

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

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Volume 22 | Issue 3

Article 4

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7-1-2005

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### Recommended Citation

Thacker, Justin (2005) "Lyotard and the Christian Metanarrative: A Rejoinder to Smith and Westphal," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 3 , Article 4.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil20052234

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol22/iss3/4>

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# LYOTARD AND THE CHRISTIAN METANARRATIVE: A REJOINDER TO SMITH AND WESTPHAL

Justin Thacker

Recently, James Smith and Merold Westphal have sought to reconcile Christianity with Lyotard's definition of the postmodern – "incredulity towards metanarratives" – by claiming that Christianity is not a metanarrative in Lyotard's sense. This paper argues that their understanding of the Lyotardian metanarrative is too restrictive, and that the term specifically includes Christianity within its scope. Despite this, though, there is a means by which Christianity and Lyotard can be brought closer together. That method is to understand Lyotard's refusal of metanarratives as being to some extent provisional. Combining this idea with Lyotard's notion of the differend allows Christianity and Lyotardian postmodernism to be found, if not in agreement, at least to coexist.

## I. Introduction

"En simplifiant à l'extrême, on tient pour *postmoderne* l'incredulité à l'égard des métarécits."<sup>1</sup>

"Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives."<sup>2</sup>

In any attempted rapprochement between Christianity and Lyotard's definition of the postmodern, Christian theologians and philosophers have tended to take one of two paths. In the first place, there are those who have focussed on the reason behind Lyotard's incredulity, asking the question: "What is it about metanarratives that engenders his scepticism?" So, for instance, Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh have seen in Lyotard's definition a suspicion of the totalising and oppressive character of metanarratives, and in response have sought to argue that Christianity is not that kind of story.<sup>3</sup> James Smith<sup>4</sup> and Merold Westphal<sup>5</sup> have trodden the second, and less common, path in two recent papers. Here the focus is on what constitutes a metanarrative, and the argument is made that in Lyotard's terms, Christianity does not qualify. The purpose of this paper is to criticize the solutions proffered by Smith and Westphal, arguing that Christianity represents a perfect example of a metanarrative. Despite this, though, I will point towards a third way in which at least a détente may be made between Lyotard's thesis and Christianity. That third way will centre on a thorough examination of Lyotard's own thought. Such an exploration



will reveal both the provisionality of his refusal of metanarratives and his acceptance of narrative conflict. Together these factors provide conceptual space for Christianity and Lyotard to be found sitting, if not in agreement, at least in the same room.

## II. Smith's Reason

Smith begins his paper by offering a criticism of what he terms "a common misreading of Lyotard."<sup>6</sup> He points towards Middleton and Walsh, chastising them for their ethical interpretation of metanarratives.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Stanley Grenz does not escape censure for, according to Smith,<sup>8</sup> focussing on the *scope* of metanarratives rather than their *nature*. In all of this, Smith repeatedly suggests that these authors' misunderstandings arise from a failure to pay sufficient attention to Lyotard's text.<sup>9</sup> What Smith will therefore offer in response is a "closer reading",<sup>10</sup> a reading that I now wish to examine. For it is my contention that in a number of ways Smith has himself misunderstood or ignored the text that he is claiming to scrutinise so carefully.

Smith starts by correctly unpacking the linguistic background to Lyotard's analysis, noting specifically Lyotard's description of sender, referent and addressee in any communicative action. The implication of this triad is that for communication to take place successfully, these elements must operate within a shared set of rules, rules that legitimate the type of discourse that takes place. This issue of legitimation then becomes central for both Lyotard and Smith, and, in this respect, Smith notes Lyotard's distinction between narrative knowledge and scientific knowledge. The former legitimates itself simply by being told. The latter, however, defines itself as requiring some form of external legitimation, in that science requires proof. It is at this point, though, that Smith begins to misunderstand Lyotard. He claims in at least four different places that science looks for this legitimation in a narrative grounded in universal reason. In addition, he suggests that this move is what defines or engenders a metanarrative for Lyotard. "For Lyotard, metanarratives are a distinctly *modern* phenomenon: they are stories which not only tell a grand story..., but also claim to be able to *legitimate* the story and its claims *by an appeal to universal Reason*."<sup>11</sup> It is this dual assertion – that modern scientific knowledge legitimates itself by a narrative of universal reason, and that this is what Lyotard means by a metanarrative – that I wish to contest. However, it is important to note here that what I am contesting is what Lyotard has said, not what actually may be the case. It may well be that modern scientific knowledge does legitimate itself with such an appeal, but that is *not* what Lyotard argues in *The Postmodern Condition*.

