Mediator 12, no. 1 (2017): 1–44

The Postmodern Condition and the Christian Open Narrative

Phillip E. Davis, Ph.D.

Abstract

In this paper, I consider the changes in knowledge brought about within countries developing into post-industrial societies. Shifts in the legitimation of knowledge bring about a situation described as "the postmodern condition." For insight into the current critical consciousness, I consider Jean-François Lyotard's analysis of knowledge in contemporary society. I also look at his "phrase pragmatics," in which he demonstrates the dispersal of knowledge experienced in developed countries. A second condition accompanies the splintering of knowledge in the West. Specifically, the modern grand narratives have lost credibility. This affects the legitimization of knowledge in all fields, including theology and education. For a theological response, I turn to Lieven Boeve's analysis of Lyotard's work. Boeve receives the latter's critique: namely, that the Christian narrative can degenerate into a hegemonic meta-narrative. However, Boeve argues that the Christian narrative is naturally an "open narrative," which resists hegemonic narratives, while testifying to the event of God's grace. Still, Boeve notes that any witness bearing must necessarily betray the event, even as it tries to give expression to it through language. I conclude then with a brief presentation of Boeve's model of the "open narrative," along with a few implications this model has for a theology working in the current postmodern context.

Nations in post-industrial societies experience changes in knowledge that have a tremendous effect on culture. These changes also affect theology and the witness it gives to the Christian faith. Previous expressions of the faith may no longer communicate effectively for people within those societies. During times of great transition, theology is called to explain the faith in culturally relevant terms. Roughly four decades ago, Western countries began to experience the postmodern condition. This resulted naturally from the rapid expansion of knowledge in post-industrialized nations. Since this shift was first reported, the rapid expansion of knowledge has spread around the globe. No other people, at any other time in human history, have seen difference so clearly as people living today. Increasingly, therefore, theologians share their reflections on faith in a postmodern culture. In order to gain insight into these changes, we turn to the philosophical analysis offered by Jean-François Lyotard.

1. Jean-François Lyotard

In 1979, Jean-François Lyotard gained international recognition for a small work submitted to the Canadian government.[1] His report, entitled *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* analyzed Occidental culture as coming increasingly under the influence of technological and informational narratives—stories that legitimize knowledge in the West.[2] Lyotard summarized his findings in these terms:

> Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements—narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. However, we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable.[3]

One phrase stood out from the report: his overly simplified definition of the postmodern as "incredulity toward metanarratives." In this same pamphlet, Lyotard announced a coming work that would further explain his thought. This later work has been largely ignored by theologians.[4] Rather,

---

[1] See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans., Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Theory and History of Literature, vol. 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxv. Lyotard calls this writing an "occasional one"—"a report on knowledge in the most highly developed societies"—which was presented to the government of Quebec.

[2] Jean François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport Sur Le Savoir* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979).

[3] Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

[4] See Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Différend* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1983). This extremely difficult book preforms Lyotard's understanding of his phrase pragmatics. For

Lyotard functions as an *auctoritas* within other peoples' (theological) arguments. Numerous journal articles cite the Lyotardian phrase—"incredulity toward metanarratives"—as a definition of the postmodern before launching out in a direction that was predetermined by its author. This does an injustice to the philosopher, since it reduces his complex thought to a three-word slogan.

During the 1980's, Lyotard found an eager audience in many Western university liberal arts departments. His oeuvre covers many diverse subjects such as philosophy, history, the arts, etc. Theologians have interacted with other postmodern writers (e.g., Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Richard Rorty, among others), while largely ignoring Lyotard. This impoverishes theology; for his analysis of language and the current state of knowledge can benefit a theology seeking understanding. The condition Lyotard describes as a "crisis of metaphysical philosophy" increasingly affects theology, as well as the universities promulgating such thought. For only certain forms of knowledge receive universal legitimation: namely, the pragmatic, useful, and technological forms. One sees the effect of this crisis in the Church's (often) defensive response to new forms of knowledge. It is detected as well in the small number of young people seeking ecclesiastical careers—in contrast to those entering the technical, engineering, and scientific fields. In this paper, we will argue that a theology that seeks understanding, *fides quaerens intellectum*, can benefit from engaging with Lyotard's postmodern critical philosophy. But theologians should do so to gain a critical understanding of knowledge in current thought—not to build a cool, new, postmodern theology.

2. The Postmodern condition

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard deals with "the question of knowledge in advanced industrial societies."[5] Shifts in knowledge occur in soci-

---

the English translation, see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Theory and History of Literature, vol. 46 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

[5] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 13. It is important to note here that Lyotard is dealing with a particular "contemporary society and culture": namely, "postindustrial society, [and] postmodern culture" in the West. See ibid., 37.

eties as they move from an industrial to a post-industrial phase, according to Lyotard. In such societies, knowledge is legitimized pragmatically: i.e., through its performativity or "use-value." Forms of knowledge that can be put to use are (demonstratively) true; whereas, metaphysical or narratival truth claims are held as suspect. Simply said, they have lost legitimacy. The former forms of knowledge fall within the realm of experts; whereas, philosophers and artists deal in the latter forms. Knowledge continues to advance in such societies, as more sophisticated machines are developed, and knowledge continues to increase, in a process similar to what happened in the development of transportation and communication. Knowledge is converted into information and is, therefore, separated from the "knower" (i.e., from one with a trained mind). Instead, it becomes exchangeable. As knowledge is converted into information, only the bits of information are remembered. Other forms of knowledge, which cannot be translated into computerized language, are immediately forgotten.[6]

2.1 Narratival knowledge

However, traditional narrative knowledge makes its own claim. Such forms of knowledge confront the modern practice of legitimizing knowledge through technological or scientific means with their own claims. These narratives "jar the golden rule of our knowledge" when they exhort their addressees to "never forget."[7] Traditional knowledge is incommensurable with Western scientific or technological narratives, which claim an independent, "objective observer" as the one who legitimizes their claims. These latter (scientific) games are played by experts. However, narratival knowledge uses a different set of rules, making it incommensurate with the Occidental language game. One sees a difference in the temporal sense employed in the traditional narrative: a narratee, who recounts the narrative, is also located as one within a group—the group of people thus narrated. One is included within the narrative as both sender, hearer, and object (or more technically, as addressor, addressee, and referent). In narrative knowledge, one never forgets; for the founding events are recounted

[6] See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 4.

