I. BEYOND MODERNISM

Postmodernism, I said in the Introduction, is a world-view. It therefore affects us all, for such is the nature of world-views. Some authors refer to them as 'climates of opinion,' and that is an apt description. For world-views are like a climate in the sense that they have an effect on us whether we like it or not. We can never fully escape their influence.

We can, however, take measures to protect ourselves against inclement weather. The same thing applies with respect to world-views. The first thing to do, when seeking protection against them, is to get to know these world-views as well as we can. In other words (and to switch our metaphor) it is to learn about the spirits that are abroad in one's days. In the process of doing so we can learn to evaluate these spirits and decide what our response must be. To discern and test the spirit of postmodernism is what we will be concerned with in these lectures.

1. From modernism to postmodernism

Perhaps the best way to begin is by saying something about changes in history. In the historical process one period or age follows another. We read about such successions in the book of Daniel. In chapter 2, for example, we are told about Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the great statue. Daniel explains that dream to mean that Nebuchadnezzar's Neo-Babylonian empire will be replaced by the Persian empire under Cyrus, that Persia will be overrun by Alexander the Great, and that Alexander's empire in its turn will be overthrown by Rome. In this case historical periods succeeded each other because of conquest.

Historical periods can also follow each other without military conquest. This happened in our own civilization, the European or western one. Our civilization started around A.D. 500, with the fall of Rome, and it has lasted until now. No foreign power ever conquered the West; yet there are distinct periods in its history. To mention the most important ones: there was the period of the Middle Ages, which lasted from about 500 to about 1500; then came the modern period, which stretched from the sixteenth or seventeenth century into our own times; and now we are entering the postmodern age. Although our concern in these lectures is with the postmodern period, attention will have to be given to the modern

one as well. We have to look at the nature of modernism and answer the question why the modern world-view is in the process of being replaced by the postmodern one.

The Modern Age

The modern period began, according to many historians, around 1500.[1] One of the important changes taking place in its beginning phase was the rise of modern science. This happened not long after the Protestant Reformation, and in the early modern period Western Europe was still predominantly Christian. The rise of science, combined with various other developments, however, would have a secularizing effect. Whereas the Middle Ages could, with certain qualifications, be called an Age of Faith, the modern age became known as the Age of Reason. It was increasingly secular and humanistic.

It was also increasingly cosmopolitan, and this, too, contributed to the advance of secularism. The voyages of discovery opened up the world to European travellers and acquainted them with civilizations, religions, and customs quite different from their own. The idea that western traditions were necessarily superior to those of other peoples was now being questioned. Especially in the eighteenth century, radical critics loved to compare foreign customs and traditions to European ones and pronounce the former superior.

This questioning of the West's own beliefs and customs and the exaltation of their foreign counterparts did not, under modernism, lead to a western inferiority complex. The modern age was an optimistic one, and for good reasons, for progress was substantial and rapid. Manufacturing flourished, trade and commerce increased, and capitalism took a firm hold. Instead of the class-system of the Middle Ages, liberalism arose, and then democracy. The West became wealthy and developed into an imperial power of global dimensions, for its admiration of foreign cultures did not prevent it from attempting to subjugate these cultures. Europe colonized many parts of the world and dominated much of the rest, both politically and economically.

Indeed, things were going so well for the West that the so-called 'idea of progress' arose. This was the belief that, thanks to the application of human reason, all the evils of life could be overcome. The modern world-view, in brief, was secular, humanistic, optimistic, and progres-

sive. And the faith in progress was built, primarily, on the accomplishments of science and technology, on the prosperity and dominant global position of Europe, and on the belief that human reason could, given time, solve every problem humanity faced.

The arrival of postmodernism

The faith in progress lasted for a number of centuries, but eventually the bubble burst. The problems began already in the nineteenth century, but to most people they did not really become apparent until the twentieth. Among the reasons for the disillusionment in that century were the two world wars and the cold war, the rise of totalitarian systems, and the fact that practically all the colonies rebelled against their European masters and declared their independence. The white man ceased to dominate the earth. Equally important was the realization that science, which had been the pride of the modern era, was capable not just of much good, but also of great evil. It made possible destructive military technology, including the nuclear bomb; it caused air, water, and soil pollution; it led to the destruction of the world's forests and water supplies and to the exhaustion of other natural resources; and, with the discovery of the DNA molecule, it opened the possibility of genetic engineering.

But the change in world-view was not simply the result of an array of disasters and threats. Innovations played a role as well. The modern age, for example, was the age of the nation state, but postmodernism stresses globalism. Also, the modern age was pre-eminently an industrial age; the postmodern period is moving toward a post-industrial economy. These developments are in large part the result of important technological developments. If the modern age was the age of print, of gunpowder and the steamship, of overseas exploration, of the factory, electricity and the internal combustion engine, the postmodern one is the age of the image, of nuclear power, of space exploration, electronics, the computer, and an information and service economy.

