

# Contemporary Christian spirituality and postmodernism: A fruitful conversation?<sup>1</sup>

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## Opsomming

*Kan 'n dialoog tussen hedendaagse Christelike spiritualiteit en postmodernisme vrugte afwerp? Moet bespreking van postmodernisme aan die ander kant ten alle koste weerstaan word as gevolg van die bedreiging wat dit vir spiritualiteit bied? Die spesifieke verhandeling doen aan die hand dat postmodernisme en spiritualiteit, nieteenstaande verskille, aansienlik ooreenkomstig is en dat die ooreenkomstighede insigte in Christelike spiritualiteit en sy eie ryk bronne bespoedig, in die besonder in die 'pyn van afwesigheid' ('ache of absence') van die hedendaagse postmoderne tydperk. Hierdie insigte maak hedendaagse Christelike spiritualiteit meer toepaslik en verstaanbaar in die postmoderne tydperk. Ooreenkomstige korrelasies sluit die alles insluitende, fragmentariese en ondersoekende aard van albei verskynsels in, veral met betrekking tot transendensie en sake van 'uiterste belang.' Daar is 'n gemeenskaplikheid tussen die kenmerke van hedendaagse spiritualiteit en postmodernisme wat geleenthede, insigte en uitdagings vir die deurliefde ervaring bied en die akademiese uitoefening van spiritualiteit in 'n postmoderne tydperk.*

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## 1. Introduction

Can there be fruitful conversation or dialogue between Christian spirituality and postmodernism? Would it not be better to abandon any hope of mutual learning? On the other hand, is there anything inherently analogous to spirituality and postmodernism? Do they not bear many similarities in their experiences, concerns and search for meaning? The problem, variously stated, is as follows: Some theologians see little that is positive in postmodernism. It apparently strikes at the heart of revealed truth. It holds no position on God. It has no revelatory or dogmatic anchor. It is a hugely diverse phenomenon, such as cannot be easily or safely characterised. It bears at least the shadow of nihilism. For others it is a fad. Christian spirituality must necessarily be the enemy of faddism and world trends. Moreover, who can tell whether postmodernism is not just postmodern, in the sense of a reaction, rather than anything coherent, serious and philosophically respectable, never mind theologically plausible?

There is a well represented counter-argument, though, that postmodernism presents Christian spirituality with an enormous opportunity to come to grips with its own rich insights, not to mention a number of corresponding missional challenges from the contemporary postmodern context. More strongly put, there is real feeling that postmodernism, in its more positive expressions, invests Christian spirituality with a new dynamic and tool for rediscovering itself and equipping its practitioners, and sincere seekers after truth, with a Christian lifestyle and resource for the darker aspects of spiritual journeying.

Considering and profiling common ground between contemporary Christian spirituality and postmodernism is no mere academic exercise, in the pejorative sense. Examination and critique of our (postmodern) context, and the nature of Christian spirituality, is critical to ensuring that God's Word remains versatile. The authors are assuming here that 'the Word of God is the living address of the living God to living people through a living community of believers. Living communication is versatile, not rigid. It is interactive ...' (Nünberger, 2004:2). The authors are also assuming that theologians in our postmodern climate 'need to hear the spiritual longings of those outside the regular ecclesial communities, those who are standing on its fringes and who are searching for a genuine profundity of life' (Matthews, 2000:20). Contemporary spirituality, like much postmodernism, gives some recognition to a non-foreclosed spiritual search; it recognises the inevitable 'ache of absence' common to Christian devotion and postmodern spiritual fragmentation. As with postmodernism, it recognises anew (in spirituality's case through its contemplative and mystical rediscovery) the essential mystery of God, life and selfhood. Furthermore it insightfully helps to interpret a postmodern spiritual quest which 'is still fascinated by a spirituality of

mystery' and less enchanted with absolutist claims and pre-packed dogmatic truths (Matthews, 2000:22).

In this article the authors will look, then, for analogous (shared) aspects in postmodernism and contemporary Christian spirituality. They briefly comment on the value, or otherwise, of in-depth conversation between the two, but assume for the most part that where analogous they will naturally benefit more from dialogue and shared insights than in the case of overwhelming dissimilarity. Finally, they will venture an opinion on the basis of this inductive investigation as to whether the two are substantially analogous or not and therefore whether the pursuit of conversation stands to bear fruit for spirituality as academic discipline. (In the main they are dealing with the theoretical aspects of Christian spirituality as an academic discipline. There is, however, no obviously clear line between this aspect and lived-life Christian experience.)

## 2. Contemporary spirituality and postmodernism

In the interests of clarity a refinement of 'contemporary Christian spirituality' and 'postmodernism' is required. Both designations enjoy popular usage, but far too much is taken for granted. The present article, furthermore, presupposes a distinctive understanding of these terms, especially with respect to the former.