[7] Ibid., 22.

from one generation to the next. According to Lyotard, "Narration is the quintessential form of customary knowledge."[8] Such stories form the social bond. Lyotard refers to traditional narrative knowledge in *The Postmodern Condition* to show the diversity of language games. There he argues that various discourse genres use different rules to "win" in a game in which they all compete.[9]

2.2 The dispersal of knowledge

Scientific knowledge plays by its own set of rules, as well. But the rules science uses—namely, verification and falsification—are incommensurate with those used by narratives. The scientist concludes therefore that the narrative's referents are not true (i.e., they are not established, since proof cannot be given for their existence). However, narratives play by their own set of rules. As a result, a story may, or may not, incorporate insights gained through the scientific method. If it does, the narrative will renarrate this insight as one of the story's many recounted events. Different forms of knowledge use various, particular rules. Thus, it is as impossible to legitimize narratival knowledge by scientific procedures as it is to judge the latter by the former. Lyotard is left "in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species." However, he argues that in postmodernity "lamenting the 'loss of meaning'... boils down to mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative."[10] Knowledge is dispersed in the postmodern condition. Indeed, the existence of modern universities—whose role is to further extend knowledge—attests to the diversity of various forms of knowledge.[11]

---

[8] Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 19.

[9] This analysis is more completely elaborated in *The Differend*.

[10] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 26. He notes, however, that when scientists explain their (non-narratival) findings to the public they often employ epic language (i.e., they construct stories). Lyotard writes, "It is not inconceivable that the recourse to narrative is inevitable, at least to the extent that the language game of science desires its statements to be true but does not have the resources to legitimate their truth on its own. If this is the case, it is necessary to admit an irreducible need for history understood... as a need to forget" (ibid., 27–28).

[11] Lyotard identifies a narrative grounding modern scientific practice, as seen in the founding of the university system in Berlin, Germany, in the speculative discourse of Ger-

This diversification of knowledge results naturally from progress itself. The growth of knowledge, resulting from rapidly increasing technological transformations, brings necessary changes to the nature of knowledge. Since the number of languages continues to grow, no one can speak them all.[12] Knowledge appears to be "splintering." As a result, the realization dawns that no universal metalanguage exists that is capable of legitimizing all forms of knowledge. Rather, each discourse of knowledge must legitimize itself.

2.3 Language games

Artists and philosophers in Vienna began to grapple with this realization at the turn of the twentieth century. In contrast to the positivists, Wittgenstein's investigations into language games leads to

> a kind of legitimation not based on performativity. That is what the postmodern world is all about. Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction.[13]

For example, science uses a number of language discourses to legitimize its empirical practices. Logic is employed, as a metalanguage, to establish well-formed expressions, which other scientists adhere to in their own re-

---

man Idealism, which, in bringing together all of the disparate forms of knowledge, constructs its own metanarrative. This, of course, is a different legitimation than that of usefulness. Today, however, knowledge finds its legitimacy in "humanity," i.e., in our ability to govern ourselves. Knowledge informs us about the reality in which our prescriptions—i.e., what we want and thus legislate—are to be carried out. Within such a narrative, "knowledge has no final legitimacy outside of serving the goals envisioned by the practical subject, the autonomous collectivity," i.e., the state. See Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 31–36.

[12] Languages continue to increase in all fields of knowledge. Along with symbolism used in chemistry and notation employed in calculus, Lyotard mentions "machine languages, the matrices of game theory, new systems of musical notation, systems of notation for nondenotative forms of logic (temporal logics, modal logics), the language of the genetic code, graphs of phonological structures, and so on" (ibid., 40–41).

[13] Ibid., 41.

search.[14] Clarity is required, since science is a dialectic that calls for consensus among its addressees.[15] Therefore, scientific statements must adhere to logical conventions for the creation of "well-formed" statements, in order to render judgment.[16] Other language discourses also appear within scientific research: the prescriptive, which sets the conditions for scientific statements; the denotative, which expresses the (hypothesized) state of the referent before it is "proven"; and the ostensive, which "proves" the referent through observation by sight, hearing, or some other sense. Thus, as stated above, science is a form of knowledge that engages in its own form of "communicational interaction."

2.4 Performativity

Historically, the scientific enterprise was conducted under idealistic and humanist narratives of legitimation (i.e., Spirit or truth). However, today "the production of proof... falls under the control of another language game, in which the goal is no longer truth, but performativity—that is, the best possible input/output equation."[17] Today, the point of research is power. As Lyotard writes, "Scientists, technicians, and instruments are

[14] Languages are used pragmatically in scientific research. Each language "must formulate its own rules and petition the addressee to accept them. To satisfy this condition, an axiomatic is defined that includes a definition of symbols to be used in the proposed language, a description of the form expressions in the language must take in order to gain acceptance (well-formed expressions), and an enumeration of the operations that may be performed on the accepted expressions (axioms in the narrow sense)" (Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 42).

[15] That is, new findings are put to other scientists, within the scientific community, who, after reviewing the evidence presented, give consent that the evidence validates (or invalidates) claims made by the addressor(s).

[16] But logic itself may be questioned. By what means does logical discourse legitimize its own ways of determining whether or not statements are "well-formed"? The logician's problem is that "all formal systems have internal limitations," and language, which is used to express axioms, is inconsistent. For "it allows the formation of paradoxes." This creates a question, regarding the legitimation of knowledge: the sciences "owe their status to the existence of a language whose rules of functioning cannot themselves be demonstrated but are the object of a consensus among experts." See ibid. 43.

[17] Ibid., 46.

purchased not to find truth, but to augment power."[18] However, technical ability increases one's ability to obtain proof, so it also necessarily influences "the truth criterion." Simply said: something is true because it works. Improved performance, therefore, produces a pseudo form of *de facto* legitimation.