The first indication that Smith may have gone wrong is that his interpretation is unusual amongst the scholarly community. If one examines particularly the secular philosophers, there is a significant degree of unanimity on what Lyotard means by a metanarrative, and it is certainly not a legitimating narrative based on universal reason. So, Bill Readings describes the grand narrative as "the story that can reveal the meaning of all stories...Its metanarrative status comes from the fact that it talks about the many nar-

ratives of culture so as to reveal the singular truth inherent in them."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Gary Browning quotes with approval Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson's description thus: "In his (Lyotard's) conception of legitimating metanarrative, the stress properly belongs on the 'meta' and not the 'narrative'. It purports to be a privileged discourse capable of situating, characterizing and evaluating all other discourses."<sup>13</sup> And, in a similar fashion, Emilia Steurman describes the grand narrative, at least in *The Postmodern Condition*, as a "totalizing unity" that "grounds all other narratives."<sup>14</sup> What all these authors are getting at is that the metanarrative is a universal, legitimating narrative that seeks to ground, explain, reveal or otherwise control all other narratives. Now, of course, narratives based on universal reason may well fulfil this function. Lyotard himself points to the Enlightenment narrative as such an example. However, as Lyotard makes clear, this is but one case amongst many.<sup>15</sup> So a metanarrative *includes* Smith's description but is not *limited* to it.

The second reason to doubt Smith's thesis is that, despite its originality, Smith fails to provide the necessary support for it. On at least four occasions, he reasserts his claim that a metanarrative is a legitimating narrative based on universal reason.<sup>16</sup> However, at none of these points is Lyotard's work referred to. Indeed, the only place I am aware of where Lyotard does suggest that a metanarrative might be based on universal reason is in a letter published in the collection *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, where he states, "The appeal to modern ideals was an appeal to the universality of reason."<sup>17</sup> This seems to me the best evidence Smith has for his thesis, though he does not cite it. Yet, even here, there are problems, not least that the letter is not dealing with the issue of metanarratives. And when Lyotard refers to "modern ideals" the context of the passage indicates that he is talking specifically about Enlightenment ideals, and not about ideals more generally. As I have already said, the Enlightenment metanarrative certainly does fit Smith's description, but that is only one metanarrative amongst many and, as we will see later, not even the most important one for Lyotard.

The third reason to doubt Smith is to note that, for Lyotard, metanarratives draw their legitimation not from their arche but from their telos. Lyotard states, "[Metanarratives] look for legitimacy not in an original founding act but in a future to be accomplished, that is, in an Idea to be realised."<sup>18</sup> And similarly, he describes the "great narrative" as that "which promises at the end to reconcile the subject with itself."<sup>19</sup> The nature of that end is pluriform, but the point Lyotard is making is that what constitutes a metanarrative is the promise of such an end, not the origin or grounding ideology. Furthermore, in *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, Lyotard clarifies what he terms "the 'metanarratives' I was concerned with in *The Postmodern Condition*." Amongst others, there is "the salvation of creatures through the conversion of souls to the Christian narrative of martyred love."<sup>20</sup> The important point here is that Lyotard says nothing about grounding narratives upon universal reason, but he does point to Christianity as centered upon a "narrative of martyred love"<sup>21</sup> or elsewhere "hope."<sup>22</sup> Similarly, as well as noting the Enlightenment narrative, Lyotard also points to Romanticism<sup>23</sup> and an emancipatory narrative<sup>24</sup> as examples of such metanarratives, which in both cases he specifically makes clear are

not based on universal reason (see endnotes). The point of these examples – Christianity, Romanticism and emancipation – is to demonstrate that, according to Lyotard, examples can be given of metanarratives that are not grounded upon universal reason. This point is strengthened when one realises that in different places Lyotard uses two of these examples as paradigm cases for what a metanarrative looks like.<sup>25</sup>

All of my arguments so far could be considered mere proof texting, and therefore in this section of the paper I will outline the structure of Lyotard's argument in *The Postmodern Condition*. Having set the stage in chapters 1-5, Lyotard spells out in chapters 6 and 7 the respective natures of narrative knowledge and then scientific knowledge. Smith accurately comments upon this part of Lyotard's work. Then, at the end of chapter 7 and the start of chapter 8 Lyotard specifies the problem scientific knowledge has: "the demand for legitimation."<sup>26</sup> It is in response to this "demand" that Smith misunderstands Lyotard. He is of the opinion that such a demand is answered by an appeal to universal reason, but nowhere in chapters 8 or 9, where Lyotard lays out the answer, is universal reason *per se* mentioned. In chapter 8, Lyotard points to a whole series of narratives that have been used across time to legitimate scientific knowledge. He mentions Plato's dialogues, Descartes' *cogito* and Aristotle's metaphysics amongst others.<sup>27</sup> Then, in the recent modern period, he notes that the legitimation of science takes on some new nuances. These include an approval of narrative as a source of legitimation and, especially, a referral to "the people (the nation, or even humanity)" as the ultimate legitimator.<sup>28</sup> Even if one reads into these various narratives of legitimation an appeal to universal reason, it is immediately clear that such an appeal is not Lyotard's main concern, for the simple reason that he never mentions it. In fact the only unifying factor that Lyotard points to in all these narratives is just that – that they are only narratives. This point Smith acknowledges, but to assert that they are all based on universal reason is to read into the text something that is not there.

