

Why Christianity is an Emancipation Narrative for François Lyotard

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Preliminary Remarks

Philosopher James K.A. Smith has maintained for years that the idea that Christianity is a grand narrative is simply a myth spread in Evangelical circles.¹ According to the myth, Christianity is a Lyotardian metanarrative. Since a position of scepticism towards metanarratives is representative of postmodern thinking, the Christian faith would correspondingly have to behave antithetically towards Postmodernism. This antagonism, according to Smith, is the result of a superficial reading of Lyotard. A careful review of Lyotard's writings on metanarratives can demythologise this 'bumper-sticker' reading and demonstrates that Lyotard's criticism of grand narratives does not apply to Christianity. On the contrary, Christians "should find in Lyotard not an enemy but an ally; orthodox Christian faith actually requires that we, too, stop believing in metanarratives" (WAP, p. 64).

In this brief analysis I would like to provide evidence that Lyotard indeed designated Christianity as a grand narrative and treated it as one. The discussion of precisely this question follows a short introduction to the narrative manner of discourse.²

¹ James K. A. Smith, „A Little Story about Metanarratives: Lyotard, Religion and Postmodernism Revisited“, *Faith and Philosophy* 18/3 (July 2001), p. 353–368. Reprinted as: James K. A. Smith, „A Little Story about Metanarratives: Lyotard, Religion and Postmodernism Revisited“ in: Myron B. Penner, *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views*, Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005, p. 123–140 (herein abbreviated as LSM). A revised version appeared as James K. A. Smith's *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006, p. 59–79 (herein abbreviated as WAP). The central thesis was presented by James Smith in the course of a series of lectures at the Swiss location of L'Abri in 2003 (comp. WAP, p. 12).

² A number of questions that Smith raises over against traditional interpretations of Lyotard require discussion. What would Lyotard's metanarratives be if not social constructions (comp. LSM, p. 126)? Is it accurate to say that with

Similar to Smith, I will also predominately refer to texts by Lyotard. In contrast to Smith, I will also incorporate those writings in which the French philosopher expressly mentions Christianity.³

The End of Metanarratives

François Lyotard

Jean François Lyotard (1924–1998)⁴, alongside Michel Foucault (1926–1984) and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), all belong to the group of leading French postmodern philosophers. In 1979, by way of his book *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (TPC), Lyotard introduced the term "postmodern" into philosophical discussion. In light of his work, Lyotard belongs next to Richard Rorty (1931–2007) as one of the most analytical and renowned representatives of the so-called "honorable postmodernity."⁵

Lyotard a metanarrative cannot imply an ethic (comp. LSM, p. 126–127)? What does Smith mean when he speaks of the postmodern church's need to relate the 'timelessness' of the biblical story (comp. WAP, p. 77)? Can thinking that allows for timeless ideas be postmodern?

³ James Smith draws primarily upon: Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, First Edition 1984, originally published 1979 (herein abbreviated TPC). Additionally I will consider Lyotard's philosophical opus magnum *The Differend*, Trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele, Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1988, originally published 1983 (herein abbreviated TD); *Heidegger and „the Jews“*, Trans. Andreas Michel and Mark S. Roberts Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, originally published 1988 (herein abbreviated HAJ); „Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?“ in: *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed., Thomas Docherty. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993. p. 35–46 (herein abbreviated WIP); „Note on the Meaning of ‚Post-;“ in: *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed., Thomas Docherty. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993. p. 47–50 (herein abbreviated NMP); in: „Sublime and the Avant Garde / Memorandum über die Legitimität“, in: *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed., Thomas Docherty. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993. p. 244–256 (herein abbreviated MDL); the conversation with Eberhard Gruber published as *The Hyphen Between Christianity and Judaism*, Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 1999, originally published 1993 (herein abbreviated BJC) and Jean François Lyotard, „Randbemerkungen zu den Erzählungen“ in: Peter Engelmann (Hg.), *Postmoderne und Dekonstruktion*, Stuttgart, Philipp Reclam jun., 1990, S. 49–53 (translated and herein abbreviated RE).