> This procedure operates within the following framework: since "reality" is what provides the evidence used as proof in scientific argumentation, and also provides prescriptions and promises of a juridical, ethical, and political nature with results, one can master all of these games by mastering "reality." That is precisely what technology can do. By reinforcing technology, one "reinforces" reality, and one's chances of being just and right increase accordingly. Reciprocally, technology is reinforced all the more effectively if one has access to scientific knowledge and decision-making authority.[19]

Lyotard argues that power functions in a cycle of self-legitimation: where the law and science, as well as their particular discourses, are legitimized through efficiency; while that very efficiency is legitimized through science and law. This creates a self-legitimizing cycle that has tremendous implications for other areas of society, including, notably, higher education.

2.5 Education

The criterion of performativity has a deep effect on education, for it begins to be governed by the idea of knowledge through power. Immediately the idea of education as the transmission of an established body of (traditional) knowledge is delegitimized. Education no longer has the role of training the "liberal elite," who guide society along a path towards social progress or emancipation. Rather, education is expected to produce experts and managers, who have the necessary skills required for improving the efficiency of social systems.[20] Higher education, therefore, becomes

[18] Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 46.
[19] Ibid., 47.
[20] Ibid., 48–49.

functional, and the place of professors—as those who transmit a body of knowledge—is replaced by computers transmitting knowledge to students.[21] This functionalization of knowledge fundamentally changes the role of education. For "when it comes to speaking the truth or prescribing justice, numbers are meaningless."[22] However, numbers do matter when one is putting research teams together, for "teamwork does in fact improve performance."[23]

2.6 Breakthroughs

While research and education are legitimized through performativity, this is not the source of scientific breakthroughs. Teams of researchers advance knowledge and push research forward; however, they do so through paralogy—not through consensus. That is, they look to break established ways of thinking in order to find a newer and better idea. Lyotard writes,

> Science does not expand by means of the positivism of efficiency. The opposite is true: working on a proof means searching for and "inventing" counterexamples, in other words, the unintelligible; supporting an argument means looking for a "paradox" and legitimating it with new rules in the games of reasoning. In neither case is efficiency sought for its own sake; it comes, sometimes tardily, as an extra, when the grant givers finally decide to take an interest in the case. But what never fails to come and come again, with every new theory, new hypothesis, new statement, or new observation, is the question of legitimacy. For it is not philosophy that asks this question of science, but science that asks it of

[21] Lyotard writes, "But one thing that seems certain is that in both cases the process of delegitimation and the predominance of the performance criterion are sounding the knell of the age of the Professor: a professor is no more competent than memory bank networks in transmitting established knowledge, no more competent than interdisciplinary teams in imagining new moves or new games" (Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition.*, 53). In line with Lyotard's thought, one wonders today about the professor's role once his or her lectures are recorded as video and made available for on-line instruction. Computers never tire, get sick, demand raises, or protest. And networks transmit information efficiently.

[22] Ibid., 52.

[23] Ibid.

itself.[24]

Thus, the problem of legitimizing knowledge appears over and over again. The increasing particularity and sophistication of knowledge—thus its "splintering"—is seen in the difference between the physical sciences and the human sciences. While the hard sciences legitimize their findings through a dialectic carried out among fellow scientists, which establishes a referent (i.e., nature) through denotative statements, the human sciences deal with a referent (i.e., a human) that argues back, develops strategies, and counters scientific moves with its own move. Nature is an indifferent referent, but a human is involved—agonistic.[25]

2.7 Paralogy and dissensus

Lyotard closes his argument in *The Postmodern Condition* by contrasting paralogy and systems based on a body knowledge. Such systems strive for balance, stability, and uniformity. They function through a pragmatics of consensus. While knowledge does in fact continue to develop within such systems—governed by a paradigm and functioning through consensus—it is the idea that upends the current paradigm that promulgates "new norms of understanding."[26] As we previously said, occasionally someone comes along with such a new idea. As Lyotard notes, discoveries "are unpredictable."[27] They arise with the request that practitioners follow a different language game.

Throughout *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard points to the different language games used to legitimize the heterogeneous forms of knowledge in postindustrial societies. For example, he writes,

> From the beginning of this study, I have emphasized the differences (not only formal, but also pragmatic) between the various language games, especially between denotative, or knowledge, games and prescriptive, or action, games. The pragmatics of science is centered on denotative utterances, which are the foundation upon which it builds institutions of learning (institutes, cen-

[24] Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 54.
[25] Ibid., 57.
[26] Ibid., 61.
[27] Ibid.

> ters, universities, etc.). But its postmodern development brings a decisive "fact" to the fore: even discussions of denotative statements need to have rules. Rules are not denotative but prescriptive utterances, which we are better off calling metaprescriptive utterances to avoid confusion (they prescribe what the moves of language games must be in order to be admissible). The function of the differential or imaginative or paralogical activity of the current pragmatics of science is to point out these metaprescriptives (science's "presuppositions") and to petition the players to accept different ones. The only legitimation that can make this kind of request admissible is that it will generate ideas, in other words, new statements.[28]

However, unlike science which uses a "simple" pragmatics, social pragmatics employs many disparate, competing language games, within networks of linguistic phrases. Recognition of this situation signals the postmodern condition.[29] The idea that one metalanguage can regulate all of the sentences used in social pragmatics is abandoned. According to Lyotard, this describes the current inability to believe in traditional or "modern" narratives of legitimation.[30] In fact, the use of the word "system" is an attempt to deal with the loss of such a regulating story.

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard announces the coming of another philosophical work—a book that will further work out his thought. There he pleads that we pay attention to the dispute that breaks out in "language." For justice must be done to those who are victimized by terror, and this can only be expressed when we take dissensus seriously.[31]

---

[28] Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 65.

[29] Lyotard mentions these: "denotative, prescriptive, performative, technical, evaluative, etc." (ibid.).

[30] Again, among the "modern" narratives of legitimation, Lyotard mentions "the emancipation of humanity" and "the realization of the Idea" (ibid).