In the following chapter, Lyotard describes two paradigm examples of narratives of legitimation for scientific knowledge. The first of these is termed a "narrative of speculation" and the second a "narrative of emancipation." The important point to remember in this is that Lyotard specifically selects these two narratives as quintessential examples of what he considers metanarratives to be. In the first example, there possibly is room for Smith's thesis. Essentially, Lyotard is referring to Hegel's corpus as a narrative that legitimates scientific knowledge. He even goes so far as to describe it as "a rational narration, or rather metanarration"<sup>29</sup> and, in that way, Smith's contention may seem evident. Having said that, it certainly does not seem that this is the focus of Lyotard's attention. Most of his discussion on this speculative narrative is on its self-grounding, totalising nature rather than on any appeal to universal reason.

In the second narrative – the narrative of emancipation – any idea of universal reason is entirely absent. This narrative is one in which the people or humanity free themselves from the oppressors who would seek to deny them knowledge. "If the social subject is not already the subject of scientific knowledge, it is because that has been forbidden by priests and tyrants. The right to science must be reconquered."<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, Lyotard makes it clear that the motivation behind this narrative does not have to do with knowledge itself, but simply freedom. "The principle of the movement animating the people is not the self-legitimation of knowledge, but the self-grounding of freedom or, if preferred, its self-management."<sup>31</sup> The only role of knowledge in such a narrative is as a tool that the people use as and when they dictate. "Knowledge has no final legitimacy outside of serving the goals envisioned by the practical subject, the autonomous collectivity."<sup>32</sup> It is, of course, possible to argue that such a narrative of emancipation is itself predicated upon a higher narrative (a meta-metanarrative) that does appeal to universal reason, e.g. Marx's dialectical materialism. However, Lyotard does not leave this option open. He tells us that Marxism represents both of these narratives, "the proletariat that of the people or of humanity, dialectical materialism that of speculative idealism."<sup>33</sup> Lyotard's point seems specifically to be that the narrative of emancipation only has the people or humanity as its grounding ideology. It does not consist in an appeal to reason, and where one does introduce an appeal to reason, as in dialectical materialism, even if that reason is to ground such a narrative of emancipation, then because of that very fact it is a narrative of speculation, not one of emancipation.

Let me return then to how Lyotard introduces these two examples. He gives them as paradigms of what a metanarrative might look like. He calls them "major versions of the narrative of legitimation."<sup>34</sup> However, Lyotard's point is not to exhaust the category of metanarrative by them, but to demonstrate what it may look like. He states, "The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation."<sup>35</sup> It seems that in this very sentence we have a direct contradiction of Smith's thesis that it is the *nature* of metanarratives that is important to Lyotard. He is incredulous towards metanarratives "regardless of what mode of unification" they use, that is regardless of what kind of metanarrative they are, regardless of their nature. I am not sure how any other interpretation here is possible. In addition, Lyotard, by presenting a narrative that has nothing do with universal reason as one of his paradigm examples, casts significant doubt on Smith's suggestion that a metanarrative is, by definition, based on an appeal to universal reason. It can hardly be that if Lyotard's own prime example is not.

In summary, therefore, Smith's thesis that what Lyotard means by metanarratives are narratives that appeal to universal reason is fallacious. Lyotard does not suggest this, it conflicts with Lyotard's emphasis on a narrative's *telos* rather than *arche*, and Lyotard gives numerous examples of metanarratives that are specifically not grounded upon reason. Furthermore, in the four crucial chapters in *The Postmodern Condition*, metanarratives, whilst including those based on reason, are not limited by that description. Indeed, when Lyotard gives his two paradigm examples of metanarratives, he either disavows or ignores reason as a factor. Finally, it is perhaps for all these reasons that Smith's suggestion is less common amongst the scholarly community.

### III. Westphal's Autonomy

Westphal offers a more accurate discussion of Lyotard in his recent paper<sup>36</sup> He describes three defining features of a metanarrative that simultaneously demonstrate why Christianity is not a metanarrative in Lyotard's sense.<sup>37</sup> The first is that "A metanarrative is a metadiscourse in the sense of being a second-level discourse not directly about the world but about a first-level discourse."<sup>38</sup> The second point that Westphal makes is that metanarratives are primarily narratives of legitimation. They seek to legitimate the primary discourses that they govern, whatever the nature of those primary discourses.<sup>39</sup> All of this I would agree with as an exposition of Lyotard. However, it is on Westphal's third point that problems arise. In describing this final distinguishing mark that both defines the metanarrative and distinguishes it from Christianity, he looks to the provenance of both. "The third and final difference...concerns origins. [Christianity] has its origin in revelation, not in philosophy, and most especially not in modern philosophy, grounded in the autonomy of the human subject."<sup>40</sup>