⁴ For an introduction to Lyotard's life and his most significant work see: Ron Kubsch, „Vom Ende der großen Erzählungen“ („The End of Metanarratives“, not available in English), *MBS Texte* 3 (2004), Philosophische Anstöße, URL: <http://www.bucer.eu/mbstexte.html> [Accessed 01.04.2007].

⁵ This formulation has its source in Lyotard himself in TD, p. xiii. The 'honorable postmodernity' stands for a solid philosophy, which is tied up with modernity and which does not refuse criticism. This is in contrast to the populist use of the term 'postmoderne' in the sense of arbitrariness.

Petite and Grand Narratives

In order to understand Lyotard's criticism of the pretensions of modern science, one needs to analyse his notion of the narrative manner of discourse. Narratives connect different sentential – rule systems and thereby mediate knowledge. They interpret, assert, channel and offer wisdom. Lyotard distinguishes between petite and grand narratives.

He calls petite narratives the prose of the people (TD, p. 159, segment 230). There is an affinity between people and petite narratives (stories). These narratives interlock diversity, let other opinions count and neutralise conflict. ”’Language’s’ popular mode of being is the deritualized short story. Short because it is faithful to phrase regimens and to differends, which popular narratives do not seek to dissipate but only to neutralize. They contradict each other. They are resumed in maxims, proverbs, and morals that contradict each other.’ (TD, p. 159, fragment 230). “The prose of the people - I mean its real prose - asserts something just as well as its opposite. ‘Birds of a feather flock together’ and ‘opposites attract’”(WIP, p. 52).

Grand Narratives (myths, sagas, fairy tales, narratives that are handed down; comp. TD, p. 152–154, fragment 220) bump up against this diversity. In them a community tells its story and in so doing creates its own identity and legitimation. The stories of antiquity are called ‘wild’ narratives. They are oriented towards beginnings, and identity and legitimation are derived from a myth revolving around beginnings. In contrast to modern science, ‘wild’ narratives do not seek their own legitimation; rather, they authenticate themselves by being transmitted, without argumentation and without proof. “This is why its incomprehension of the problems of scientific discourse is accompanied by a certain tolerance: it approaches such discourse primarily as a variant in the family of narrative cultures. The opposite is not true. The scientist questions the

validity of narrative statements and concludes that they are never subject to argumentation or proof. He classifies them as belonging to a different mentality: savage, primitive, underdeveloped, backward, alienated, composed of opinion, customs, authority, prejudice, ignorance, ideology. Narratives are fables, myths, legends, fit only for women and children” (TPC, p. 27). Grand narratives in modernity are thus critical, and they collect the petite and ‘wild’ narratives and assert a universal claim.⁶ They legitimate themselves by that which has been called philosophy (TPC, p. xxiii). They announce the coming of a better future. “Simply stated,” Lyotard writes, they are “narratives of emancipation (which I call metanarratives in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*)” (TPC, p. xiii).

Is presumptuousness on the part of philosophy and science justified? Lyotard denies this categorically. “Scientific knowledge cannot know and make known that it is the true knowledge without resorting to the other, narrative, kind of knowledge, which from its point of view is no knowledge at all. Without such recourse it would be in the position of presupposing its own validity and would be stooping to what it condemns: begging the question, proceeding on prejudice” (TPC, p. 29). For the conditions of truth, that is to say the rules of the game of science, there is no other proof beside the consensus of the experts (TPC, p. 29). But the consensus has become “an outdated and suspect value” (TPC, p. 66). Science is similarly as questionable as folk narratives. “... Science plays its own game; it is incapable of legitimating the other language games (TPC, p. 40). There is therefore no meta-language that can totalise grand narratives without the required power of authority. “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives” (TPC, S. 14, italicised in the original). Grand narratives are

⁶ Lyotard names various grand narratives of modernity: the emancipation of mankind, hermeneutics of meaning, the evolution of knowledge as speculative spirit. See, for example, TPC, p. 13. Another catalog (emancipation, realisation of spirit, capitalism) are found in Jean François Lyotard, *Philosophie und Malerei im Zeitalter ihres Experimentierens*, Berlin, 1986, p. 98.

no longer believed. It can be said that the mourning process has been completed.⁷ Even the longing for a lost narrative has disappeared for the majority of people. (comp. TPC, S. 41).