[31] Here I begin to anticipate Lyotard's position in *The Differend*. However, at the end of *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard writes, "Consensus has become an outmoded and suspect value. But justice as a value is neither outmoded nor suspect. We must thus arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus" (Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 66).

3. The differend

The work Lyotard announced appeared in 1983, in French, as *Le différend*. In this long book, Lyotard performs a reading of philosophy, history, and politics, without trying to impose criteria upon these disciplines. He searches, thereby, for the rule that will do justice to the event as expressed in these particular disciplines. *The Differend* is a book that demands much of its reader: for Lyotard attempts to write with a "zero degree style," in the form of "Observations, Remarks, Thoughts, and Notes."[32] Arranged like a philosopher's notebook, the thought is given into the reader's hand. Lyotard provides a clue for the reader in the "reading dossier" that precedes the work: "the whole is to be read in sequence."[33] However, as the A. (i.e., author, addressor, or addressee?)[34] notes, the book is "too voluminous, too long, and too difficult."[35] However, this dossier permits the reader "to 'talk about the book' without having read it."[36] For philosophical reflection takes time—something people will not suffer, since success requires "gaining time."

3.1 Language pragmatics

In *The Differend*, Lyotard performs his concept of language pragmatics. Here the reader encounters the radical heterogeneity found in "language." The radical differences between particular genres of discourse—alluded to in *The Postmodern Condition*—are sketched out in (sometimes) excruciating detail. *The Differend* is organized into 264 numbered reflections, which are interrupted by a number of Notices or "reading notes for philosophical texts."[37] Once the reader leaves the reading dossier, s/he plunges

---

[32] Lyotard, *The Differend*, xiv.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Lyotard argues that phrases "happen," so he effaces the role of the author, as a way of undoing the "subject"—hero of the Enlightenment project. He says that "in writing this book, the A. had the feeling that his sole addressee was the *Is it happening?* It is to it that the phrases which happen call forth." Here Lyotard can be understood to be the author (of the phrases in the book), addressor (of the event or the reader), or addressee (of the phrases that happen). See ibid., xvi.

[35] Ibid., xv.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid., xiv.

deep into Lyotard's discussion with a number of philosophers—a conversation that encompasses the whole history of philosophy.[38]

3.2 Silence and the differend

Lyotard's philosophy of the phrase centers on the idea of the *differend* (*différend*). A differend is the dispute that erupts at the presentation of a phrase, or in the occurrence of an event. He writes, "The differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be. This state includes silence, which is a negative phrase, but it also calls upon phrases which are in principle possible."[39] Lyotard's philosophy of the phrase seeks to express (somehow) the inexpressible phrase. A sentence must be phrased, but cannot be phrased under the rules governing the (then current) discourse. The condition of a differend—or dispute—is signaled by a feeling. One must look for the right words, and struggles to do so.[40] This feeling signifies that a search must be made for a new rule (or rules) capable of bearing witness to the event, i.e., to the thing to which the feeling alludes. A phrase must be phrased. A search must be made for a way to express the (as yet) inexpressible. Otherwise, the event is immediately forgotten and smothered in a litigation.[41] During this unstable moment in language, something "asks" to be expressed and suffers from its inability to be put into words. Lyotard calls this a wrong (*tort*)—the suffering of a damage (*dommage*), along with an accompanying inability to communicate this loss to other people.[42]

---

[38] For example, early on Lyotard discusses the dispute between Plato and Gorgias (the father of rhetoric). See the "Gorgias Notice," in Lyotard, *The Differend*, 14–16.

[39] Throughout this article, Lyotard's number for particular reflections in *The Differend* will also be cited, to make them easier to locate. See ibid., 13 [D22].

[40] Ibid.

[41] That is, the event is translated into a phrase regimen that cannot signify its witness, or an end is imposed on it by the prevailing discourse genre. As a result, the event is reduced to a litigation, since its wrong cannot be signified. Its witness is thus silenced and forgotten. See 3.3 below.

[42] Lyotard notes that this happens under two conditions: 1) the complainant loses the ability to prove his or her loss, and 2) one cannot bring the damage to peoples' understanding. The victim who attempts to circumvent the impossibility of expressing the

The Differend begins with a dispute between Robert Faurisson—former professor at the University of Lyon (France) and holocaust denier—and the survivors of Auschwitz. Faurisson claims that he has made an exhaustive search of experts, documents, and deportees; however, he has not found a single survivor who can prove that s/he saw a gas chamber at Auschwitz with his/her own eyes.[43] Faurisson demands eye-witness testimony from someone who saw an operating gas chamber in the death camp as proof of its existence, i.e., he requires proof needed to establish the existence of a referent. However, the survivors cannot bear witness to their experience in the language of scientific discourse. For to have seen a gas chamber operating at Auschwitz is to be one of the dead. Exacerbating the situation is the fact that the Nazis destroyed the evidence, and the guards won't talk. Indeed, Faurisson claims that *he* is a victim—fooled by those who lie, claiming that gas chambers were used in the Final Solution. As a result, the survivors are put in a position where they cannot prove their claim, or signify their damage. They suffer the wrong of being unable to signify their loss in the discourse genre the professor requires (i.e., cognition). In Lyotard's parlance, Faurisson makes the survivors victims, because they are deprived of the ability to prove the wrong they have suffered. Lyotard writes, "A plaintiff is someone who has incurred damages and who disposes of the means to prove it. One becomes a victim if one loses these means."[44]

---

wrong suffered in an understandable way runs into a dilemma. Such a victim is told "either the damages you complain about never took place, and your testimony is false; or else they took place, and since you are able to testify to them, it is not a wrong that has been done to you, but merely a damage, and your testimony is still false" (Lyotard, *The Differend*, 5 [D7]).

[43] Ibid., 3 [D2].