First, *contemporary* Christian spirituality, while able to satisfy the attribute of 'Christian' for some thinkers, does not always pass the 'Christian' test for others. That is because such spirituality invariably draws on a few of its own earlier (for some) controversial traditions. It is also, *inter alia*, because spirituality (allegedly) corrupts Christian thought with toxic postmodern strains. Whatever the truth, contemporary Christian spirituality is distinct from a timeless, dogmatic apologia that might happily go by the same name. A dogmatic mainstream spirituality precludes what has been happening in the thought and experience of seminal Christian theorists and practitioners of the last few decades. Amongst the last-mentioned, one finds a more dynamic and fluid expression than a timeless, pre-packed spirituality at once inscrutable and inert. The last number of decades shows a stirring in (contemporary) spirituality that evokes and secures a different idiom for itself than a bland, even nervous, canon of Christian spirituality *per se*. This latter-day phenomenon and realisation is distinct from a static kind of Christian spirituality – one mostly bent, it would seem, on maintaining the doctrinal status quo.

The second term, postmodernism, is ubiquitous enough, but its (often) vague, presumptuous usage is problematic for present purposes. Pertinently, one must distinguish between a self-consciously philosophic *postmodernism* on the one

hand, and its current worldwide, more or less unselfconscious expression on the other, best described as *postmodernity*. Thus:

The former is the intellectual formulation of postmodern ideas on the high end of culture ... Postmodernity, by contrast [is] the popular, social expression of the same assumptions but in ways that may be unselfconscious and often not intellectual at all, making this a diffuse, unshaped kind of expression (Wells, 2005:64).

Given the above distinction the article at hand, while scarcely claiming proficiency in thorough-going postmodern philosophies, is certainly more concerned with a seriously reflective postmodernism than the oft-times thoughtless, albeit universal expressions of the same.<sup>2</sup> The concession must also be readily made that postmodernism is diverse in its expression. Nothing is herein meant to convey that intellectual postmodernism is seamless and uniform. To switch metaphors, there are aspects of radical postmodernism that ‘shape’ Christian spirituality mostly through spirituality’s resistance to it, chiselling away with seeming negation and enmity towards Christian faith. In this case, the more combative aspect of the dialectic is enhanced, though still serving the interests of spirituality’s definition, if only by virtue of spirituality’s self-defence or apologetic. The two-edged accepting-rejecting nature of postmodernism, from a Christian viewpoint, is inferred by Downey (1994:99). He writes of ‘[a]n authentic Christian spirituality marked by the more hopeful and optimistic currents in postmodernity ...’. His words bespeak postmodernism’s diversity, optimistic and otherwise, and surely the need for discriminative caution.

But now one needs to look at the corresponding features of spirituality and postmodernism, if there are such, given the focus and refinement suggested, using contemporary Christian spirituality as the ‘control’, pace-setting analogy.<sup>3</sup> How do Christian spirituality and postmodernism affirm or negate each other? Is there possibility of an enriching dialogue? Can postmodernism in any way enhance contemporary spirituality’s self-understanding and appreciation?

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2 If one considers postmodernism for its compatibility, or otherwise, with contemporary spirituality some dilution of the strictest philosophic treatment of postmodernism might be propitious, especially as spirituality itself is conceived in the dialectic soil between theory and spiritual practice – a kind of mutually conceived life that realises and constitutes spirituality’s theory. What one is interested in, then, is reflective postmodernism’s reaching out to lived reality and expression, especially if comparisons are to be drawn between itself and spirituality.

3 Yaghjian’s (2006:208-212) treatment of the rhetoric of analogical method has been helpful here, though not rigorously followed. Moreover, spirituality’s placement as primary port of call is in no way suggestive, in this article, of pre-eminence of one kind or another, but merely of fitting convenience as formal object of the discourse.

### 3. Features of similitude

#### 3.1 A new inclusivity

Schneiders (1989:692), a renowned theorist in academic spirituality, re-deploys Harvey's (1966:54-59) phrase when she, Schneiders, describes the discipline of Christian spirituality as 'a field-encompassing field'; one might say, an encompassing inclusivity. To be sure, contemporary Christian spirituality *as a whole* can be aptly described as 'a field encompassing field', whether such spirituality be understood in the sense of lived experience or as a contemporary academic discipline. When thoroughly delineated, both these senses of emerging Christian spirituality yield an encompassing (often global) perspective (Kourie & Ruthenberg, 2008:76). Finnegan (2008:59) says that:

Spirituality confronts us with and reacts to all the forces that impact existential reality. It impacts on every aspect of life: inner and outer, personal and communal. Spirituality emerges in geographical landscapes: deserts, mountains, valleys, villages, cities, in holy places and holy spaces, in the wilderness, and in hidden places of the human heart and soul, mind and memory, imagination and creativity, joy and sorrow, well-being and woe.