There are three main reasons why this assertion cannot be upheld. The first of these is that Lyotard stresses again and again that concerning metanarratives it is not the origin of a narrative that matters, but its telos. I have already quoted (see above) two sections where Lyotard makes this point, but here is another. In a discussion in which he lists four points that distinguish the postmodern fable from the grand narrative, the third marker is an absence of "eschatology."<sup>41</sup> He states, "The end of this history is in no way directed toward the horizon of an emancipation."<sup>42</sup> Elsewhere, Lyotard comments on this one uniting factor of all the "great narratives" of the last two hundred years: "they all situate the data supplied by events within the course of a history whose end, even if it is out of reach, is called freedom."<sup>43</sup>

Westphal's description of the grounding of metanarratives provides us with the second reason to doubt his thesis. To begin with, it seems that Westphal's statement, "[Christianity] has its origin in revelation, not in philosophy," is surely begging the question. For Lyotard, all narratives have their origin in the human subject. The whole point of chapters 3 and 5 of *The Postmodern Condition* is to affirm that we are all linguistically conditioned, we cannot step out of our own linguistic context, whether that is to seize "reality" or "revelation". Westphal, of course, would agree with this. More than most, he has served Christianity well by reminding the church of her finitude. Hence, on both his and Lyotard's terms, it is not just that cultural conditioning affects our appropriation of revelation, but more than that, the very statement "[Christianity] has its origin in revelation" is so conditioned, and therefore just as much part of philosophy (in a broad sense) as anything else. Hence, to try to claim that because Christianity's roots are in revelation it can somehow escape the critique of philosophy is surely to beg the question. How do you know the origins of Christianity are such? You cannot, in any absolute sense. Therefore, Westphal's attempt to shield Christianity from the critique of philosophy stumbles before it even gets started.<sup>44</sup>

More plausible is Westphal's suggestion that Christianity does not find

its origin "in modern philosophy, grounded in the autonomy of the human subject." However, even this suggestion, on Lyotardian terms, is questionable. The important issue here is whether "the autonomy of the human subject" represents the *sine qua non* of metanarratives for Lyotard. Echoing the form of my argument with Smith, I would certainly agree that where one has a philosophy grounded in this way, it probably represents a metanarrative for Lyotard. The issue is whether this exhausts what Lyotard would consider to be metanarratives, and whether it is the primary issue for him in his definition of metanarratives. On the first of these points, an examination of Lyotard's attitude to Emmanuel Levinas will prove useful. For if anyone has written a philosophy based on the *heteronomy* of the human subject, it is Levinas. Therefore, if Lyotard embraces Levinas' scheme, we can safely conclude he does not consider it as one of those metanarratives to which he is incredulous. However, despite in many ways applauding Levinas, and drawing some of his own thought from him, it is precisely on this point that Lyotard begins to distance himself from him. In *Just Gaming*, Lyotard indicates that the difference between himself and Levinas is that while he considers Levinas' discourse as merely useful, Levinas considers it the "truth."<sup>45</sup> Lyotard then goes on to highlight what he considers as the danger of such an attitude: it tends to privilege or legitimate one discourse above all others.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, Lyotard gives an indication of why Levinas may end up in this position. Although he is trying to write a phenomenological ethics regarding our responsibility towards the Other, Levinas is not able to write about this without at the same time being ensnared by what Lyotard terms a "denotative metalanguage."<sup>47</sup> What Lyotard seems to be suggesting here is that, although he welcomes the essence of Levinas' discourse, he cannot accept the manner in which Levinas delineates it. His particular problem is if a discourse claims to apprehend the "truth," because it describes things as they really are, which is what Lyotard's "denotative metalanguage" alludes to.<sup>48</sup> This whole paradigm (denotative metadiscourse that apprehends reality and thereby legitimates other primary discourses) represents the language of metanarratives. Hence, although Lyotard nowhere describes Levinas' discourse as a metanarrative, he distances himself from it precisely on the same points that he distances himself from more typical metanarratives. The relevance of this is that it suggests that whether a narrative finds its locus in the autonomy or heteronomy of the subject, or indeed anything else about the *content* of a narrative, is not the important point for Lyotard. The significant factor for him seems to be much more general than this, related to the manner in which a narrative is described and held. And if this is right, then Westphal's suggestion that the "the autonomy of the human subject" is a defining feature of metanarratives cannot be upheld.

Finally, Westphal states bluntly, "Christianity is not Lyotard's target."<sup>49</sup> Once again, it should be clear by now that Christianity is precisely one of Lyotard's targets. I have quoted earlier Lyotard's clarification in *The Postmodern Explained to Children* where he specifically lists Christianity amongst his objects. Similarly, elsewhere, Lyotard lists what he considers to be the "great narratives" of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Not surprisingly, we find here the Enlightenment narrative, the Marxist narra-



tive, the Hegelian narrative and the capitalist narrative. However, what takes pride of place as the first narrative listed is "a Christian narrative in which Adam's sin is redeemed through love."<sup>50</sup> Of course, it would be possible for Westphal to argue that he has correctly described metanarratives, and that Lyotard is opposed to Christianity because he has misunderstood the nature of Christianity. The problem with this argument is that the features of Christianity that Lyotard points to – "a narrative of martyred love" and redemption through "love" – are hardly features with which Westphal would disagree. Furthermore, they are not features that Westphal's definition of metanarratives indicates. The simpler explanation is that Westphal's definition is inaccurate.