Is Christianity a grand narrative?

No! (James Smith)

James Smith's sympathy for the postmodern approach, as far as Lyotard is concerned, is based upon the conviction that the biblical story, or Christianity (in the Augustinian sense), "is *not* a metanarrative in Lyotard's sense" (LSM, p.125, italicised in the original). Many Christian scholars, particularly those within the Evangelical movement, have misunderstood Lyotard.⁸ Oftentimes the concept of metanarrative has been interpreted as if to mean a (totally) explanatory story of the world. "In other words, many assume that metanarratives are the target of postmodern disbelief because of their scope, because they make grand, totalizing claims about reality and have universal pretensions" (WAP, p. 64). That is not what is meant by Lyotard when he speaks of metanarratives. It is not the scope of a story that he connects with a metanarrative. Rather it is the way a story is told. For Lyotard grand narratives are exclusively a modern phenomenon. They do not just tell big stories. Rather, they assert the claim by appealing to reason that they are provable (comp. WAP, p. 65). Homer's *Odyssey*, from Lyotard's point of view, is not a grand narrative, because in spite of its far reaching claims it does not appeal to scientific reason. The central point for Lyotard is not the tension between petite and grand

⁷ Lyotard alludes to the pessimism in Vienna among artists, literary scholars and philosophers at the turn of the 20th century (comp. TPC, p. 41).

⁸ James Smith names the following as an exemplary list of scholars who understand postmodernism and Christianity antithetically: Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, Stanley Grenz, Henry H. Knight III, Brian Ingrassia and the Roman Catholic theologian Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt (see WAP, p. 64 and LSM, p. 124).

narratives. His interest lies primarily in the tension between narratives and science and the question of the legitimation of narratives (comp. WAP, p. 65).

Ja! (François Lyotard)

Smith sees completely correctly that, as far as Lyotard is concerned, the issue has to do with the de-legitimation of modern science. However, does he recognise the meaningful differentiation for Lyotard between petite and grand narratives and between ancient and modern narratives (see diagram 1: Narratives for Jean François Lyotard)? Does Smith understand that Lyotard wants to de-legitimise not only science but also the claims of grand narratives as well? In short, why does Lyotard differentiate between petite and grand narratives? What does Lyotard say about Christianity?

Christianity for Lyotard takes a curious middle position between the origins-oriented and modern metanarrative.⁹ On the one hand the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments tell a story of what has already happened as the history of a people, and it thereby derives its legitimation from a prehistory. On the other hand the narrative of Christianity is modern, since it acts universal and teleological.

⁹Compare with Joachim Track, "Theologie am Ende – am Ende Theologie? Ein Gespräch mit François Lyotard" („Theology at its End – Theology at the end of it all? A Conversation with François Lyotard") in: Hans Jürgen Luibl (ed.), *Spurensuche im Grenzland: Postmoderne Theorien und protestantische Theologie*, (trans. *Looking for Tracks in the Borderlands*) Vienna: Passagen Verlag (Passagen Publishing), 1996.