[44] Ibid., 8 [D9]. Lyotard describes how the plaintiff is made into a victim. "You neutralize the addressor, the addressee, and the sense of the testimony; then everything is as if there were no referent (no damages). If there is nobody to adduce the proof, nobody to admit it, and/or if the argument which upholds it is judged to be absurd, then the plaintiff is dismissed, the wrong he or she complains of cannot be attested. He or she becomes a victim. If he or she persists in invoking this wrong as if it existed, the others (addressor, addressee, expert commentator on the testimony) will easily be able to make him or her pass for mad" (ibid., [D9] 8).

The question arises, "Why don't the survivors speak? Why are they silent?"[45] For Lyotard, their silence is a sign. It indicates the suffering borne by those who cannot express what they have to say. Silence indicates, therefore, the limits of language. It signals the denial of one of the phrase instances (i.e., addressor, addressee, referent, or sense). Once again, something "asks" to be expressed but suffers from its inability to be immediately phrased. For the event must be expressed in an utterly new way, since no prior idioms can convey what asks to be communicated.[46] Lyotard's philosophy attempts to do justice to victims, to those who have been silenced.

> To give the differend its due is to institute new addressees, new addressors, new significations, and new referents in order for the wrong to find an expression and for the plaintiff to cease being a victim. This requires new rules for the formation and linking of phrases. No one doubts that language is capable of admitting these new phrase families or new genres of discourse. Every wrong ought to be able to be put into phrases. A new competence (or "prudence") must be found.[47]

Lyotard's philosophy attempts to do justice to victims, to those who have been silenced. His thought bears witness to the limits of language, as well as to the radical heterogeneity present in "language."

3.3 Phrase instances and phrase regimens

Lyotard notes that when a phrase happens it immediately presents a universe. As was implied above, in every phrase universe four instances are situated: addressor, addressee, referent, and sense.[48] A phrase is not a

---

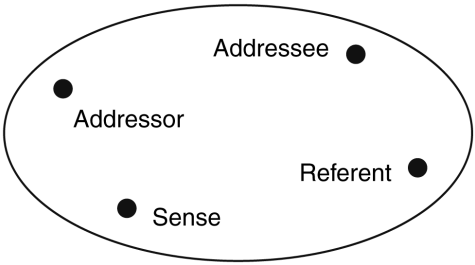
[45] For years after the Second World War, the Jews remained silent. This raises a philosophical question that Lyotard answers. See Lyotard, *The Differend*, 13–14 [D24–27]. However, as the decades passed and the number of survivors declined, the deportees began to tell their stories. They felt compelled to tell people what happened. The phrase "Never again!" expresses their compulsion.

[46] Lyotard writes, "What remains to be phrased exceeds what they can presently phrase, and they must be allowed to institute idioms which do not yet exist" (ibid., 13 [23]).

[47] See ibid., 13 [D21].

[48] Not every instance is situated in every phrase. Lyotard gives the example of the

message communicated from an addressor to an addressee, as those who are independent of the phrase; rather, both are situated within the phrase universe, when it happens, according to the rules the phrase follows, i.e., according to its phrase regimen. For there is a radical heterogeneity between phrases and phrase regimens. As Lyotard shows, there are phrases for "reasoning, knowing, describing, recounting, questioning, showing, ordering, etc."[49] Each of these regimens are radically heterogeneous, situating their instances according to different rules.[50] Therefore, translation of a phrase into another phrase regimen necessarily damages that prior phrase. For the phrase regimen determines how a phrase is formed, linked, and validated.[51]



Phrases do not need to be verbal, for phrases are events, i.e., occurrences in the world. Lyotard says that a phrase is a "what" that happens. As a result, words may, or may not, be used. Lyotard gives some examples of gestures as phrases: a wink, foot tapping, a dog's wagging tail, a cat's perked ears, the "French *Al'é*, Italian *Eh*, [and] American *Whoops*," or shrugging shoulder.[52] The one thing which is certain is the phrase. Des-

---

phrase *I saw it*, where the addressor, sense, and referent are situated. Note, however, that the addressee is not situated in that phrase universe. To situate the addressee, another phrase is needed: *I tell you that it's there that I saw it*. In this second phrase the other three instances (i.e. addressor, sense, and referent) are situated along with the addressee. See Lyotard, *The Differend*, 71 [D115].

[49] Ibid., xii.

[50] Lyotard writes, "The addressor of an exclamative is not situated with regard to the sense in the same way as the addressor of a descriptive. The addressee of a command is not situated with regard to the addressor and to the referent in the same way as the addressee of an invitation or of a bit of information" (ibid., 49 [D79]).

[51] Ibid., 49 [D78].

[52] Ibid., 70 [D110].

cartes may doubt everything including his existence; but the thing that survives that doubt is a phrase: *I think*.... A phrase's existence cannot be doubted. The phrase, as a singular, calls forth the plural: for another phrase must link to the presented phrase, even if this is a silence—for silence is a phrase.[53]

A phrase is presented. What is clear is that another phase must follow, and a link must be made to the prior phrase. However, when a phrase links to the presented phrase, it does damage to the latter, for the phrase instances are modified by the linking phrase. Secondly, a phrase from one regimen cannot be translated into another regimen without doing damage to the phrase, for phrase instances are situated according to specific rules governing each particular regimen. For example, in logical phrases the instances are situated in order to provide a range of possibilities: e.g., *It may or may not rain*, or *x is p or not-p*. And such a phrase is situated in a radically different manner than an ostensive phrase: e.g., *Here it is! Rome*—the phrase a traveler uses as he points at a city.[54] Both the logical and ostensive phrases are also radically heterogeneous to the prescriptive phrase—*Open the door*. In the same way, the ostensive phrase situates the addressor and addressee instances differently than in the descriptive phrase—*The door is open*.[55] While the various phrase regimens situate their phrase universes in radically different ways, they cannot avoid coming into contact with each other. Thus, differends are inevitable.

3.4 Genres of discourse

Once again, when a phrase is presented it calls forth phrases that will link according to relations between the phrase instances, which are predeter-

---

[53] Silence is a phrase in abeyance, signifying that something cannot (as yet) be phrased—often as a feeling.

[54] Of course, Lyotard notes, the city could be "in Italy, or in the State of Georgia, or New York, or Oregon, or Tennessee, but not in California." In which case, we need another phrase to indicate the specific place referred to, within the network of names. See Lyotard, *The Differend*, 44 [D67].