We might suppose Finnegan to write merely out of an aspirational idealism. As a theologian, though, he is unquestionably motivated by what is presently happening in the field-encompassing field of an emerging Christian discipline, of which developments Finnegan too is undoubtedly a significant exponent. He gives expression to an emerging spiritual consciousness and experience in both academic and everyday experiential spirituality.<sup>4</sup>

That there is a *broad* embrace and perspective to the contemporary spirituality here described is self evident. The sense of essential inter-connectedness is permeative in the thought of contemporary theorists in this field. The embrace is most notably demonstrated by academic spirituality's inter-disciplinarity, or self-avowed ownership of this academic feature. By way of preview let it be said upfront that this perspectival, encompassment-feature of spirituality will later be claimed also for postmodernism. For now, if spirituality were once seen as the domain of elitist experiences, or dualist thinking (isolating spirituality from, or even opposing it to, real material life and thereby relegating it to a pejorative

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4 A tempering of this conclusion is expressed by Sheldrake (2006:22). He feels that spirituality's *theoretical* awareness of culturally sensitive methodological principles, at least in the English-speaking world, exceeds the actual realisation 'on the ground' of these insights. In light of Sheldrake's point, one can accede to evidence that spirituality is to some degree still an ideal.

category) then such is no longer the case. The essential inter-relatedness and wholeness of life is admirably endorsed and evident in the distinctive, new-look spirituality, notwithstanding some of its own (surely healthy) *intra* diversity and theoretical contestation in the theology academy. This new inclusivity spans the departure points of a number of theologians in the field of spirituality. One benefits from scanning a few contemporary (Christian) spirituality-theologians that variously display such a motif.

Frohlich (2005:65-78), for example, understands spirituality as a matter of full presence – to or with oneself, others, and the world. Formally speaking, this understanding involves the human spirit as fully-in-act, comprehensively engaged with reality both in contingent and transcendent aspects. It is clear that she appreciates the expansive or accommodative potential of Christian spirituality. Using somewhat different criteria Schneiders (1986; 1989) effects a similar accommodation, seeing the formal object of academic spirituality as experience, *per se*.<sup>5</sup> Her understanding of experience goes hand-in-hand with the idea of a conscious involvement in life integration. Its definitive aspect in each case is the project of self-transcendence towards the ultimate value a person perceives. For Schneiders, as a Christian theologian, the material object of spirituality is definitely Christian. In my view, however, one should not underestimate the breadth and general life-affirmation that Schneiders gives to Christian spirituality. This breadth is in turn heightened and underscored, the authors maintain, when seen in the context of her wider endorsement of spirituality as a *general* academic discipline. The general academic context for Christian spirituality lends to the latter a spaciousness, generosity and encompassment – said differently, a less rigid and more porous possibility. Paulsell (2008:15) echoes Schneiders' dimensions for spirituality when she sees the boundary between Christian and generic spirituality being unstable. The spaciousness and contour of Christian spirituality is born of its awareness that it is not alone in its substantive subject matter. Indeed, it is embedded in a phenomenon of universal, multi-cultural proportions.

One may look at two more influential writers, Rolheiser (1998) and Sheldrake (2000; 2003), who invest spirituality with the same breadth and almost indeterminate, perforated margins. What these writers do, together with the two

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5 Schneiders' daring advocacy of an umbrella subject (Spirituality) for the academy, shows that she is interested in defending the freedom of experience in the broadest sense. While she herself works within the ambit of Christian spirituality her wider defence of spirituality as such reflects her over-all persuasion of coming down on the side of experience as opposed to merely binding spirituality to the dictates of a dogmatic theological foreclosure. For her, experience can be Christian, but it must work on its own terms.

authors already mentioned, is generate a sense of linearity. Spirituality is related to everything. It scans the whole linearity of life, so analogised. Life is like an intact circumference, with spirituality a central searchlight, illuminating and reconnoitring the whole circumference, albeit through a distinctive lens. Perhaps spirituality operates from the perspective of human desire, even pushed to madness at times (Rolheiser, 1998). Perhaps spirituality is the whole of human life at depth, questioned and dialectically influenced by a Christian critique; perhaps it is living publicly the Christian conviction (Sheldrake, 2000; 2003). Whatever the variation, the expanse of vision and intent is evident in each case, describing new trajectories in the wake of emergent spirituality. There is a unilateral engagement, circumferential and Argus-like, in Christian spirituality's 'take' on life. Such then are the contributions of a few cutting-edge theorists. They explore new worlds and open insular (occasionally indolent) minds. One now turns to the comparative features of postmodernism as possible corresponding analogy.

Postmodernism – of the intentionally reflective kind – heralds a collapse of the house of modernity, essentially a 'house of cards' that privileged *reason*, according it primacy, promise and self-sufficiency.<sup>6</sup> Modernism began with the humanistic optimism of the Enlightenment and then virtually coincided with the new scientific era; one that bore the imprint of Newton's (1642-1727) mechanistic worldview. Postmodernism subverts the dichotomous modernistic worldview, which typically privatises and relativises all that does not conform to its own imperial critique and *modus operandi*. The result is a fissured and largely discredited modernism that no longer retains its hierarchical place. There is a dispersion of validity, if the authors might coin a phrase. That is, all of life now gives access to truth, thanks largely to the disillusioning historical failure of rationality, or even to its claim on epistemological pre-eminence. A greater wholeness and inter-dependence takes hold in postmodernism, undermining the dualistic polarisation and 'face-off' intrinsic to modernism. Postmodernism fosters a sense of at-oneness 'where the foundation of all social energies – economic, political and cultural – is spiritual' (Holland, 1988:49). The generic spirituality (as far as there is one) that blooms in this postmodern climate is one where 'spiritual energies are the deepest source of the legitimating or transformation of society' (ibid: 49).<sup>7</sup> Basic dichotomies or schisms implode. They

6 'Gradually, during the first half of the twentieth century, modernity's house of cards began to collapse. Even the most industrially advanced countries, such as Germany under the Nazi's and other fascist states around the world, began to act irrationally and inhumanly' (Nolan, 2006:5).