Hence, albeit in a less egregious way than Smith, even Westphal's description of metanarratives as those grounded in "the autonomy of the human subject" seems too restrictive. As he points out, Christianity is not grounded in such autonomy, yet Lyotard still considers it a metanarrative. So what are the defining features of a metanarrative for Lyotard and why is he incredulous towards them?

#### *IV. Lyotard's Definition*

It seems clear from Lyotard's own writing that there are three essential features to a metanarrative – essentially the three features that the scholarly community (Smith and Westphal excepted) has reached a consensus on (see discussion earlier). These features are 1) a second-level narrative about a primary discourse; 2) a legitimating discourse, that in some sense controls, explains or grounds other discourses; 3) a universal discourse that legitimates in this way all other discourses.<sup>51</sup> These points are not particularly contentious. The essence of my disagreement with Smith and Westphal is that they have added a fourth feature – grounded in universal reason and grounded in the autonomy of the human subject, respectively – that is unjustified on the basis of Lyotard's writings, and which inappropriately limits metanarratives in a way that Lyotard did not intend.

If I am right about this description of what Lyotard means by a metanarrative, the immediate question is why is he incredulous towards them? For if we examine his work, it becomes apparent that a certain degree of inconsistency is evident. Let us ask first whether Lyotard is incredulous simply because these narratives are second-level discourses. This seems almost certainly not the case, for the reason that at numerous points Lyotard himself advocates such meta-discourses with no sense of either embarrassment or irony.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, in some way all discourses are about other discourses and therefore meta in level. Secondly, is he incredulous because they are legitimating discourses, which by definition also include the idea that they are second-level discourses? At first sight, this may seem to be the case. However, taken alone, it cannot be, for, in *The Postmodern Condition*, there comes a curious section where Lyotard not only tolerates second-level legitimating discourses, he positively encourages them. The relevant section comes in the final chapter of that book, where Lyotard is discussing how we might act in a way that is just, given the plurality of language games that exist. He is against finding a rule of consensus (as per

Habermas), and therefore he suggests instead two particular moves. The first of these is to recognise the inherent "heteromorphous nature of language games" and not try to suppress it. The second is to make the rules that govern language games "local" and "finite", that is "subject to eventual cancellation." But the upshot of this move is to encourage "a multiplicity of finite meta-arguments, by which I mean argumentation that concerns metaprescriptives and is limited in space and time."<sup>53</sup> What Lyotard is arguing for here is the presence of multiple, restricted, second-level legitimating discourses, for that is exactly what the rules of a language game represent.<sup>54</sup> Hence, the presence of such a discourse alone is not what makes Lyotard incredulous. Is it then Lyotard's final factor, the universal, that is the source of his incredulity? Once again it cannot be universality *per se* that is the problem, given Lyotard's own lack of reticence when he writes in a universal way. (For instance, when he writes about language games as such, and without any further qualification.) A number of combinations are possible, but what is most likely is that what makes Lyotard incredulous is not any one of these three factors alone, but their combination in a single discourse. That is, Lyotard is incredulous towards narratives that are second-level *and* legitimating *and* universal. This certainly seems to be what Lyotard is getting at when in his explanation of metanarratives he states that they represent an Idea which "has legitimating value because it is universal. It guides every human reality."<sup>55</sup>

However, the question remains: what is it about the combination of these three factors in a metanarrative that makes Lyotard incredulous? The answer to this question is found in the final chapter of *Just Gaming*, a book published in the same year as *The Postmodern Condition*. In that work Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud have a discussion, arranged over seven days,<sup>56</sup> that examines the question of how justice is possible. In the final chapter of the book, entitled "Majority does not mean great number but great fear," the outlines of a conclusion are drawn, a conclusion that is explicated in more depth in *The Differend*. That conclusion centres on the fact that an injustice occurs whenever any particular language game oversteps its proper boundary and begins to intrude on another. This clearly happens whenever a language game makes pretensions to universality, so Lyotard writes, "any attempt to state the law, for example, to place oneself in the position of the enunciator of the universal prescription is obviously infatuation itself and absolute injustice, in point of fact."<sup>57</sup> Not only is such a pretension the characteristic of injustice, it is also necessarily a fiction. "[It is] impossible for anyone to establish her- or himself in a field and proceed to produce its laws in a sort of universal language or generalized metalanguage, and then go on to extend these laws to all the fields of language."<sup>58</sup> As will be clear, this is the language of metanarratives – universal, second-level, legitimating discourses – and Lyotard's incredulity towards them appears to centre on two poles. The first is that such narratives are unjust, due to their oppression and silencing of other narratives, and, secondly, that they are implausible. These two poles represent respectively a suspicion and scepticism towards metanarratives, which is indeed what the French term "incrédulité" indicates, having as it does a slightly broader semantic range than the English "incredulity." However, that is