Technological advances in our century have been phenomenal. The important thing to note, however, is that whereas in the modern age developments in science and technology gave rise to an increased confidence in humanity and in human reason, such is not the case in our times. In our age, it seems, the political and environmental disasters have been too great for a feeling of triumphalism to arise. Furthermore, developments have taken place in mathematics and science, and also in other

areas of knowledge, which convinced people that the powers of human reason are limited; that, contrary to the conviction of modernism, it cannot discover final truths about life and nature. In short, in our century people lost their faith in progress. They began to question the optimistic world-view of modernism and they patched together, in course of time, an alternate and far more pessimistic way of looking at life and the world. That alternate way became known as the postmodern one.

In switching to a new world-view postmodernists are, like their modern counterparts, influenced by non-western traditions, which reach them from all corners of the world. Indeed, an important cause of the cultural changes of our days is the process of globalization. Far more so than in the eighteenth century, the world's peoples are becoming interdependent. This is the outcome of a variety of political and economic developments and is being accelerated by revolutions in transportation and communication. In today's global village not just our intellectual leaders, but practically all of us get acquainted at first hand with people of different cultures and faiths.

The result is, also today, a depreciation of the West's traditional values — a process that is now intensified by the loss of nerve in the western world. Western traditions are rejected wholesale in favour of non-western ones, or else western and non-western traditions exist together, providing postmoderns with an infinitude of often conflicting ideas, values, and lifestyles, from which they are free to choose what pleases them. Here we have an explanation of the relativism and the loss of meaning which so strongly characterize postmodernism.

As the foregoing should have made clear, the changes from modernism to postmodernism have not been sudden, nor did they all take place at the same time. We are dealing with a process, one that has been going on for several decades. As I said, one can trace some of the roots of postmodernism as far back as the previous century. But while many of our society's *thinkers* may have rejected the ideals and beliefs of modernism at an early stage, it took time for their ideas to seep through to the public at large. That process has accelerated in the second half of the twentieth century, but it remains difficult to say precisely when, among the general public, modernist ideas and attitudes began to be replaced by postmodernist ones. Most people choose a date in the post-war period, somewhere in the 1960s or 1970s, and that is probably close enough. But we must remember that there were postmodernist trends long before that

time. Furthermore, there continue to be many modernist ones today. We are in a period of transition.

What is the relationship between the two world-views? It is a complex one, for while postmodernism is strongly opposed to modernism, it is not in every respect its opposite. On the one hand it is the culmination of modernism, and some people even call it hyper-modernism. It builds on modernism's ideas and in many cases it draws out their logical conclusions. It has taken over, for example, modernism's religious scepticism and its rejection of Christianity. But postmodernism must, on the other hand, also be seen as a *reaction* to the older world-view. It strongly rejects modernism's trust in science and in human reason. Postmodernism does not believe in truth and has given up the faith in automatic progress. Modernism, it says, promised far more than it delivered. Worse, in attempting to fulfil these promises it has resorted to policies of oppression and destructiveness on an unprecedented scale.

In short, modernism has failed, it is bankrupt, and if mankind and nature are to survive, modern traditions and belief systems must be replaced by different ones. We will have occasion to notice both aspects in our account of the relationship between the two world-views.

2. Some characteristics of postmodernism

We have established an approximate date for the beginning of postmodernism and given some of the reasons why it arose, paying special attention to political, military, and environmental disasters, and the rise of new technologies. We will now look at some other characteristics of postmodernism, compare them to modernist ones, and then, in the final section of this lecture, attempt to explain and evaluate them. For this lecture I have chosen the following three characteristics: postmodernism's brand of humanitarianism; its rejection of western culture; and its attitude toward nature.

(1) Postmodernism's brand of humanitarianism

When dealing with the first characteristic, we note both continuity and discontinuity with modernism. The humanitarian sentiment is very strong. There is, in the words of one author, an unprecedented hunger for brotherhood and righteousness in our days,[2] and it will indeed be hard to find a period in history when efforts to relieve suffering were pursued with as much moral earnestness as they are today. Even so, the

sentiment itself is not new. The conviction that we must show compassion for the poor and the afflicted, for the homeless and the fugitive, is an inheritance from Christianity and as such part of the western tradition. Though it has more and more been separated from its religious moorings, it remained strong throughout the modern period.

But if there is continuity with modernism, there is also change. Postmodern humanitarians are far more radical than their modern counterparts. They have also greatly extended the circle of those who are to receive protection and help. It is at this point that the adversary relationship with modernism comes in. Many reformers today believe that modernism, in spite of the humanitarian reforms it introduced, was at bottom elitist and oppressive. These people describe modern society as patriarchal, ethnocentric (or Eurocentric), and homophobic. Together these terms mean that it was the white, heterosexual, western male who occupied the privileged position in modern society, and that everybody else was marginalized.

And that is not all. The western male's very humanitarianism, these postmodern critics say, served him as a means to exert power over others. Love, pity, charity, the grant of individual freedoms, they were intended to increase the western male's power over others. Those who have suffered the consequences of this desire for dominion include women, blacks, natives, and homosexuals. Often they also include members of minority religions which, so the argument goes, have traditionally been marginalized by the dominant religion of Christianity. Espousing the cause of these various groups, postmodern critics consciously profile themselves against modernism.