7 Christian spirituality, therefore, not only engages with a postmodern intellectual climate and its formal articulations. It also inter-acts with the emergence of a postmodern spirituality, or

become of one piece. There is an at-homeness in the world, and a joy in communion (Griffin, 1988:14-15). There is a birthing of relational consciousness. Every dimension of life becomes ‘constitutive of one’s very identity’ (ibid: 14). In this multivocal and pluralistic framework an existential re-integration is realised. Thus Tarnas (1991:407), for instance, describes a postmodern ‘reconciliation of subject and object, human and nature, spirit and matter, conscious and unconscious, intellect and soul’. (For this philosopher it is a vigorous re-emergence of the original project of Romanticism.)

In summation, the inclusivity of both emergent Christian spirituality and postmodernism, their fresh appreciation of the breadth, co-inherence and even enchantment of all of life, perhaps even its elemental spirituality in the form of a relational consciousness, points to similitude. One includes in postmodernism the burgeoning (and often bewildering) postmodern spiritualities, which nonetheless appreciate the liquid nature of formerly rigid boundaries and dualisms. If there is any *disenchantment* displayed by both parties, it pertains to another meaning of the word altogether; namely, a disappointment at the stultifying legacy of modernism. But, given the almost generic undertones of both, might one not look plausibly to an immediate future of shared insights between postmodern thinkers and spirituality-theologians when it comes to their common instinct for breadth and encompassment? Spirituality in particular might hereby appreciate the inter-connectedness of all things, and the fundamental spiritual strain that courses through all of life.

### **3.2 Fragmentation and disparity**

The authors have tried to show inclusivity as common to postmodernism and the ‘new’ Christian spirituality. It might appear contradictory, therefore, to speak right afterwards of a fragmentation internal to both. The juxtaposition, however, is necessary and valid. On the one hand, both postmodernism (its spiritualities included) and emergent Christian spirituality have a strong appetite for inclusivity and (postmodern) co-inherence. On the other hand, there is also a fragmentation; a kind of spiritual federalism, found in both.<sup>8</sup> Certainly for postmodernism these

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spiritualities. It is in this derivative manifestation that Christian spirituality meets the spiritual hunger of a postmodern era and finds itself in exciting dialogue and dialectic with a kindred spirit. By all accounts, postmodern spirituality (or spiritualities) carries within itself the germ and appeal of universality. In identifying with some of its insights Christian spirituality also prospers from the former’s universal appeal. Thus to the extent that Christian spirituality finds common voice with the postmodern kind it also speaks with a universal breadth.

8 To keep it in the theological family, Von Rad’s (1975:16) word, ‘amphictyony’, comes to mind, being his description of the commonality and disparity of the tribes of Israel.



contrasts work ‘together as polarized, but complementary, tendencies’ (Tarnas [1991], 1996:407). First one looks at this fragmentation within postmodernism.

Postmodernism’s *intra*-fragmentation is well attested to. Its deconstructive ethos, its radical project of ‘unmasking’ and critique, right across the spectrum, dispenses with order and consolidation, glorying in a seeming impunity of new-found latitude. Postmodernism disports itself, one might say, in a spaciousness of postmodern latitude. Once-untroubled epistemological schemes, intellectual imperialism and custodians of authority and orthodoxy are especially vulnerable in this climate. By the same token, there is no grand synthesis or meta-narrative, whether of secular idealism or theological persuasion. Things fall apart. More so, there seems contentment with this incongruity and chaos. It adds lustre, perhaps, to the revolutionary spirit, celebrating for now the fresh breezes of a new dawn.

In some ways Christian spirituality bears a likeness to this postmodern predilection. One reason for the likeness may be that spirituality is itself a child (or better, *contemporary*) of the postmodern era. But the reasons are not in the foreground of my concern here. The point is that the new Christian spirituality is not without inner fragmentation itself – certainly diversity. Christian spirituality bears various attributions: ‘Creation’, ‘liberation’, ‘feminist’, and of course denominational, of one kind or another. And on the edges of church life there are thinking Christians busy exploring a new-look Christian spirituality too scary or experimental for Sunday-worship stalwarts. They speak of an emergent-Church (Gibbs & Bolger, 2005).<sup>9</sup> Firm in opposition, on the other hand, is the concern of a (watchdog?) ‘spiritual theology’ that wants to keep a firmer hand on spirituality’s new vagaries, if that’s what they are. Indeed, this fragmentation is far too unwieldy for some guardians of Christian orthodoxy. Christian spirituality has pulled anchor from the bedrock of dogmatic theology. It is all adrift, and subject to currents of subjectivism. However, it could just as well be argued that contemporary Christian spirituality has a real measure of anchorage and is not a disavowal of its heritage. Church, tradition, scripture and dynamic hermeneutics, together with the rich resources of historic Christian spirituality, the authors submit, all give shape and substance to an emergent Christian-spirituality discipline. Nonetheless there is fragmentation of a kind, and more than some can bear. Could a more tentative, humble and fragmented spirituality find appeal in a similarly tentative, fragmented and experimental postmodern era?