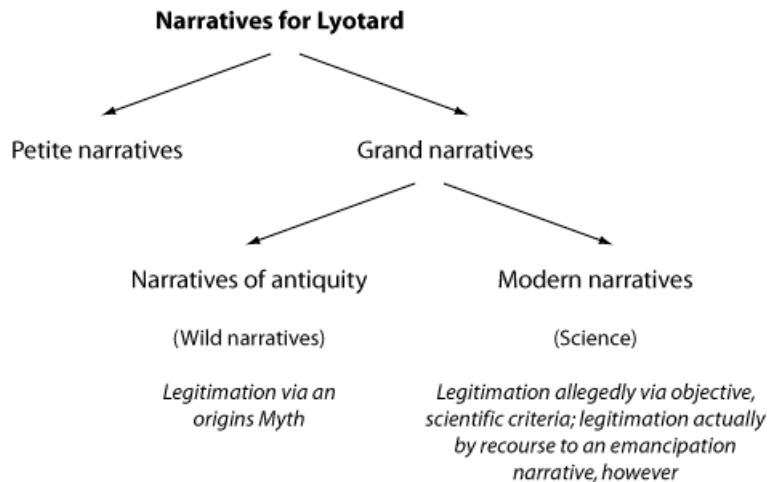


Figure 1: Narratives for Jean François Lyotard

“These narratives are not myths in the sense of fables (even the Christian narratives are not such)” (RE, S. 49). They are “emancipation narratives.” “Just as these they possess legitimation functions as well as social and political practices, laws, ethics, ways of thinking, imagery. In contrast to the myths they find their legitimation not in original, well-founded acts; rather, they find legitimation in a redemptive future, in an idea that finds expression in reality (MDL, p. 65). The universalism and this pure teleology of a grand narrative ”are not classical in the sense of Antiquity, but modern in the sense of Christianity” (TD, p. 155, segment 221). The Christian faith since the time of Paul and Augustine appears in the gestalt of a historical philosophy, which takes its leave from a cyclical model of time as found with the Greeks and legitimates itself with a still to be fulfilled future promise.¹⁰ “Christian narration not only tells what has happened,

¹⁰ Lyotard writes: “With the moderns – that is, beginning with Paul and Augustine – the promised emancipation was that which organized time in accordance with a history or, at least, a historicity. For the promise required taking off on an educational journey, leaving an initial state of alienation and setting out for an horizon of openness or freedom and pleasure in what is one’s own. Duration was then oriented, taking on a sense of waiting and of labor. It marked the whole enterprise as a trial or ordeal, and it announced an end. Pagan Europe had given itself this time in the form of the Odyssean cycle. Christian Europe put off the *dénouement*, the moment of the return home. The sanctity of *having undergone this dénouement* (a state) was postponed to a final day, still to come. The *dénouement* (an act) became the daily bread of goodwill – the effort of a sacrifice that would be recompensed. Modern philosophy, speculative phenomenology, and hermeneutics graft upon this ethical tension the eschatology of a knowledge that is also a desire for the emancipation of meaning, one that is always on the way (BJC, p. 6). Similarly he writes at another point: “Philosophies of history are forged around a redemptive future (TD, p. 155, segment 221).

thereby fixing a tradition, but it also prescribes the *caritas* for what can happen, whatever it might be” (TD, p. 160, segment 233). By the announcement of the emancipation of humanity, Christianity connects antiquity with modern times und establishes a template for other liberation efforts. “Humanism, whether Christian or secular, can be summed up by the expression: man is something that must be freed” (BJC, p. 3). Christianity is the grand narrative of the emancipation of humanity, while all other grand narratives are only more or less secularised variations of the Christian metanarrative. Modern revolutions repeat the gesture of revelation: here, now, a new life begins whose end is redemption (or emancipation, or some acquittal...)” (BJC, p. 80). Lyotard takes up Camus without mentioning him by name.¹¹ This philosopher of absurdity maintains in his work *The Rebel* that Marxism is a secularised form of Christian teleology. As far as Camus is concerned, historical philosophy is derived from the Judeo-Christian worldview. “The Christians were the first to consider human life and the course of events as a history that is unfolding from a fixed beginning toward a definite end, in the course of which man achieves his salvation or earns his punishment. The philosophy of history springs from a Christian representation, ...”¹² Lyotard writes, “It is not by accident that, since Augustine, Christian thought, having become the thought of the empire, has tried to gather up into a History (with a capital H), into a grand narrative, the promise of redemption” (BJC, p. 62).