[55] Ibid., 42 [D65]. The phrase universes presented by each phrase regimen are heterogeneous to the phrase universes presented by other phrase regimens; therefore, the situation of instances varies depending on the rules governing each phrase regimen (e.g., cognitive, descriptive, ostensive, performative, obligatory, etc.). See ibid., 128 [D179].

mined according to its own phrase regimen. Each phrase regimen has its particular rules for the linking of phrases. But, as was just stated, contact between phrases of heterogeneous phrase regimens is inevitable. Therefore, the links that occur between phrases are either pertinent or inconsistent, according to whether or not the link is made in a suitable or unsuitable manner with regard to the prior phrase.[56] The differend occurs when the mode of linking is unsuitable for the prior phrase.

The problem of linking phrases from incommensurate phrase regimens is regulated by genres of discourse, which link phrases together according to a particular end. Lyotard gives examples of different genres of discourse, including, among others, cognition, obligation, speculation, rhetoric, and narrative. Genres of discourse "seduce" phrases to link together, setting the rules for linking, determining the stakes, and establishing a single finality for phrases from different regimens. Following these rules insures that the differend is avoided, since an end is given to all phrases. Heterogeneous phrases link according to what is at stake in the genre of discourse, and differends between the various phrase regimens are allowed to continue. But the differends are shifted "from the level of regimens to that of ends."[57]

However, a differend breaks out at the linking of every phrase; this time on the level of discourse genres. For the various genres of discourse "compete" with each other over the presented phrase. One genre of discourse will defeat all other discourse genres and determine the linkage to the prior phrase. Thus, a wrong is done to all other possible phrases, both on the level of phrase regimens and discourse genres.[58] The differend is forgotten and the gap between heterogeneous phrase regimens is filled in according to the rules of the genre of discourse governing the linkage of the two phrases. On the level of discourse genres, the fight is over which

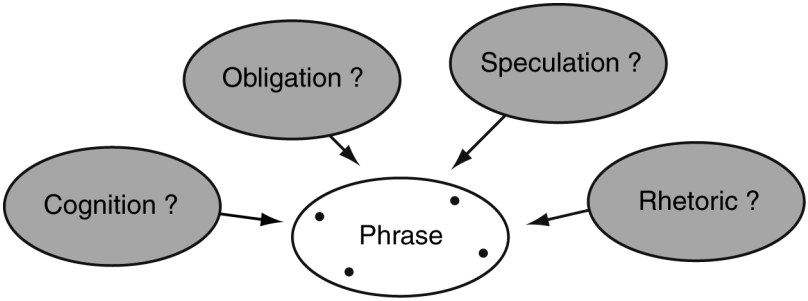
---

[56] The only pertinent link to the officer's prescriptive phrase *Avant!* is to obey, i.e., to charge forward. Soldiers who cry out *Bravo!*—but don't move—link to the prior phrase in an impertinent manner, thus, damaging it. See Lyotard, *The Differend*, 30 [D43].

[57] Ibid., 29 [D40].

[58] For only one discourse genre will succeed in regulating the link to the presented phrase. All other possible discourse genres are defeated. Their possible ends are silenced, thus victimized.

end will determine the linking of phrases (e.g., knowledge, result, obedience, etc.).



3.5 Narratives

Genres of discourse tend to forget the differend, or dispute between phrases. But one discourse genre, in particular, most easily forgets the differend. The narrative genre of discourse places its end upon all phrases: namely, "to come to an end." A narrative links phrases together according to diegetic time, i.e., the time frame given in the story. Each individual phrase functions as a "turn" in the story. The narrative presumes that the last phrase will be a "good one," as turns are knitted together. When the last phrase links, all previous sentences are organized and signified according to this phrase—from the end to the beginning. In this final move, an end is stamped on all prior phrases.[59]

A narrative strips away the interruptive power of the event through its diachronic operator (the before/after). The story pushes the event—as a disturbing presence—to its (narratival) border. Thus, the event—as a challenge to current knowledge—never happens. Rather, the narrative links it to other events, as simply one more occurrence in a chain of narrated events. In this way, the event is translated and tamed. Peace reigns within the narrative, and the event (as event) is forgotten.[60] Because of

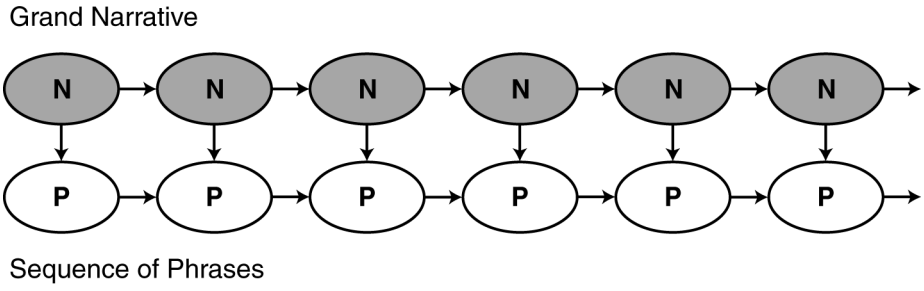
[59] A murder mystery gives a good example of this. Throughout the story, the author presents one character after another as the possible perpetrator, while misleading the reader. Clues are embedded in the narrative, which the reader (hopefully) misses. At the conclusion, the last sentences impress a (correct) meaning on all prior phrases, and the truth is revealed. This gives the reader tremendous pleasure, when it is done well.

[60] For an example of how a narrative forgets all that lies outside its borders, see Lyo-

this, the narrative as discourse easily forgets the dispute that breaks out between heterogeneous phrase regimens and genres of discourse. This is especially the case with narratives from the Enlightenment. Such stories claim universality, i.e., to be able to represent reality "as it is." Lyotard resists such hegemonic narratives. Rather, he focuses his attention on the phrase as a way of resisting claims made by the grand narratives.