(2) The rejection of western culture

The hostility of postmodernists toward modernism is also evident in their negative attitude toward western civilization. This is the second characteristic of postmodernism to have our attention, and it is related to the previous one. Among the objections that many postmodernists have to the western cultural tradition is its alleged oppressiveness and destructiveness. Driven by the will to power, postmodern critics say, the western male subjected the weaker members of society to his dominion.

Nor was that the extent of the West's guilt. Europe was also the society where technology flourished, and its technological know-how enabled it to dominate much of the rest of the world. In the process it

humiliated and abused non-western peoples, depleted the world's resources, and despoiled the global environment.

The conclusion is that western civilization is a failure, and that peace, equality, and happiness can be guaranteed only by a drastic cultural overhaul. Often postmodernists reject western values altogether and demand their replacement by non-western ones.

(3) Postmodernism and nature

The third and last characteristic of postmodernism that we will deal with in this section is its attitude toward nature. Postmodernists turned against the modern adoration of science. In doing so they not only stressed the negative potential of science but also attempted to explain *why* science became so destructive, and they concluded that the modern model of the universe was one of the culprits. That model is the mechanistic one. Modernism sees the universe as a clockwork or a machine, and therefore as essentially a non-living thing. Postmodern critics say that while this model contributed to the rapid advances of science and technology, it also encouraged the abuse of nature. After all, if nature is no more than a thing, you can do with it what you want.

Postmodernists reject this view of nature. They prefer to see nature not as a lifeless thing, which can be abused with impunity, but as a living organism, which must be treated well if it is to flourish. Because modern society has failed to do so, more than one postmodernist ranges nature with the victims of the West's oppressive patriarchal society. They place it in the same league as women, blacks, natives, and gays. The comparison with women is especially close. Many environmentalists see nature as female. They like to refer to our planet as mother earth and some see it even as a mother goddess. That view is especially popular among radical feminists.

3. An evaluation

More could be said about the relationship between modernism and postmodernism, and more will be said about it later, but the foregoing will have to do for now. It is time to turn to our final section. That is, we must look at the ideas underlying postmodern attitudes and attempt to evaluate them.

You will agree that the ideas we have unearthed so far constitute a mixed bag. There are beliefs that we immediately recognize as destruc-

tive and reject without further ado. But there are also ideas that we can, at least to some extent, sympathize with. I am thinking, for example, of postmodernism's championing of the underdog, and its concern for the environment. Changes in our attitude toward nature were overdue, and while recognizing the anti-christian philosophy of much of the environmental movement (a point to which we will return), we can nevertheless admit that it has taught us valid lessons.

The positive aspects of postmodernism must be recognized together with the negative ones. We cannot interpret either category properly, however, apart from the belief systems that inspire the movement as a whole. We are indeed dealing with belief systems here. Postmodernism, I said at the beginning, can be considered a world-view. And it is the function of world-views to help humanity make sense of life. They deal with man's deepest concerns and formulate answers to his ultimate questions. That is, they tell man what to believe about God, about the nature and destiny of man, the meaning of life, and the outcome of history. These are religious questions, which require religious answers. This is as true for postmodernism as for any other world-view. To understand it we must look at the beliefs that inform it and, where possible, explain these beliefs. That is what we will attempt to do in the present section.

(1) Postmodernist humanitarianism

We will begin, again, with postmodernism's humanitarian concerns. That humanitarian attitude is a striking phenomenon. It is also a complex one. On the one hand there is the fact that love for the neighbour, help for the oppressed, care for the sick, the persecuted, the fugitive, are all pre-eminently Christian virtues. Yet it seems that the more secular our society becomes, the more eagerly it tries to realize these Christian ideals. To be sure, it is not done consistently. One of the greatest stains on the humanitarian record of postmodern times is the lack of legal protection for the unborn. The inconsistency is jarring, for the fact remains that in various other respects society shows a concern for the down and out that — we may as well admit it — can put Christians to shame.

That is one side of the coin. The other side is that the goals this humanitarianism seeks to reach appear to be constantly receding. No matter how much is done to help the poor and lift up the downtrodden, reformers keep complaining about society's failure to bring inequality and suffer-

ing to an end, both at home and abroad. More is never enough. Humanitarianism is in our days joined with perfectionism, and as a result it gives rise to an ever-increasing sense of disillusionment. And that disillusionment, in turn, leads to the political and social radicalism whose manifestations are all too common in our days. I am thinking of the excesses of the political correctness movement, of unwise applications of affirmative action regulations, of the policies of radical feminists, and so on.

Why this fanaticism?

How are we to explain these frantic efforts to protect what is considered the underdog? Why does the discontent and anger of our social reformers increase, no matter what is done to redress the balance? Indeed, even in spite of the fact that the balance at times tips way over to the side of the so-called victim? We cannot simply refer to the agitation of interest groups here, although this plays a part. But there is also much genuine discontent with society's performance.