¹¹ Peter Zima writes: “Whoever has followed the postmodern debates about ‘the end of metanarratives’ over the years has probably asked himself in bewilderment for what reason Camus has not been recognised and named as the sole initiator of this dispute. Perhaps the restraint is connected with the demands of the cultural market for innovation, originality and the surprise effect. How can it otherwise be explained that Lyotard clumsily tells us at the end of the 1970s why the grand metanarratives have lost their credibility, without mentioning a word about Camus’ radical Nietzschean critique of the legitimization of these Christian and Marxist grand narratives? This silence is best explained by Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital: Had Lyotard been so culturally blundering as to assiduously refer to authors such as Kuhn, Gödel, Frege, Lehmann or even to critical theory in his foreword, and to say that he wanted to further develop one of the central theses which had been formulated by Camus in 1951 and was so en vogue among pupils and students, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* would not have fallen on such fertile soil.” In Peter V. Zima, *Moderne/Postmoderne*, 2th ed., Tübingen: Francke, 2001, p. 140.

¹² Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, New York: Alfred A. Kopf, 1991, p. 189.

“The ‘metanarratives,’ of which are spoken about in postmodern knowledge, have those marks which distinguished modernity: progressive emancipation from reason, progressive or catastrophic emancipation of work (the source of the alienating value of capitalism), enrichment of all of humanity by the progress of capitalistic techno-science and even, if one counts Christianity as belonging to modernity (that is, in contrast to antiquity’s classicalism), salvation of creatures via conversion of souls to the Christian (*cristique*) narrative of a martyr’s love. Hegel’s philosophy unites all these narratives, and in this sense the speculative modernity as well” (RE, S. 49).

Lyotard does not conceive of narratives of human emancipation as liberation. It is not his intent to “paint too gruesome a picture of this long movement that has been stirring the West – and the human world along with it – for two millennia” (BJC, p. 4). However, occidental history is not a development process as people would have us believe. It is “a product of complexification” (BJC, p. 4). “The night has spread; the Greco-Christian light itself has spread its night” (BJC, p. 57).

Concluding Remarks

James K.A. Smith and others¹³ have maintained for years that Christianity is not a metanarrative in the sense that Lyotard used the term. Either this theory is false or Smith understands Lyotard better than Lyotard understood himself. Lyotard, his friends, and critics indeed recognise that Christianity is the large-scale, meaningful narrative of mankind’s emancipation that stimulated all other occidental metanarratives (e.g., Hegel, Marx, Schleiermacher). Lyotard’s diagnosis offered Smith the opportunity to bring Christianity back into play. For Lyotard, however, Christianity can

¹³ Merold Westphal, for example, writes: Christianity is not Lyotard’s goal. Neither is it by nature this type of narrative that he criticizes.” Merold Westphal, “Onto-theology, Metanarrative, Perspectivism, and the Gospel” in: Myron B. Penner, *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views*, Grand Rapids, Mi: Brazos, 2005, p. 150.

only get into the game if it holds to postmodern rules. A consensus about the rules, according to which moves can be made, can only be local and have to be “subject to eventual cancellation” (TPC, p. 66). Christianity in the sense of that believed by Paul and Augustine can, according to Lyotard, only inflict violence on people. To confess Christianity is to bring that to light which cannot be brought to light. “It already happened that the unrepresentable presented itself to the world; it will happen that it represents itself. One must prepare oneself to recognize it, this time around.” (HAJ, p. 38). For Lyotard such a situation can only lead to terror. “Finally it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented. And it is not to be expected that this task will effect the last reconciliation between language games [...] We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name” (TPC, p. 81–82). Wolfgang Iser, the most renowned philosopher of postmodernism in Germany, summarises as follows: “The non-existence of a meta-criterion (of an ultimate principle, God, king, final judgment or even of a respectable discourse police) is what represents the heart of a Lyotardian concept of postmodernism.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Wolfgang Iser, *Unsere Moderne Postmoderne*, 5th ed., Berlin: Akademie Publishing, 1997, p. 232.