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9 This is not to mention the fairly sophisticated indeterminate area occupied by Tacey (2004), a man of acknowledged Christian background who nonetheless looks at spirituality with an extremely wide and professionally unaffiliated lens.

### 3.3 The God-question

The conversation between emergent Christian spirituality and postmodernism arguably takes on a more dialectical or double-edged encounter when one addresses the question of a divine or transcendent reality. This matter admittedly remains unresolved for a postmodernism that cannot commit on the God-question, one way or the other – in short, whether God ‘exists’ or not. On that score then, the issue is: Can there be a fruitful conversation and sharing of notes and experience? The problem is that for many concerned Christian thinkers this is where the dialogue between postmodernism and spirituality must break down altogether.<sup>10</sup> Some of the related areas of contestation necessarily have to do with metaphysics, transcendence (or a divine reality) and nihilism. Postmodernism, for these concerned Christians, apparently strikes at the condition, transcendence, ground and destiny of everything.

There are, to be sure, many different theological fields upon which Christian thinkers fight the battle for ‘transcendence’, or for ‘God’. That is, the problem is not only indicated by reference to ‘God’. Words like revelation, tradition, scripture, metaphysics, theism, Church, foundationalism, ‘objective truth’, ‘salvation history’ may all be appealed to as derivative of the underlying problem. They are all symptomatic, surely, of an appeal to God, to ultimate authority or a ‘given’ bedrock stability that is now under threat in the new postmodern era. These words, then, stand as synonyms for transcendence, if only in the form of a contingent, secondary objectivity. They signal the same essential issue, by implication or even necessity, of the Divine Dispenser of these means of grace. This divine reality stands in the face of a supposed dark, ‘nothing-out-there-nihilism’.

In defence it must be said that the Christian faith *is* rooted in God, in God’s intervention in history and self-revelation in Christ, and in that gospel that is ‘traditioned’ (‘passed on’, *παράδοσις*) to the saints (1 Cor. 15:3). And every sharing of the Eucharist and the earthly elements underscores the point. On the other hand, the cumulative historical paradigms, or trajectory, of that faith comprise what the postmodern critic might disparagingly refer to as a meta-

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10 A *thinking* postmodernism, in the main, is similarly resolute. Russell (1961:14) came close to speaking for a still embryonic postmodernism when he wrote, albeit with some barb: ‘Theology ... induces a dogmatic belief that we have knowledge where in fact we have ignorance, and by doing so generates a kind of impotent insolence towards the universe. Uncertainty ... must be endured if we wish to live without the support of comforting fairy tales.’ Indeed, for many postmodern thinkers the Church, and all that it stands for and defends, looks stifling and obscurantist, at best just one of innumerable worldviews or options.

narrative, a perceived authoritative grand scheme, or foreclosure on the open-ended search for truth so valued in the postmodern perspective. In this coinage the word 'meta-narrative' has taken on an almost pejorative connotation, a far cry from the cherished custodian of divine historical revelation through the centuries. How can Christian spirituality find any common ground with this postmodern subversion, one that has no 'demonstrable foundation' (Tarnas, 1991:401)? The authors look a bit further at postmodernism.

In postmodernism there are no longer any grand histories, schemes or projects. On the contrary, one finds a painfully acquired reservation about metaphysical, ultimate and universal truth, an acquisition that may be largely ascribed to disillusionment with modernism's unfulfilled promises and grievous historical setbacks. There is no more confidence in great epic schemes. There is no undergirding sense-making trajectory, whether relating to 'God' or positivistic positions. What epiphanies and visitations there are seem to be episodic. More likely, '[r]eality is in some sense constructed by the mind, not simply perceived by it, and many such constructions are possible, none necessarily sovereign' (Tarnas, 1991:396). Thus, 'because views of reality are not "given" but constructed, there is suspicion of all universal and normative claims, even and especially about God' (Downey, 1994:95). No given reality exists prior to interpretation and creation of meaning. On this reading there is an ostensible stand-off between spirituality and postmodernism on the matter of transcendent reality. That impasse, it goes without saying, undermines all the other Christian 'givens', which stand or fall on the fundamental premise.