The question how we are to explain this phenomenon has occupied many a politician, sociologist, and philosopher. You probably have often asked it yourselves. I have. One explanation that I have come across, and that seems to make sense, is the one provided by the well-known English philosopher Michael Polanyi, who died in 1976. His theory throws an interesting light not only on the problem we are dealing with now, but on the aspirations of modernism and postmodernism as a whole. [3] Let me therefore outline it for you.

Polanyi was an internationally-known scientist before he turned to philosophy. He knew about science, believed in its potential for good, and would have disagreed with the radical postmodernists who condemn it. Although the expansion of science and technology has given rise to serious problems, Polanyi knew that such problems are not inherent in the scientific enterprise as such. For science and technology are not independent powers. Their control is in human hands. Ultimately the way in which they are used is determined by society's basic beliefs about life and nature.

In other words, the prevailing world-view decides on the use of science and technology, and indeed on that of all other gifts humanity has received. And it was the prevailing world-view, the modern scientific one, that Polanyi saw as the major source of our century's debacles. And note that he was not referring to the environmental ones. Polanyi's con-

cern was with the political, social, and moral disasters and discontents of our age.

The cult of scientism

What was the essence of the modern world-view? For Polanyi it was the faith in scientism and in the objective ideal. Concretely, it was the belief that the only way we can reach objectively valid truth was by the so-called scientific method. That method was to be applied automatically, in a mechanical, impersonal manner. By following it, scientists would achieve total objectivity, and this in turn ensured not only that the conclusions science reached were valid everywhere and at all times, but also that they were the only possible conclusions.

This scientific approach was therefore altogether different from the one followed by thinkers in areas other than that of the sciences, such as theologians and historians. These people allow their beliefs and their personal insights to intrude in their scholarly work, and as a result their conclusions are subjective, and therefore not necessarily the same. Two historians can come with very different interpretations, even if they deal with the same topic and have access to the same facts. For example, a Marxist historian dealing with the Lutheran reformation would reach conclusions quite different from those of a Protestant historian dealing with the same topic. And similarly, a believing biblical scholar and a non-believing one will come with very different interpretations of the Bible.

But if world-views, religious beliefs and other personal factors exert an influence on historians, biblical scholars, and so on, scientists were supposed to avoid such biases. They, it was held, put their own beliefs and preconceptions, as well as those of their society, on hold. Religious faith, divine revelation, tradition, inherited wisdom, none of them was allowed to play a role in scientific research. What scientists did was collect value-free facts and formulate the laws that these facts dictated. It was this approach that guaranteed scientific objectivity. One could be sure that what science came up with was the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. This implied, among other things, that if science ‘disproved’ parts of Scripture, then they were disproved. But it also implied that if this same scientific method was applied to social, political and moral matters, these areas would greatly benefit. The use of the scientific approach in both the natural and the social sciences

would lead to a utopia. It was a simple matter of technique, of following the proper method.

Personal knowledge

It was this cult that Polanyi attacked. His rejection of the objective ideal does not mean that he turned to subjectivism — the belief that the thinker, the subject, creates his own reality, without reference to an objectively existing external world. Polanyi believed in an external reality and was convinced that we can have objective knowledge of it. To reach such knowledge was the scientist's task and goal.

But Polanyi did not believe that this knowledge could be reached in a mechanical, impersonal manner. No scientist, he said, proceeds according to the so-called scientific method. To that objectivist ideal he opposed his view of personal knowledge, a view that implied personal commitment and personal responsibility. For him there was nothing mechanical or automatic about the scientific search for truth. Man with all his faculties, and also with all his limitations, was fully and passionately involved. This implied, in the first place, that science was not simply based on observation. The scientist's personality, his insight, and his creative imagination played an essential role in the formation of scientific theory.

I can explain this point with reference to a theory like evolutionism. Darwin and others collected a lot of facts that could support an evolutionary theory. These same facts could also, however, support its opposite, a devolutionary one. What I mean is that you can prove that things develop from small and primitive to more complex, but also that there is a reverse process. Organic beings are born and grow, but after a while they decline and die. An acorn develops into an oak, but the oak, in turn, produces an acorn. Whether or not you notice evolution depends on what you are looking for, and in the nineteenth century people were looking for proofs of developmentalism. The choice that was made in favour of evolution, therefore, was not determined first of all by the facts, but by the period's world-view, which was optimistic and progressive and demanded scientific proofs that things indeed get better and better. Had that not been the prevailing world-view, we would not have had Darwinian evolutionism.[4]

This shows, then, that the scientists' personal involvement plays a role in the formation of scientific theory. And that personal involvement implied in the second place, Polanyi said, the risk of error and failure.

Scientific knowledge was not absolute and indubitable. Nevertheless, truth was real and it would be recognized, Polanyi believed (and he spoke as one who had been a practising scientist), by those who truly sought it.

The role of doubt

Polanyi attacked not only the *automatism* of the objective ideal, but also the *scepticism* on which that ideal was based. Scepticism was ingrained in the thought-world of modernism. Already in the seventeenth century, in the early stages of the scientific revolution, philosophers such as the Frenchman René Descartes had preached the doctrine of detachment and doubt. To reach objective and indubitable truth, he taught, a critical examination of received truths was essential. Researchers had to rely on the approved scientific method and doubt away all subjective elements in their thinking. The belief that universal doubt was the royal road to objective knowledge became a central dogma in the modern period. Nor was it restricted to the field of natural science. All authority became suspect, and the belief took hold that every belief and doctrine, whether derived from religious sources, from ancient wisdom, or from contemporary teachings was to be critically examined and, if it did not pass the test, rejected.