not all that needs to be said. For if the factor driving this incredulity is merely any language game overstepping its bounds, then we should expect to find that Lyotard is incredulous even if the narrative does not make universal pretensions, but simply seeks to adjudicate on other narratives that are not properly part of its scope. And this is exactly what we find in *Just Gaming*. "Here one would have to ask whether a language game that becomes excessive...that is, precisely when such a language game begins to regulate language games that are not the same as itself, isn't such a language game always assisted by the sword?"<sup>59</sup> Lyotard goes on to spell out what this means: "Majority does not mean large number, it means great fear." This is a hugely significant statement, which explains its use as the title of this final chapter of *Just Gaming*. Lyotard's point is that what troubles him about metanarratives is the way in which they overstep their bounds, and begin to control or manipulate other narratives. Furthermore, he adopts this attitude irrespective of the content of the metanarrative involved. Another way of saying this is that all narratives must be local and finite and should claim nothing beyond themselves. The whole point of Lyotard's subsequent major work, *The Differend*, is to outline how we might then act given the inevitable contradictions and conflicts that will arise as a result of this idea.

#### V. Christianity

Now that we have established what Lyotard means by a metanarrative, and, more importantly, why he is incredulous towards them, we are in a position to situate Christianity within his framework. It should, of course, be immediately obvious that Christianity must be such a metanarrative, for almost any claim it makes will, for Lyotard, impinge upon the claims of other narratives. For Christians to claim that God exists, impinges upon the atheistic narratives; for Christians to claim Jesus died on a cross, impinges upon the Quranic narrative, and so on. Indeed, any narrative held with anything more than merely local intent has the feature of a metanarrative that makes Lyotard incredulous. It is not surprising, therefore, that throughout his writings, we do (contra Westphal) find Lyotard precisely describing Christianity as the kind of metanarrative that he is incredulous towards. Does this mean then that no rapprochement between Lyotard and Christianity is possible? To put it in his terms, can we do nothing but bear witness to this differend,<sup>60</sup> without seeking a solution? Do we indeed have to claim that Paris has nothing to do with Jerusalem?

I do not think we have to despair or give up any hope of an appropriate appropriation, but the solution to this problem is not to be found where Smith and Westphal have placed it, but rather, paradoxically enough, in a closer examination of Lyotard's own thought. The point of *Just Gaming* has been to examine whether justice is possible without resorting to the so-called justice of metanarratives or universal prescriptions. Lyotard seems ambivalent on whether such a justice is indeed possible, yet he does not want to leave the situation there. For, as he sees it, to do so would be to leave us open to "indifferentism, that is the bad side of the pagan line I am trying to trace."<sup>61</sup> Hence, almost despite himself, Lyotard ends the book

with this remarkable imperative: "And then the justice of multiplicity: it is assured, paradoxically enough, by a prescriptive of universal value." In light of this, it is no surprise that the final line is given to Jean-Loup Thébaud: "Here you are talking like the great prescriber himself...(laughter)."<sup>62</sup> The question in all of this is how can Lyotard, who has spent the whole book railing against universal prescriptives, end by asserting one himself? Lyotard does not particularly pursue this question other than in the ironic laughter that accompanies the close of the book. Indeed, a number of authors, not least Samuel Weber who provides an afterword to *Just Gaming*, point to this facet of Lyotard's thought, and accuse him of inconsistency and self-contradiction.<sup>63</sup> Having said this, there is a quotation at the start of *Just Gaming* that may provide an insight into what Lyotard is doing here. That quotation, from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, runs like this: "The rule of the undetermined is itself undetermined." In using this quotation at the start, and by ending the book with ironic laughter, it seems as though Lyotard is indicating the means by which he can make that prescription. That method is akin to the one that Westphal uses to demonstrate why there is no performative self-contradiction in the postmodern claim that "the truth is that there is no Truth."<sup>64</sup> For Westphal, the answer to this problem is to highlight the difference in capitalisation, and thereby claim that when postmoderns assert the truth of their prohibition on Truth, those words indicate two different things. In the latter case, it is a claim to absolute certainty, but in the former, it is a mere description of what currently seems best to us given our finitude. In a parallel fashion, it seems possible that what Lyotard is claiming is a *provisional* prescription against *absolute, certain* prescriptions. That is what both the quotation and laughter are alluding to.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, Lyotard's definition of the postmodern can also be viewed in the same way. This is so because it exemplifies the core features of a metanarrative (universal, second-level, legitimating), and yet, there is no contradiction if the definition is understood as merely a provisional rejection of metanarratives held absolutely.<sup>66</sup>

