, instead the Christian believer adopting postliberal theology would be left wondering whether key tenets such as the resurrection of Jesus is a historical fact or just a community cultural-linguistic convention. Other areas of contention include:

- (i) The truth question and the reluctance of postliberals to state clearly their position in the epistemological realism-antirealism debate.
- (ii) The uncertainty of whether the authority of scripture resides with the text itself or the understanding of the principal community of believers over time. If the latter, the ambiguity of deciding which Christian community should be the final arbiter of "truth" when there are competing views.

It appears, therefore, that the postliberal theological method, when adopting postmodern concepts, has arrived at a similar result as postmodernism, that is relativism.

4.2.2 Deconstruction Theology

Theologians associated with the "death of god movement" are probably the earliest to adopt deconstruction theory in their theological approach. (Ward 2003: 76) Others, such as John Caputo and William Johnson, began to pursue the same course. The assumptions and pre-understanding that these theologians hold include:

- (i) It is a mistake to view the 'reality' of God through the lens of philosophical theology, commonly known as onto-theology or simply metaphysics.
- (ii) Instead, theology is related to Derrida's concept of the linguistic sign. In other words, we could only understand God in terms of a finite model, and the model is human language.
- (iii) Deconstruction is a process that is useful for the theological task, since it facilitates an understanding of the human condition and our finite knowledge of God. Through the paradoxes of negative theology such as the "death of god" philosophy, the investigation of our theological models and analogies can reveal gaps in our understanding.

The resulting theology can vary greatly, as expected, since pluralism is encouraged in the deconstructive process. According to the death-of-god theologian, the usual relationship between faith and love, theology and ethics, God and humanity is reversed. We are not proceeding from God and faith to neighborly love. We love our neighbor out of a sense of the loss of God. We set aside this sense of loss or death, and accept the secular world as normative intellectually and ethically good.

Others who have adopted deconstruction in their theology such as John Caputo appear to understand God as an entity without absolute control, and unable to physically or metaphysically intervene in nature. (Caputo 2006:39) In addition, the traditional beliefs in supernatural events are considered irrelevant and what matters are the impacts on the communities' experience. For example, the miracle of Lazarus' resurrection is not significant as compared with the future hope Mary and Martha experienced through Jesus. (Caputo 2006: 118)

I have argued that the underlying assumptions and philosophy that support deconstruction theology are Derrida's methodology. I have shown the difficulties in engaging Derrida as a conversational partner. The difficulties include:

- (i) The endless deferral of meaning which results in the absurd world view that we will never know the truth.
- (ii) Since a transcendental signifier does not exist, there is no such thing as normative and universal truth.
- (iii) The end result of the deconstruction process leads to nihilism.

If Derrida's deconstructive process is problematic to theology, then it follows that deconstruction theology itself which is undergirded by Derrida's hypothesis, would also be problematic.

4.2.3 Reconstructive (Process) Theology

Unlike postliberal and deconstruction theologies, reconstructive or process theology does not directly rely on the philosophies of Nietzsche, Heidegger or Derrida. It appears that process theology is considered postmodern because its epistemology is not based on foundationalism. Process theology claims to be postmodern because its characteristics share many similar traits with "traditional" postmodern thinking such as the rejection of the modernist's viewpoints on metaphysics, universal truths, and objective knowledge. The process theologian's pre-understanding and assumptions include:

- (i) Whiteheadian philosophy, which proposes the notion that "reality" or the external world is a continuing process, and an occasion of experience. Our perception of an object, though it seems concrete to us, is actually successions or series of experiences.
- (ii) A metaphysics that sees process as constituting an essential aspect of everything that exists. Reality is not just sustained by an on-going process but the on-going process shape reality, giving it a temporal dimension.

The resulting theology describes god as panentheistic, he contains the universe but is not identical with it. God interacts with the changing universe and is himself changeable, hence he is not immutable. However, there is an aspect of god that is unchanging and to reconcile this apparent contradiction, the process theologian introduces the concept of “dipolar theism.”