While admitting that there is a place in science (and also in other fields of knowledge) for 'reasonable doubt,' Polanyi argues that the doctrine of universal doubt is both unfounded and ruinous. Science would not be possible, he points out, if scientists failed to pay attention to tradition and if they put their beliefs on hold. They are unable to do so, for a large part of our knowledge is tacit, which means that we know more than we can tell or articulate. Furthermore, much of what we know is not discovered but transmitted. We have to accept it on authority, which means that in order to know, we must believe. Polanyi more than once quotes the church father Augustine, who wrote, following Scripture, that unless we believe, we will not understand.

And this applies as much to science as to any other type of knowledge. To make progress, scientists must believe what their tradition tells them. Every scientist accepts (that is, believes) a vast range of information as background knowledge. He also follows his peers in adhering to principles, such as the ones concerning the uniformity and rationality of nature, which cannot be proven, but without which science would be impossible. If our minds were simply blank sheets, without prior knowl-

edge, without beliefs and expectations and presuppositions, knowledge would be impossible. The cultivation of such a mind (a 'virgin mind,' as Polanyi calls it), would result, he says, in a state of imbecility.[5]

Textbooks and the media, however, continue to propagate the scientist, objectivist myth of modernism with its doctrines of personal detachment and universal doubt. Positivists and rationalists keep telling us, Polanyi writes, that our political and social and moral troubles come from the fact that we are still too much influenced by tradition. We are being warned that we need to be more sceptical, get rid of all inherited norms and beliefs, and rely on our critical reason alone. If we do, progress will inevitably follow. Polanyi adds that these advocates of rational doubt do not consider it necessary to doubt their own belief that all beliefs must be doubted, and concludes that the proclamation of scepticism is, therefore, nothing more than "the sceptic's way of advocating his own beliefs."[6] In other words, rational scepticism itself is based on faith and demands faith.

Scientism and humanitarianism

It is this modern belief in scientific objectivism, Polanyi says, that has been coupled with the older Christian tradition of charity and the search for social justice. That tradition was at the core of our civilization. But although it continued to be strong, it was secularized, and in the process it changed. Scripture teaches that love of the neighbour is impossible without love of God. It teaches that man cannot even begin to fulfil the divine command by his own power, but only by the strength that God provides, but also that man remains personally responsible for the way he acts. And finally, it teaches that perfection will not be reached on this earth. The heavenly city will come, but not as part of the historical process. God is its architect. It will descend from above.

Modernism ignored these biblical teachings. It believed that reliance on reason and on the method of scepticism and doubt provided a better foundation for the creation of a just society than obedience to divine commands. Implied in this belief was the notion that justice can come about in an automatic manner, by the simple application of the proper method; that, in politics and ethics as in science, there is no need for personal commitment and no room for personal responsibility.

Polanyi illustrates this faith, and what it could lead to, with reference to a utopian scheme like communism. Karl Marx was an assimilated German Jew who inherited the humanitarian impulse from both Judaism

and Christianity. He inherited his faith in science from his own age, and theorized in what he believed was a truly scientific manner. He referred to his theory as scientific socialism and proved to his own satisfaction that the results of his approach were both predictable and inevitable. The workers would overthrow their capitalistic oppressors and — in course of time, and in accordance with objectively valid laws — establish the heavenly city of socialism.

This coupling of the humanitarian impulse with the faith in scientific objectivity accounts for the tremendous appeal that communism exerted, also in the western world. Here, it seemed to many, was the final and truly scientific solution to all the social and political problems that plagued society. The same coupling also explains why the cruelties and the totalitarianism of the communist system were persistently overlooked. You cannot criticize the outcome of a scientific process. Or, if you do criticize it, you will be condemned as unscientific, and your criticism will be ignored. That happened not just in communist countries, but also in the West. Even when revelations of Lenin's and Stalin's inhumanity surfaced, the majority of western media and a great many intellectuals ignored them or tried to explain them away.

Communism turned out to be a disaster. Its utter failure should have created doubt about the cult of scientism. This, however, has not been the case among large numbers of our contemporaries. Philosophers, teachers, journalists and other moulders of public opinion continue to teach the efficacy of an objective, 'scientific' approach to all things, an approach that works automatically and requires no personal commitment. Yet they also increasingly realize that the approach somehow fails to work. And it is this, Polanyi believes, that explains the frustration of the reformers, their impatience and discontent, as well as their increasing radicalism and recourse to coercive measures.

Not in the last place, it contributes to our society's self-doubt and cynicism. That cynicism is especially strong among young people. They are indoctrinated with the humanitarian and egalitarian social gospel. They are also keenly aware of society's failure to live up to its moral ideals and they interpret that failure as rank hypocrisy. Repulsed by the contrast between ideal and reality they turn their back on society and create their own communities and their own values. The scary thing is that often these values are much farther removed from Christianity than are those of their elders.