Contemporary Christian spirituality, however, would claim to be in *need* of this conversation with postmodernism. Spirituality, certainly in the present world context, suffers the same 'ache of absence' that precipitates and sustains the postmodern sensibility. Downey (1994:92) memorably writes that: 'In the encounter with God in the ache of absence, in the loss of what was thought to be known of God until now, what is called for is the cultivation of deep reserves of trust and hope, the strengthening of the conviction that, even in this, God's unfathomable fidelity is found as both promise and presence.' This ache of absence, constitutive as it is of the postmodern mind, cannot but affect a contemporary Christian spirituality that is inevitably a child of its times.<sup>11</sup> A sense of loss has, in any case, already infiltrated the theologies, experiences and

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11 Whether the loss of an overarching 'given' is experienced as 'ache' in postmodernism as opposed to a kind of joyous release, is neither here nor there. The sense of absence, perhaps 'loss' variously characterised, is the essential nub of the matter.

imaginings of those theologians, Downey being one, who would speak meaningfully in postmodern times. Happily, Christian spirituality finds comparable experiences to the postmodern desolation in its own tradition. Very often these experiences bring a much needed corrective to Christian thought about God. With the help of these traditions, often mystical, one becomes 'willing to surrender to the unfathomable gracious mystery in the darkness that is in itself a disclosure', where all vestiges of idolatry are finally purged (Downey, 1994:99). It should also be evident that academic spirituality must fight shy of premature foreclosure when it comes to experience of God, or when assessing what might feasibly be genuine experience of the divine. This tentativeness will also pertain to easy, unquestioned concepts of 'God'. As with postmodernism, there is something indeterminate about the God-question in any self-respecting spirituality, Christian spirituality included. An easy straight-forward theism is perhaps no less foreign to the greater insights of Christian tradition, mysticism and a true appreciation of God's transcendence or immanence than it is of postmodernism's open-endedness on these questions. God is 'Other' and God is mystery. At best there is common ground with postmodernism here – a shared appreciation of our contemporary philosophic context.

One needs, the authors contend, to refute the idea that revelation, transcendence and 'God' is being undermined through conversation with postmodernism. The said ache of absence is itself a 'given', an experience of our day, and one which theology, being theology, needs to address and accommodate if it is to speak intelligibly of God into, and out of, the experience of the times.<sup>12</sup> It is also instructive to note that old ways of thinking about God are now more or less undermined. Vattimo (2002:17) echoes something of the contemporary mind when he says: 'The end of metaphysics and the death of the moral God have liquidated the philosophical basis of atheism.' But, if metaphysics has lost ground as a conceptual framework, taking with it the basis for atheism, by the same subversion it has shifted theism as well. In other words, thinking about God has moved on. Older theological arguments end up answering questions that are not being asked. Again, there is in some Christian spirituality a readiness to explore pantheism, an approach that seems more consonant with postmodernism's appreciation of inter-connectedness and embodiment. So Borg (1997:33) writes: 'Indeed, pantheism – because it affirms both the transcendence and immanence of God – seems to me to be the orthodox Christian concept of God, even though the notion is not widely known in popular Christianity.'

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12 Theology is virtually by definition an exercise that takes the contemporary-thought-context seriously. Systematic theology cannot shy away from the mood of the times.

Underlying all these God-concepts is the felt-need of spirituality to deal seriously and attentively with the contemporary postmodern mind. If anything, spirituality owns a greater responsibility than most disciplines to deal with the spiritual experience of the postmodern person, the 'God loss', as opposed to simply appealing to a dogmatic stance that leaves that ache unaddressed.<sup>13</sup> By owning the sense of God-loss, spirituality will be going a long way to fulfilling its experiential vocation. More than that, it might even surface the kind of bereaved denial that many troubled Christians and theologians live with anyway. Such denial sadly and typically eventuates in an even greater, anxiety-ridden, appeal to authority.

By appreciating the analogical similarities of postmodernism and Christian spirituality in relation to the ultimate question of God, or the contemporary ache of absence, a number of benefits emerge. A few of these have already been alluded to. One benefit is obviously that God's word can more effectively be spoken into the existential tenor of the times, given that one's context is always a co-determinant, or evaluative principle of sound hermeneutic; or of an authentic word from God. That is, a hermeneutic of the recipients is no less called-for than a hermeneutics of biblical content. It has been well said that '[o]nce we have understood that it is God's redemptive response to human needs which drives the underlying current of meaning forward, we are able to draw out its thrust to contemporary situations of need' (Nürnberg, 2004:239). Furthermore, biblical paradigms on their own do not constitute some kind of exclusive holiness (ibid: 239).

Significantly, both postmodernism and the newer spirituality face questions about the Divine that cannot be satisfied with easy, dogmatic answers from another time frame or historical paradigm. More so, there is a certain ambiguity about the experience of God, if the main world religions are anything to go by. As such, spirituality and postmodern thought stand to benefit mutually from conversation, from analogical experiences and from exercises in hope. The authors submit, furthermore, that academic spirituality in particular stands to gain from some of the more hopeful perspectives in postmodernism, together with serendipitous redeployment of resources from its own rich traditions. More than that, one detects a certain kinship of spirit and existential crisis for both contemporary

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13 Academic spirituality, one means to say, is itself a science of experience and must, of all disciplines, be honest and representative of that experience in its work, albeit with trenchant criticism where necessary. One should not, on the other hand, caricature systematic theology by suggesting, somewhat derogatively, that its calling or preference is to shut down discussion by appealing to dogmatic non-negotiables. The issue is more accurately that the two disciplines operate by criteria suitable to their own spheres of discipline and investigation, so that the patronage of one by the other is entirely inappropriate.

spirituality and postmodernism, a common ground that makes for a valuable sharing – one that is spurred on by mutual interests.