I have argued that a serious deficiency in process theology is the notion of God as not being distinct entity. God has become a process not a person. As a result, the traditional understanding of the key tenets of Christianity such as the resurrection, immortality, the personality of Christ and the Holy Spirit appear subverted in process theology. This is because orthodox Christians believe that an event such as the resurrection is a historical event involving a real entity, a real person, Jesus, and not merely a process. The understanding of Scripture has been read through the grid of process philosophy. When the resulting conclusion is compared and “tested” against orthodox Christianity and traditional Christian experience, process theology is found to be wanting.

4.3 Hermeneutics

While orthodox Christians believe that their epistemology is related to the Bible and hence hermeneutics, the postmodernist goes further to claim that there is only linguistic access to reality and the external world. We have heard Jacques Derrida saying, “There is nothing outside the text.” (Derrida 1976: 158) This means that our epistemology is linguistically constructed, that is, knowledge is merely a cultural and social convention. According to the postmodernist, it makes little sense to inquire about truth beyond the text. This is because every linguistic structure is deconstructible, and language itself is merely a set of arbitrary signs. Central to postmodern thinking is the notion of linguistic and textual conditions. Therefore, it is no surprise that the whole idea of epistemology has been reduced by postmodernists to interpretations.

Pre-understanding is a vital ingredient in hermeneutics as interpreting the text will be influenced by the reader's philosophy and cultural-linguistic traditions.

Heidegger had emphasized that there could not be any understanding without pre-understanding. I have argued that it is the pre-understanding of the postmodernist that has resulted in radical claims and this leads to relativism and eventual nihilism. The postmodernist's pre-understanding and assumptions are:

- (i) Philosophy based on the ontology of Nietzsche and Heidegger where knowledge could be discovered by the knower only through his/her experience with the known. As a result, knowledge is culturally and traditionally situated.
- (ii) Literary criticism which relied on the deconstruction methodology of Derrida.

The resulting postmodern hermeneutics would have the following characteristics:

- (i) Demise of the author- It is not possible to recover the intentions of the author because of our pre-understanding and the unstable nature of the text (the linguistic signs). All we have are plural interpretations of the text.
- (ii) Freeing the text- Instead of viewing the text as author-intended written communication, the text is regarded as free of constraints and objective content. Thus the text is open to any form of interpretations. When examining a text, the focus is not on what the text says but what it fails to reveal, through deconstruction.
- (iii) Privileging the reader-It is considered that textual meaning originates not from the author but the reader. In typical radical reader response criticism, the meaning of the text is almost entirely the product of the individual reader. Meaning, like beauty, is in the eyes of the beholder.

I have shown why I have rejected the above postmodern viewpoint on hermeneutics, and defended the orthodox view that we can recover meaning from the author.

Firstly, we do not have to accept the postmodern philosophical pre-understanding based on Nietzsche and Heidegger. While we accept that the knower is interrelated to the known, this does not necessary mean that we are trapped in a vicious circle between the knower and the known. I have argued that it is possible to transcend this impasse, that is, we can distinguish between the subjective and the objective. Our belief is based on the analytical- philosophical response to postmodern skepticism, which includes a modest form of referential theory. We also appeal to the classical theistic belief that God can and has helped us break through the barrier of human situatedness to the external world.

Secondly, we reject the conclusions of postmodern literary theories, particularly, the “indeterminacy of meaning.” We claim that the author’s intention can be recovered because language does not merely consist of signs but speech acts. We based our claims on the speech act theories of Austin and Searle, linguistic-praxis hypothesis, and reformed epistemology.