Polanyi and Christianity

Although he was sympathetic toward Christianity, Polanyi did not write as an apologist for the Christian faith. His concern was with what he called post-critical philosophy, specifically with the revision of the dominant theory of knowledge. He was aware of the fact, however, that his theory of knowledge had implications for Christianity, and as the foregoing will have made clear, Christians can indeed make use of his insights. They can appreciate his attack on relativism, radical scepticism and universal doubt, his defence of authority, and his insistence on the importance of the transmission of knowledge in the search for further knowledge. Also of interest is Polanyi's stress on the fact that the advance and certainty of knowledge depend on a working together in a community.

Several of these views, incidentally, Polanyi holds in common with other postmodern thinkers. The German hermeneuticist Hans-Georg Gadamer, for example, has lamented the Enlightenment's 'fundamental prejudice against prejudice,' arguing that modernists did not even consider the possibility that tradition may contain truth, and that therefore listening to authority may be a matter not of blind obedience, but of understanding and knowledge.[7] And there are thinkers in a variety of disciplines – ranging all the way from the natural and social sciences to theology, and from philosophy to art and literary theory – who join in this questioning of the modernist conception of knowledge. Polanyi, in other words, is no solitary reformer, even if he is a leader. His unique contribution, as one of his commentators writes,[8] lies in his grasp of the causal connection between the ideal of objectivism and the disasters of our century, and in the progress he has made toward the development of a theory of knowledge that may serve as an alternative to the destructive modern-objectivist one.

His theory, as we have seen, stresses the necessity of faith in the process of acquiring knowledge, and this is another of Polanyi's insights that Christians can appreciate. It is true that faith in his system is not the same as religious faith. For Polanyi it is primarily acceptance of what we have been told, or what we believe to be self-evident without being told, although he also speaks of faith in a reality that, though hidden or only barely perceived, will be recognized by those who truly seek it.

The Christian faith is unlike Polanyi's in that it is the acceptance of revealed propositions as well as trust in a Person. Yet there are similarities between Polanyi's theory of knowledge and faith as the Bible defines it. I already mentioned Polanyi's stress on community. Also important is

his insistence upon the need to believe in the existence of the unseen reality one is searching for, and in connection therewith on the requirement of responsible commitment. Faith precedes sight. Just as scientific knowledge is not achieved automatically, by simply following a method, so it is with religious knowledge. The means to find out whether the teachings of the gospel are indeed true, the Lord tells us, is by commitment: by choosing to do the will of God (John 7.17). It is by *following* Jesus that we find the truth. There is no other way. This circularity, Polanyi shows, characterizes all ultimate faith commitments.[9]

And finally, Christians can work with and benefit from Polanyi's explanation of postmodernism's frustrated idealism. Polanyi reveals the role which the faith in science and human reason has played and continues to play in our society, and unmasks it as idolatry. It is true that as Christians we knew that science and reason are mere creatures, and therefore not to be worshiped. It should also be noted that the faith in full scientific objectivity had already been attacked, before Polanyi wrote his philosophical works, by Christian thinkers, such as the Reformed theologians Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck and the philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd.[10] But it does not at all hurt to be reminded of the fact that the myth of objectivism is ill-founded. For propaganda for the opposite view comes to us from all quarters. It reaches us via magazines and the electronic media, and if we attend public school or university, also via textbooks, teachers, and professors. To receive support in our struggle against this anti-Christian view from philosophers of science is something to be very grateful for.

I should add that the criticism of the cult of objectivism arose, at least in secular circles, only in the course of the present century. It came in a time when among leading thinkers the faith in modernism was declining and the belief in the infallibility of the scientific method was coming under scrutiny. Which is to say that people like Polanyi and his allies must be considered postmodern thinkers, rather than modern ones. I mention this to show that our times are not all bad. Postmodern thought at its best provides insights that modern scholars, whose thinking was strongly influenced by their own world-view, tended to miss. In that sense it serves as a necessary corrective.

(2) The rejection of western culture

So much for the first characteristic on our list, the one concerning postmodern humanitarianism. That explanation provides at least a

partial answer also to the second question, which asked why many postmodernists reject their own culture. Our society's inability to live up to its promises and ideals causes not only the young to question the traditions of their culture, it has a similar effect on their teachers. In most cases these teachers were among the first to express their feelings of alienation. This is not an uncommon thing; the critique of a society often begins with the academic elite. Historians speak in this connection of the 'treason of the intellectuals.' Estranged from their culture, these intellectuals freely attack it, thereby adding to the discontent of the rest of society. We can notice this phenomenon in the years before the French Revolution, and also before the take-over of Russia by the communists and of Germany by the Nazis.