### **3.4 Mysticism, 'self', 'decentring', 'deconstruction'**

Matthews (2000:89-104) has demonstrated, to my mind, a congruency between aspects of Christian mysticism and the postmodern mind. This similitude suggests ground for fruitful conversation and mutual learning between the two. It is indeed not particularly surprising that mysticism has come into its own again in contemporary Christian spirituality, as it speaks to a postmodern milieu that is in many respects groomed for its acceptance. By the same token there seem to be many 'freelance' mystics in the proliferation of (non-Christian) postmodern spiritualities, not to mention the general popularisation again of the word 'mystic'. The authors look briefly at commonalities related to mysticism in Christian spirituality and postmodernism in general.

Both postmodernism and Christian spirituality (and Christian mysticism in particular) evidence humility about the place of the self, as opposed to a sometimes over-inflated modernistic confidence. The words 'deconstruction' and 'decentring' are common to postmodernism. They herald a new hermeneutics of suspicion, a critique of the human perspective. Postmodernism, for example, 'involves a "decentring" of the self, an awareness that the self is not a distinguishable reality which interprets and validates all other realities' (Matthews, 2000:91). The 'self's' unquestioned trustworthiness is brought to order. This critique of the 'self', a sort of deconstruction and decentring, is familiar to Christian mysticism.<sup>14</sup> The Christian concept of *kenosis*, or the 'emptying' (Phil. 2:7) that described Christ's incarnational self-relinquishment, a word that has endlessly intrigued theologians of Christology, meets with conceptual sympathies in postmodern thought. In postmodernism there is, that is, a wariness about the 'self'; a *dispossession*, an emptying, together with a new openness to the 'other'. The analogous kenotic echo from the Christian mystical

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14 To be sure, 'the traditional language of mysticism was ... a form of deconstruction of religion, a constant practice of distance or detachment from the reality of God by which the proper reality of God was revealed' (Matthews, 2000:92). Any kind of Christian mysticism is traditionally and supremely alert to the wiles of personal 'interference' and perceptions emanating from the 'self', and their constant ability to insinuate themselves into the God-relationship. Part of that interference happens when the limits of language and the 'world' it brings with it, are not appreciated. Both postmodernism and Christian mysticism, uncannily enough, have a deep appreciation of the 'correspondence' problematics of language. While mysticism speaks of apophaticism, the conditions where language fails, postmodernism brings a sophisticated critique of language far removed from earlier uncritical perceptions.

perspective is well expressed by Kourie (1998:447): 'For the Christian mystic the kenosis of God and the kenosis of humanity coincide in Jesus ... For the mystic, the kenotic love of God results in his or her own self-effacement. There is a process of *dispossession*, and a vigorous out-pouring of self.' Not unrelated is the Apostle Paul's frequent 'in Christ' phrase, together with the mystical anthropology of Weil (1963:28) and Stein (1992:12) that we are selves-in-solidarity. This thinking merges in part with the postmodern interest in relationality (McIntosh, 1998:231).

Without wanting to stray from the subject of the present heading, one needs to note how mysticism and decentring (and thus postmodernism in the latter neologism) both contribute analogously to an injection of *mystery* into life. Modernism's control and mastery is for the most part gone. Regarding spirituality itself there is a discontent with dogmatism (if not with dogma) and a pre-chewed religion. More interest is displayed in the mystery and unknowability of God (or ultimate reality) – a God that cannot be manipulated, sculpted, or fully known. That in itself, for all the reservations of its theological critics, is not a bad thing. Caputo's (2007:54) conciliatory words as a postmodernist philosopher perhaps speak meaningfully into the matter of mystery and an over-confident spiritual epistemology:

Indeed, is it not a heresy in Christianity to assert that we *know* what we are doing and can do so very well by ourselves, thank you very much? ... The path to God is also a counterpath, where a great 'not' inscribes a zone of absolute respect around 'God', meaning, among other things, that we should be very cautious about pronouncing what 'God' is or means lest we find ourselves falling down before an idol.

Of course, the apophatic strain of negative theology, or the *via negativa* in mysticism, delivers the pointed reminder on God's essential mystery and unknowability. It is a form of deconstruction or iconoclasm all of its own. The *via negativa*, that is, exhibits a deconstructed resonance with postmodernism. In other words, the easy certainties of human perception and Cartesian confidence are critiqued by both postmodernism and re-emergent Christian mysticism in not entirely dissimilar ways. They both express a not-knowing, albeit in postmodernism perhaps to the extreme.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the unknowability of God in this qualified sense goes to the heart of faith itself, which is ultimately a divine

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15 I imagine, though, that it is not for nothing that early Christians sometimes bore the charge of 'atheists', as Stevenson ([1957] 1974:18-21) variously makes clear in his compilation of early historical documents pertaining to Christian witness, notably with respect to the martyrdom of Polycarp of Smyrna, sometime in the mid-second century. The early Christian perception of God clearly undermined the more image-laden, 'substantial' or anthropomorphic conceptions of popular belief.

gift. Here the experience of God arguably signifies ‘a non-experience, an experience of absence, a nonprimordial experience that announces the unimaginable, the unthinkable’ (Andrews, 2005:146). This thinking ties in with a conciliatory postmodern philosopher who says that ‘[w]hat must be believed cannot be believed – that is the mystery we call God’ (Caputo, 2007:123).