3.6 Grand narratives

A grand narrative (*grand récit*) claims that it can transcend all other stories. It pretends, thereby, to disclose the true meaning of all other "little narratives" (*petit histories*). Therefore, a grand narrative presumes a cognitive apparatus.[61] It links phrases together in parallel, according to an idea that functions as it governing rule. This is in contrast to small stories which link phrases together in serial order. At the moment of every linking, the idea governing the grand narrative situates the phrase instances and determines the rules for the linking of phrases. It thereby claims to inform us about "humanity" and presents either a totalized history or a project for humanity. History marches towards a specific goal, which is determined by the idea governing the narrative, e.g., a workers' paradise (communism) or a world market (capitalism).



tard's discussion of the Cashinahua tribe and their stories. Lyotard, *The Differend*, 152–155 [Cashinahua Notice].

[61] Among such stories, the narrative is understood as "a conceptual instrument of representation" able to produce and transmit the meaning of all narratives. See Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics*, ed. Christopher Norris, Critics of the Twentieth Century (London: Routledge, 1991), 63.

As products of the Enlightenment, grand narratives function as (meta-) narratives disclosing universal truths. For example, the "story of history" claims to reveal the truth of human existence through time. This story purports to be told by a universal (objective) addressor, to all humanity (its addressors), about "humanity," giving us the meaning of being "human." However, its referent ("humanity") cannot be shown, since it is a name for an idea. Particular names, places, times, and events—narrated by "little narratives"—are incorporated within its universal cognitive narrative. From such "data" the grand narrative extracts the true meaning of being "human." Of course, the particular names, places, events, etc. are forgotten in the "story of history." It is but one of many such grand narratives. Some identify people as "the proletariat," "consumers," or "objects of cognition," and so forth, depending on the universalized idea governing the particular (grand) narrative.

Lyotard discusses the Nazi grand narrative in *The Differend*. This story was based on the idea of pure blood and made its appeal through the aesthetic of a funerary oration. One had to be born with pure Aryan blood to be included in the story. Those with such blood are told to "hear, tell, and do" what their ancestors have already done. The Nazi grand narrative obliges true Germans to fulfill its end. They must work, kill, and die for the Third Reich—a Reich that would (reportedly) last a thousand years. Lyotard summarizes the funerary oration as follows: "*We* (e.g., past, present, and future Aryans) tell ourselves that we have died well."[62] Thus, true Germans are to participate in the Aryan "beautiful death." In this narrative, the phrase instances slide around freely. For the hearer becomes the addressor, who is, lives, and dies for those who have pure Aryan blood. As Lyotard notes, the Nazis made communal politics into a "politics of humanity."[63] But terror lies both inside and outside of this master

[62] The oration sounds as follows: "I, an Aryan, tell you, an Aryan, the narrative of our Aryan ancestors' acts.... We tell ourselves that we have died well." Lyotard notes that "the single name *Aryan* occupies the three instances in the universes of the narrative phrase." The sense of the phrase is always "the beautiful death." See Lyotard, *The Differend*, 105 [D160].

[63] Ibid., 152 [D220].

narrative. For how does one prove that s/he is a true Aryan? (By meticulously carrying out the Nazi plan.) Indeed, how pure is pure blood? Only Aryans are "human," after all. Those born without German blood are "animals." They are in the way; they will be eliminated.

Modernity promised progress and a direction to history. If there is a direction, there must be "guiding threads," which are experienced as a feeling. Here Lyotard points to the sublime. During the French Revolution, people throughout Europe hoped for freedom, equality, and fraternity. Their feelings of hope were countered by fear, among the European monarchs, that something was happening, which threatened their rule. According to Lyotard, if history marches towards a goal, this is signaled by the sublime. "Philosophies of history," therefore, try to fill in the abyss separating heterogeneous genres and events. However, Lyotard sensed a different feeling at the end of the last century—an incredulity towards modern finalities. This feeling emerges from the failure of the grand narratives to achieve their goals, to deliver on their promises. Too many counter-examples have emerged.[64]

3.7 The Christian grand narrative

For Lyotard, the Christian narrative is the grand narrative *par excellence*, which conquered all the (pagan) narratives of ancient Rome. It achieved this by incorporating what is at stake in the narrative genre itself into its own narrative, i.e., "to link onto the occurrence." The Christian narrative can link onto whatever happens through its rule of love. By loving the event, the Christian narrative re-narrates events, narratives, and other discourse genres as signs indicating (or announcing) "that 'we' creatures are loved."[65] Thus, whatever happens is signified as "the promise of good news." The event is appropriated as a gift of (divine) love.[66] In this way,

[64] The ideas governing these universal narratives have proven to be sterile. Their counter-examples include the following: historical materialism is contradicted by "Berlin 1953, Budapest 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968, Poland 1980"; parliamentary liberalism is called into question by "May 1968"; economic liberalism is countered by the "crises of 1911 and 1929." See Lyotard, *The Differend*, 179 [D257].

[65] Ibid., 160 [D233].

[66] Ibid., 159 [D232].

the narrative universalizes the narrative instances and problematizes the event, under the Idea of love. Everything is incorporated within the Christian narrative. Past events are fixed within its tradition; while any possible future events will be (already) received by *caritas*.

However, the narrative opposes those who resist its claim. Lyotard gives two examples: Joan of Arc and those involved in the Reformation. The "maid of Orleans" confesses that she feels under obligation to her heavenly voices. This puts her in conflict with "the authorized interpreters of the Scriptures." For Joan feels obligated to "the voice of conscience" and to "respect for the moral law."[67] Lyotard says that the appeal to the discourse genre of obligation shakes "narrative politics." It challenges narration's way of "receiving and neutralizing events." It also defies the latter's way of circulating the idea of love among the phrase instances (i.e., addressor, addressees and referents).[68] Grand narratives, of course, are totalitarian, and so is the Christian grand narrative. Whatever resists the narrative must be destroyed. Lyotard does not explicitly mention the end of *La Pucelle de Dieu*. But every child of France knows what happened. On May 30, 1431, Joan of Arc was burned at the stake as a heretic.[69]

According to Lyotard, the beginning of modernity—and thus of such universal narratives—can be traced to the apostle Paul and to Augustine. For in their writings a new idea of historicity emerges, which cannot be found in "ancient imaginary."[70] Both write on the idea of a Christian eschatology in which history becomes self-healing.[71] A subject, which is

---

[67] Lyotard, *The Differend*, 160 [D234].