The upshot of this understanding is that two<sup>67</sup> options then open up for the Christian seeking a reconciliation with Lyotard. The first is to claim that their Christianity is both provisional and only provisionally rejects other absolute metanarratives.<sup>68</sup> This position is consistent with Lyotard and arguably theologically defensible, though to do so would require another paper.<sup>69</sup> The second option, however, makes such a requirement redundant as it retains an absolute commitment to Christianity and yet still seeks a détente with Lyotard. The nub of this second option is to recognise that such a position does indeed conflict with Lyotard's description of the postmodern. However, one does not stop there, but instead appeals to Lyotard's notion of the differend as a way to hold both Lyotard and Christianity, if not in agreement, at least in coexistence. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* is by his own estimation Lyotard's most important work. He wrote it whilst completing both *The Postmodern Condition* and *Just Gaming* and in it he sets out his response to the problem of narrative conflict. He recognises that frequently narratives are in disagreement, and suggests that this occurs because there are no overarching grand narratives that can equitably sort out the disputes. He asks what we should do in this

circumstance, and his suggestion is that we “bear witness” to these differends, that is acknowledge and describe them, but not attempt to resolve them. “What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them.”<sup>70</sup> Indeed, he goes further and suggests any forced attempt at resolution inevitably unjustly silences one side or the other.<sup>71</sup> In light of this, we can now return to the conflict between an absolute commitment to Christianity and Lyotard’s definition of the postmodern. It seems obvious that if the Lyotardian is to remain faithful to Lyotard, she cannot preclude the Christian narrative, both on the grounds of her merely provisional rejection of metanarratives and Lyotard’s acceptance of differends. Now, clearly, such a situation is not an agreement between Christianity and Lyotard, but it is at least a coexistence. Therefore, whether one holds one’s Christianity with absolute certainty or merely provisionally, either way Lyotard’s definition of the postmodern does not necessarily exclude Christianity.<sup>72</sup>

To conclude, if we are to be fair to Lyotard, we must accept that Christianity is indeed a metanarrative. However, the solution to this problem is not to evade the point or to suggest that Lyotard has misunderstood Christianity. Rather, it is to examine more closely Lyotard’s work, and, paradoxically, by remaining more faithful to him, find the resources to situate both his thought and Christianity at least in the same room.

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#### NOTES

1. Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport Sur Le Savoir* (Paris: Les Editions De Minuit, 1979), p. 7.

2. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

3. J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than it Used to be* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995), chapters 4 and 5.

4. James K.A. Smith, “A Little Story About Metanarratives: Lyotard, Religion, And Postmodernism Revisited,” *Faith and Philosophy* 18:2 (2001) pp 353-368.

5. Merold Westphal, ‘Onto-theology, Metanarrative, Perspectivism and the Gospel’, *Perspectives*, April 2000, pp. 6-10. The relevant parts of this article were rearranged and represented in the Introduction to Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), pp. xii-xvi. References in this paper will be to Westphal’s text as it appears in the latter publication.

6. Smith, “A Little Story”, p. 355.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 355-356.

8. Almost certainly Smith constructs a straw man here as it is far from clear that Grenz’s focus is primarily on the *scope* of narratives. Indeed most of Grenz’s analysis is directed toward the legitimating *nature* of metanarratives rather than their *scope*. As the quotation that Smith includes states, Grenz’s comment on the “universality” of metanarratives only comes as a conclusion to

a previous discussion of their nature. See *Ibid.*, p. 357 and Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 44-46.

9. Smith, "A Little Story", pp. 355, 356 and especially p. 364 where in footnote n. 15 Smith tells us his goal is to "push us beyond the stereotype of post-modernism by actually reading the text of *The Postmodern Condition*." Unfortunately Smith does himself no favours in this regard by on at least three occasions (pp. 353-354) indicating that Lyotard's phrase for metanarratives is "grand récits" when in fact it is universally "métarécits" (See Lyotard, *La Condition*). Notwithstanding that *métarécit* and *grand récit* are used almost interchangeably by Lyotard, they are not entirely synonymous terms as Lyotard tends to use the latter when referring to specific grand narratives whereas the former term is more often used when referring to metanarratives in a more general sense. This may seem to be overly pedantic but if Smith is going to quote the French and criticise others for not "reading the text", then it behoves him to be especially careful in his own analysis.

10. Smith, "A Little Story", p. 358.

11. Smith, "A Little Story", p.354. See also pp. 359, 360, 361 for a repeat of this claim.

12. Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard* (London: Routledge, 1991) p. 63.

13. Gary Browning, *Lyotard and the end of Grand Narratives* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000) p. 2.

14. Emilia Steurman, 'Habermas vs Lyotard' in Andrew Benjamin (Ed), *Judging Lyotard* (London: Routledge, 1992) p. 110.

15. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

16. Smith, "A Little Story", pp. 354 (third paragraph), 359 (third paragraph), 360 (first and second paragraph), 361 (third paragraph).

17. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, trans. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas (London: Turnaround, 1992) p. 111.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

19. Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 97.

20. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, p. 29.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

22. Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p. 96.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 97. Notwithstanding those authors who argue that Romanticism is a variant on rationalism, Lyotard himself does not think so. Indeed, he specifically defines it in opposition to what he terms "modus logicus". See *Ibid.*, p. 24-25.

24. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 36-37. See later in the text for why a narrative of emancipation does not equate with dialectical materialism and therefore universal reason according to Lyotard.

25. Christianity in Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, pp. 95-97. Proletariat emancipation in Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. 31-37.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 28,29.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 30,31.

29. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 33.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

36. Westphal, 'Onto-theology', pp. 6-10. Westphal, *Overcoming*, pp. xii-xvi.

37. Although my aim at this point is to demonstrate that Westphal's description of the metanarrative is incorrect; it seems to me that even if we accept Westphal's delineation his distancing of Christianity from that definition is questionable. For instance, he claims that Christianity is not a second-level discourse. Accepting that much of Christianity is a primary discourse I am not sure how he can claim that a discourse about God is not in some sense second level. To posit the existence of a theistic (as opposed to deistic) God cannot help but have implications for all kinds of discourses whether we articulate them or not. For the same reason, I cannot see how Christianity is not at some level legitimating. Westphal tries to avoid this by claiming it only legitimates the kingdom of God and not us (cf. *Ibid.*, p. xv). But unless he supposes the kingdom of God has nothing to do with 'us', then at some level it does legitimate us, a point he seems to partially acknowledge.

38. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

39. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. xiv-xv.

41. Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p. 99.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

43. Andrew Benjamin (Ed), *The Lyotard Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1989), p. 315.

44. Ironically this is the very criticism that Smith offers towards Brian Ingraffia in his paper. See Smith, 'A Little Story', p. 365.

45. Jean-François Lyotard & Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 60.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

47. Benjamin, *The Lyotard*, p. 308. See also p. 378.

48. Whether Lyotard is being fair to Levinas here is a moot point. My purpose is simply to describe how Lyotard sees thing, not to criticize his analysis of Levinas.

49. Westphal, *Overcoming*, p. xv.

50. Benjamin, *The Lyotard*, p. 315. See also Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, pp. 95-96, where Paul of Tarsus is the first example given of a "great narrative".

51. The astute reader will have noticed the absence of a determinate telos from this list which earlier in my discussion I indicated was a characteristic feature of metanarratives. The reason for this is that although Lyotard points to such a hope as a frequent feature of metanarratives he nowhere describes it as a necessary feature. It is for that reason that I have left it out of this list.

52. See for instance Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. 65,66 and Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 69.

53. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 66.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

55. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained.*, pp. 29-30.

56. The discussions actually took place over seven months between November 1977 and June 1978.

57. Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, p. 99.

58. *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

60. Lyotard's solution to the question: how should we act given the conflicts (differends) that will arise if no metanarratives are allowed? See later in the text for a further exposition of this idea.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 103-105. See also Browning, *Lyotard*.

64. Westphal, *Overcoming*, pp. 75-88.

65. Further support for this contention is to be found in the numerous occasions in *Just Gaming* where Lyotard modifies his strident calls for paganism (a situation of no universal prescriptions) in an effort to provide some kind of regulative ethical framework. C.f. Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, pp. 73-100, especially, 74,76, 77, 86, 93,94.

66. This provisional / absolute contrast should be distinguished from the local / universal contrast already highlighted. The former of these contrasts relates to the strength of belief in the one holding the narrative. The latter contrast is a feature of the narrative itself, its scope. Hence, Lyotard's definition represents a universal narrative held provisionally. That it is possible to hold a narrative with both universal intent and with provisionality should, of course, be obvious. A new theory in particle physics whose evidence base is not strong may have exactly this combination of features. Any confusion between the two may be due to Michael Polanyi considering both as aspects of 'commitment'. However, they can, and should, be understood separately.

67. Possibly three. See footnote 72.

68. Both of these points fall out from remaining faithful to Lyotard's position as a provisional rejection of absolute metanarratives. The former must be accepted as otherwise Christianity would be provisionally rejected, an odd position for a Christian. The latter must be accepted, as otherwise the Lyotardian Christian is not being faithful to Lyotard. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for prompting me to clarify these points.

69. Though, see Westphal who *inter alios* has possibly provided the resources to do so. Westphal, *Overcoming*, pp. 75-88.

70. Lyotard, *Differend*, p. 13.

71. *Ibid.*, pp. 9,10.

72. There does exist a third option for the Christian seeking reconciliation with Lyotard. That third way centers on the idea that perhaps Lyotard himself by utilising the provisionality of his definition accepts just one absolute metanarrative: the narrative that rejects all other metanarratives. Such a situation generates a self-contradiction, but arguably, a contradiction that Lyotard can accommodate via his notion of the differend. In such a setting it becomes apparent that Lyotard's acceptance of one metanarrative is almost arbitrary, and therefore the Christian can also choose to accept just one absolute metanarrative with as much right as Lyotard has accepted his (a tu quoque argument). Once again, this would not represent an agreement between Lyotard and Christianity, but rather a mutual co-existence. The steps of this argument have only been laid out in an inchoate form here, and a more fully worked description will have to wait for another paper. I am grateful to William Hasker and an anonymous referee. I am also grateful to Murray Rae and Jim Olehuis for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.