Criticism alone, however, does not cause revolutionary change. None of the upheavals I just mentioned would have occurred if the intellectuals in question had not also suggested an alternative, one that they were able to make appear attractive to others. This happened in the three cases I mentioned. French revolutionary leaders came with their vision of a rational, just, and equal society. Indeed, it was in the period just before the French Revolution, in the so-called Age of Enlightenment, that the fateful coupling between scientism and humanitarianism began. Russian Bolsheviks built upon these Enlightenment teachings, while also adopting Karl Marx's theory of scientific socialism. And Hitler, in turn, promised a racially pure Germany that would take revenge upon its enemies, Jews and gentiles both. The ideas of these men were largely homegrown. That is, they were built on western doctrines, many of which were originally derived from Christianity. The exception is Hitler, who was inspired not by Christian ideals but by the pre-christian past of the western world.

Hitler, however, was not a modernist but an early postmodernist. As historians have shown, National Socialism and radical postmodernism have many characteristics in common,[11] and one of these is the practice of abandoning Christian traditions in favour of non-christian ones. Today's postmodernists do not all go to the same source. Several follow Hitler's example of trying to build a world-view on the pre-christian paganism of the western world. Others look (also) for ideas in eastern pantheism — the belief that everything is god — or in native traditions. What these postmodernists have in common is that, alienated from the West, they turn to non-western beliefs and traditions as a way of salvation.

I used the term ‘salvation’ on purpose, for the quest is in large part a religious one. It is their religious need, their search for spiritual experience, that explains why many postmodernists turn to other cultures. They have abandoned Christianity, the faith that shaped western civilization. In that sense they merely follow modernism. Their reaction to the loss of faith, however, is different from that of their predecessors. It is a far less confident one. Modernists, generally speaking, believed that they could live, and live well, in a world without God. The absence of faith in God meant that faith in man could increase. As more than one nineteenth-century philosopher put it, belief in the supernatural was fine for primitive cultures, but it no longer had a place in a modern, scientific society. The human being had come of age and could manage its own affairs.

This modern view of human self-sufficiency ignored the fact that man is, at heart, a religious creature, who cannot find ultimate satisfaction in secularism. If he rejects Christianity he will turn to non-christian religions. This is what we see happening in our days. It is behind the proliferation of pseudo-christian cults and the spread of the occult such as astrology, witchcraft, Satanism, and the like. It is also behind the appeal of both eastern pantheism and pre-christian and native (aboriginal) paganism. The God of the Bible having been declared dead, other gods must be found.

Among the reasons for the appeal of postmodernism, then, is the fact that (at least in some of its manifestations) it promises to satisfy the human craving for spirituality. Moreover, the type of religiosity postmodernism offers is, generally speaking, therapeutic. It promises well-being, allows men and women to fashion their own destinies, and imposes few if any moral demands. One of the gurus of the New Age movement, the actress Shirley McLaine, articulates the creed well by saying that we are godlike, capable of creating our own reality, and of making that reality as pleasant as we wish.

It is true that there are exceptions to this optimistic view. As we will see in the next section, nature religions place severe restrictions on human autonomy. Nevertheless, in postmodernist religiosity in general the therapeutic aspect predominates. Indeed, postmodernist culture as a whole is therapeutic, and we will notice in the next lecture that the promise to shape our lives as we wish is made by non-religious postmodernists as well. For them it is our control of language and our power of interpretation that enables us to escape from the constraints that so far have been common to human life.

(3) The postmodernist attitude toward nature

We cannot go into detail about postmodernist religions, but I want to refer to the role that they play in contemporary attitudes toward nature — our third and final point. Postmodernism rejects the biblical account of creation and looks at nature as the origin of all that exists. This implies, for many, a belief in pantheism, the idea that nature is divine. That belief is often strong among radical environmentalists, and it is at the foundation of New Age religions.

There is also, as we noted, a widespread desire among postmodernists to see nature as feminine, the mother of all that lives. That desire helps explain why among radical environmentalists paganism is popular. For pagan religions were often matriarchal, that is, they had a mother-goddess, who represented the earth. This was the case in ancient Greece and also in some native-American traditions. Various modern environmentalists have copied the idea. Having decided that the earth is divine, they called it Gaia, after the earth goddess of the ancient Greeks.

A variety of factors, therefore, accounts for the new view of nature. They include — besides environmental concerns — the rejection of Christianity, the search for an alternative religion, and the ambition of radical feminists and their allies to replace a patriarchal society with a matriarchal one. The feminist input is strong. Women, some radical feminists believe, will be the matriarchs and high priestesses in the new dispensation. Unlike the rule of the male, that of woman will be benign. It will ensure an age of harmonious relationships both within society and between man and nature.

The relationship between man and nature will not be based, however, on the biblical doctrine that humanity is the crown of creation. The belief in mankind's superiority over the rest of nature is, for the adherents of postmodern nature religions, a relic of the past. The human being is, at best, the equal of other creatures. This means that humanism, so strong in the modern period, has had its day. New Age gurus may try to hide this truth from us, but most radical environmentalists are not so considerate. They tell us that Gaia is concerned with the well-being of all species, which means that her primary concern is with their habitat, earth itself. A species like man may threaten the earth's well-being, but under Gaia's rule it cannot do so with impunity. Man's attitude may even lead to his disappearance from the earth, his expulsion. For he is dispensable. Nature has done without him for millions of years and can do so again.