Hence, we believe that:

- (i) The author’s intention is recoverable because we believe that the role of the author is communication, and we can understand the specific message the author intends to convey. We can also verify our reconstruction of the author’s intention through historical means.
- (ii) The text is not as arbitrary as the postmodernist would want us to believe. The meaning is fixed not by human convention but by our cognitive experience of the external world. A good example is the effects of gravity. There is no pluralistic interpretation to the effects of gravity when one walks out of a tall building.
- (iii) The reader’s task is to recover the meaning of the author and not impose his/her own understanding into the text. While we accept that

the reader's pre-understanding may influence the reading initially, the hermeneutics could be carried out in a controlled manner. The interaction between the reader and the text is an iterative process, it is like a spiral, where each successive reading gets us closer to the author's message.

4.4 Conclusion

I have presented in my thesis, the issues posed by postmodern epistemology, and the possible responses from orthodox Christian theologies. Using Penner's book, the "*Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*" as a "spring board" to launch the discussion, I have argued that:

The postmodernist philosophy of epistemological indeterminacy is unconvincing, and is merely another form of skepticism. Its epistemology is based largely on the works of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida. The central postmodern theme is that humans have no epistemic access to the external world because of their finitude, commonly termed the human situatedness. However, orthodox Christians believe that the Bible narrative of creation and eschatology relates to universal world history and the truth claims of the Gospels, in particular, Christology, transcend ethnicity, gender, culture and politics. Orthodox Christian's truth-claims relate to universals and operate outside mere prior interest communities or local ethnocentric interests. The approach based on modest foundationalism is the preferred method and a response to the postmodernist's claims that (i) truth is merely a human convention, (ii) the denial of absolute truth and (iii) we merely end up with a multitude or plurality of "truths."

Postmodern thinking may highlight and make one fully aware of his/her presuppositions and belief systems and Christians may learn and benefit from the postmodern criticisms of the Modern philosophical framework. However, postmodernism is inadequate as a philosophical framework for orthodox Christian theology and cannot be adopted without radically changing the ethos of

orthodoxy. It appears that the postmodern philosophies adopted by postliberal, deconstructive, and reconstructive theologies have resulted in epistemologies that deny the reality of God as traditionally understood, and/or lead to nihilism. According to the postliberal, the biblical text is subject to humanly constructed cultural linguistic rules, the deconstructive theologian, agnostic mysticism, and the reconstructive theologian, exoteric metaphysics. The aim of Christian thinking is the ability to participate in the reality and wisdom of God reflected in the life of Jesus Christ, and these postmodern theologies do not seem to offer a viable alternative to orthodox Christian theology.

Postmodern hermeneutics, which is largely based on deconstructionism in literary criticism and language games, may make a text interesting reading, but it does not communicate the meaning intended by the author. Postmodern hermeneutics seems to subscribe to the notion that it is a self-deluding myth to believe that it is possible to recover the author's intended meaning. The concept of literary indeterminacy is untenable because it contradicts common sense and daily experience. If literary indeterminacy is true, no one could communicate intelligibly with each other. Postmodernism may deny textual meaning, but the orthodox Christian believes otherwise. This is because the communicative agent in the text implies that objective meaning is possible. In addition, the biblical text contains objective knowledge that is relevant to the reader, and we can recover the meaning through a variety of methodologies, including critical realism and modest foundationalism. Reading the Bible through the grid of postmodern reader-response methodology seems to result in a situation where, "all the people did what was right in their own eyes." (Judg. 17:6) Textual pluralism would eventually lead to relativism and nihilism.

Myron Penner (2005:29) when summing up the debate in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn* stated that the crux of the matter was the concept of truth, and whether Christianity could be said to be true in a meaningful way after making the postmodern turn. Penner's (2005:30) concern was that the postmodern turn tends to move towards subjectivity, which "empties Christianity of the possibility

of asserting anything as true.” Penner (Ibid) had also correctly pointed out that the challenge for Christians adopting postmodernism was not to allow false and un-Christian philosophical methods to dictate Christian belief and thinking. More importantly, can the postmodern Christian establish a coherent concept of normality for establishing the Christian identity, and a legitimate basis for proclaiming Christ? I think not.

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