#### 4. Dissimilarities

It is clear that there *are* dissimilarities between Christian spirituality and postmodernism.<sup>16</sup> Notwithstanding what, in our view, are for the most part impressive possibilities and analogous issues common to the phenomena of postmodernism and re-emergent Christian spirituality, there are undeniably grounds for caution. For one, academic Christian spirituality is still to spell out how it operates within the normative particularities and ‘givens’ of the Christian faith. While postmodernism almost seems to go into a happy ‘free wheel’ of waiting for something to turn up, spirituality cannot befriend such open-endedness. It can admirably admit to the ambiguities catered for in the kataphatic and apophatic traditions, and in the present milieu, but it surely cannot go back to square one, as does postmodernism, which seemingly has no history to speak of, doubtless proudly so. Christian spirituality holds itself accountable as custodian of the Christian way. Spirituality can celebrate in new found freedoms and the essential undomesticated nature of experience, and on its own terms. But when the party is over that is not the whole truth. We must still speak of *Christian* experience, notwithstanding a new and dynamic appreciation of spirituality and theology as a kind of (patristic?) synthesis. More so, is postmodernism as deconstructed as it would have us believe? Does it not retain a surreptitious, theoretical verdict, ascribing dogmatically to the indeterminacy and fragmentation of everything through a closeted judgement of its own? Christian spirituality would do well to be alert to this apparent sleight of hand. It is not hewn from the same rock. One can now, though, venture a closing comment.

#### 5. Closing comment

It would seem dull of mind and spirit not to see the opportunities presented by postmodernism to spirituality. Further, the two are in many ways analogous. While there may be a certain unruliness to contemporary spirituality it is still in the first

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16 I respect how the latter line must smash the cymbal of understatement for many a sincere Christian thinker. Some Christians will say that these dissimilarities are all the more dangerous for lurking in fields of ostensible similitude and that the present article has already been taken in.



flush of reclaiming Christian experience for faith and lived-life. Too often theology has exhibited a kind of ‘tyranny of reason’ (Vattimo, 2002:17). The result has been ‘an institutionalisation of the experience of God at the propositional level’ (Holmes, 1981:160). Such petrification has realised an inability or lack of personal appropriation to reclaim the truth of the faith experientially for oneself. Spirituality finds itself, the authors believe, with the contemplative and mystical resources to speak to the postmodern dilemmas, ambiguities and re-emergence of personal validation and discovery. A conversation with, and even appreciation of, postmodernism is probably less a decision than a necessity – and, the authors would contend, a mostly happy one. The feeling, not infrequently encountered, that postmodernism is ‘just another fad’ and will eventually go away if we hang on long enough, hardly seems good stewardship of our time as theological interpreters of the day. Certainly if postmodernism is a ‘fad’ after the likes of modernism we might have some time to go. In any event, spirituality need not be a sell-out. Postmodernism, simply put, is a reality. Indeed, it often seems that postmodernism is less an enemy than that which moves within the ranks of Christians themselves. One refers here to petrified understandings of revelation, appeals to infallible texts, over sacralised paradigms and idolatrous denominational self-interest, together with self-vaunted parochial inscrutability. If these are our vested interests then we shall fight postmodernism, and more particularly Christian spirituality, with crusading fervour. That would be, the authors maintain, a great pity. What we stand to lose is a better understanding of ourselves, our tradition, our faith, and a fearless gaze into the ache of absence that brings out the best in us, and for which we are equipped. Let us embrace what must surely emerge as a fruitful exchange, albeit one that will agree to differ.

## 6. Conclusion

Contemporary Christian spirituality and postmodernism can benefit greatly from conversation. Their analogous similarities reflect some of their common concerns, challenges and convictions. They are both vastly encompassing fields, appreciating the connectedness of all of life. They both celebrate a new-found relational consciousness. Both struggle with the diversity and multi-facetness of life through internal diversification or fragmentation. That is to say, Christian spirituality is not straight-forwardly generic any more than postmodernism. The ache of (divine) absence is commonly felt by spirituality and postmodernism, not to mention spirituality’s recognition of such ambiguity within its own contemplative and mystical traditions. The virtual collapse of modernism has brought a humility and openness to both phenomena in the form of ‘decentring’ and ‘deconstruction’ and a new appreciation for mystery and the unknowable. Spirituality is ready to revisit its images of God in an age where the old

metaphysical constructions have largely run their course. Furthermore, postmodernism can invite Christians, through Christian spirituality, to enter a new dynamic stage of spirituality where an old propositional entrenchment can be fired with new life after the manner of a people who are constantly led, by the Spirit, into all the truth (John 16:13). There are pitfalls, and by no means can everything about postmodernism be assimilated. Conversely, it may too readily be classified as a 'fad'. Such designation may tell us more about our own static entrenchments than the real dangers of postmodernism itself.

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