Animal rights activism

The conviction that for nature to survive humanity must be brought down a notch or two is also behind the activities of animal rights activists. These people see man as of no more importance than any other creature. He is simply one of many species. The old belief that the human being is superior and in charge of creation they call *speciesism*, a term they invented to refer to the exaltation of one species over others. That belief, they say, is behind man's abuse of nature and the resulting environmental disasters. Holding to the equality of all species, these people object to the use that medical research makes of animals for man's benefit, and some have invaded medical laboratories and freed the animals they found there. In the case of some environmentalists the objection to speciesism is also behind their support of abortion. There are too many human beings around. Their numbers must be reduced for the benefit of other species, and for the sake of planet earth as a whole.

As the foregoing shows, animal rights activists and their kin make it clear that a society which rejects God is self-destructive. If we no longer believe that God created men and women in His image and that He placed them in charge of His creation, there is indeed no reason to believe that man has any right to dominate other creatures. The conclusion which these radical environmentalists draw is, on their premisses, a logical one.

Nor are they saying anything new. Oriental pantheism led to a belief in sacred animals — cows, and even rats — which had to be fed and protected, if necessary at the cost of human life. Many pagan societies — including some native-American ones — believed in human sacrifice to please their nature gods. Some Canaanites, we read in the Bible, offered their children as a burnt sacrifice to their god Moloch. It is not at all surprising, then, that neo-pagans in our society think that the sacrifice of the unborn is necessary to appease Gaia.

Christians utterly reject this idolatry of nature. Of course, postmodernists are right in stressing human responsibility for sub-human nature. God gave man that responsibility. But to admit this is far from implying the equality of man and the rest of creation. On the contrary, it underlines the fact that man was put in charge of the earth so that, as God's representative, he might care for it. And it is only by obedience to this mandate, and therefore by acknowledging God's ultimate sovereignty, that not only man, but also the rest of creation, can truly flourish. By making nature the lawgiver, on the other hand, postmodernists place both

man and nature in jeopardy. For no matter what romantics may say, nature is not benevolent but 'red in tooth and claw.' Big fishes eat little fishes; the strong animal dominates the weak. If man is indeed no more than an animal, then he is programmed to do the same. His exploitation of nature is then not only unavoidable but truly 'natural,' and therefore good. The same goes for his exploitation of his fellow-man.

Ethical implications of naturalism.

We come here to one of the many inconsistencies in late-modern and postmodern thinking. It is inherent both in the theory of evolutionism and in that of the nature religions. Darwin's mechanism for evolution was that of natural selection. He said that the great law of nature was the law of the struggle for survival, and that in this struggle the most favoured individuals survived, so that they were able to reproduce, while the less favoured ones were eliminated. The theory implied that for man and nature to evolve further, natural selection had to continue. And that, in turn, implied that struggle and the elimination of the weak, also among mankind, were necessary.

Several of Darwin's supporters in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the so-called Social Darwinists, realized this. Indeed, many of society's trend-setters in general subscribed to this type of policy, at least in social and economic matters. They promoted what was called the *laissez-faire* attitude. It meant, among other things, that capitalists should be allowed full economic freedom, and that the poor should be given no help. If they could not pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, they deserved to be eliminated. There were also Social Darwinists who suggested the need of eugenics, that is, of selective breeding. Darwin's cousin Dalton was one of them. The poor, the mentally weak and all other misfits had to be prevented from marrying and having offspring; the strong and successful were to be encouraged to reproduce.

For a while Social Darwinism with its naturalistic ethics flourished, and it has done great harm. In the end, however, humanitarianism prevailed. Yet the foundations upon which the naturalistic ethics were based remained intact. In Nazi Germany they would sanction the elimination of so-called inferior races and ethnic groups, and also of the weak and the mentally unfit. And today these same foundations make possible a philosophy according to which not only certain races and individuals, but humanity as a whole is dispensable. The sad part is that our society

has little to say in reply. People may reject the conclusions drawn by radical environmentalists, and the great majority of people in our society do reject them. But as long as they stick to the evolutionary world-view, they have no real answer to the arguments of the animal rights activists and their allies.[12]

And don't believe that the postmodernist beliefs in earth goddesses will make for a gentler society. For earth goddesses are mother goddesses, which means that they have given birth to the universe and all it contains. To quote a Jewish author (for Jewish theology, too, is under attack by radical feminists), in such a universe

> good and evil lose all meaning, everything being good in its proper time. Suffering and death no less than flourishing and life are to be regarded as 'necessary stations on the great wheel of existence.' In a 'birthed' universe, moreover, 'human beings are not qualitatively different from anything else that exists. They share in the divine essence, as children of the goddess, but only to the same extent that everything else does. Human life . . . is no more or less significant than the life of animals or plants . . . .' [13]

Looking at postmodernist nature religions, one is reminded of the remark by the English author G.K. Chesterton: "When men stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing; they believe in anything." And that is judgment. We read in Romans 1: "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools . . . . They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator. . . ." And therefore, we read three times in this chapter, "God gave them over. . . ." This apostasy was the core issue in late modernism. It continues to be the core issue in our postmodernist world.