[68] Ibid.

[69] She was posthumously canonized by Pope Benedict XV on May 16, 1920 in St. Peter's Basilica, Rome.

[70] Lyotard, of course, notes the ancient invention of history—in contrast with "myth and epic"—in the writings of Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy, and Tacitus. However, Lyotard's comments deal with the insertion of the idea of eschatology into European thought. See Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, trans., Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 96–98.

[71] By re-narrating the event, the narrative appropriates its interruptive power, neutralizing its jarring witness. The narrative heals itself because the event never happened. It is drowned in a pacific ocean of forgetfulness. For an example of this in regards to racism in America, see Jean-François Lyotard, *Pacific Wall* (Venice, CA: Lapis Press, 1990).

overcome by a lack, is promised the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and the return to the Father's house" at the "end of time."[72] This movement of history towards redemption and love funds a narrative that dominated Western civilization for almost two millennia. It authorized a "universal history as progress toward the redemption of creatures."[73] Once the narrative has been stripped of the idea of revelation (i.e., a story authorized from a primordial past), love is translated into "republican brotherhood" or "communist solidarity" and can authorize a story of humanity emancipating itself under the Idea of freedom.[74] Such stories lie at the heart of the modern project.[75]

Lyotard hates such universal narratives. For grand narratives make victims, and the past century was awash in blood shed for such stories. Countless millions of people suffered under mythical, emancipatory, and economic grand narratives. The ideas governing these narratives could not establish their promised utopias. Indeed, Lyotard sees these grand narratives as evil.[76] For people who resisted their programs were silenced, starved, gassed, and shot.

---

[72] Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, 96.

[73] Lyotard, *The Differend*, 160 [D235].

[74] Ibid., 160–161 [D235].

[75] Lyotard writes, "Although secularized, the Enlightenment narrative, Romanticist or speculative dialectics, and the Marxist narrative deploy the same historicity as Christianity, because they conserve the eschatological principles. The completion of history, be it always pushed back, will reestablish a full and whole relation with the law of the Other (capital *O*) as this relation was in the beginning: the law of God in the Christian paradise, the law of Nature in the natural right fantasized by Rousseau, the classless society, before family, property, and state, imagined by Engels. An immemorial past is always what turns out to be promised by way of an ultimate end. It is essential for the modern imaginary to project its legitimacy forward while founding it in a lost origin. Eschatology calls for an archaeology. This circle, which is the hermeneutical circle, characterizes *historicity* as the modern imaginary of time" (Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, 97–98).

[76] Lyotard understands evil as "the incessant interdiction of possible phrases, a defiance of the occurrence, the contempt for Being" (Lyotard, *The Differend*, 140 [D197]). One could give many examples here; however, one will do. In Stalinist Russia, anyone thought to disagree with Comrade Stalin would suddenly disappear at a train station, be shot at night, or get a "tenner" in the Gulag Archipelago. For numerous other examples, see Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation I - Ii*, trans., Thomas P. Whitney (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).

3.8 Philosophy's task

According to Lyotard, philosophy is a discourse in search of its own rule. Unlike grand narratives, philosophy's task is to remain open to the different. It is called to bear witness to the event and to help victims find a way to bring the wrong they suffered to peoples' knowledge. In this sense then, philosophy functions as an open discourse genre, seeking for the rule that will enable it to phrase the event in an—as of yet—un-thought of manner. Thus, philosophy is a discourse that tries to phrase the inexpressible phrase. In this sense, philosophy strives to "bear witness to the differend." However, Lyotard remains aware of the fact that any attempt to express the event in language—i.e., in a phrase—must necessarily betray the occurrence. For another phrase, another genre of discourse, could have succeeded, in the dispute among phrase regimens and discourse genres, in determining the rule for—and linking to—the presented phrase. Philosophy's task is to find a way to make the link while remembering, somehow, the differend and the betrayal of the event.

4. Assessment of Lyotard's thought

Lyotard says something important about the current condition of knowledge. He correctly identifies the current status of knowledge in the West as being legitimized by performativity. Something is true because "it works." The Enlightenment narratives of freedom and equality have largely given way to the scientific and technological.[77] Evidence of this can be easily seen, for example, in the development of "religious studies" courses in faculties of theology (i.e., theology is "legitimate" if it is studied cognitively). Money, power, and influence accrue to those who write and manage code, as knowledge is increasingly translated into data. What Lyotard described in the early eighties is ubiquitous now around the globe.

Of course, Lyotard is a difference thinker, who stresses the radical heterogeneity of discourses and ways of speaking, writing, and thinking. Here, again, Lyotard was ahead of his time. People today are constantly confronted with difference in our globalized world. CNN's recent tagline,

[77] It seems, however, that another narrative increasingly governs phrases and gestures in the world, i.e., capitalism. This is a point Lyotard makes at the end of *The Differend*.

"go there," describes an electronically mediated global journey that promises to take us wherever anything newsworthy is happening. Our awareness of difference continues to grow, as cell phones, Youtube, Facebook, and other digital tools show us radical differences in opinions, lifestyles, cultures, religious ideas, etc. Of course, this goes far beyond anything Lyotard could describe four decades ago; but it points to his prescience. For the radically particular stories we tell are being mediated through a digital (i.e., "computerized") medium, and we cannot fail to notice radical, particular difference in these worlds.

However, more interesting for theology is Lyotard's assessment of language—to the radical heterogeneity of phrase regimens and discourse genres. His insight regarding their inability to bear witness to the event is particularly helpful. While a link must be made to the presented phrase, any phrase that succeeds in linking necessarily wrongs the event in the very act of giving it expression. For another phase could have succeeded in linking, but failed. No phrase can completely express the event. Something is always forgotten. Lyotard warns about the narrative's propensity to forget the event. This is important for theology to understand, because theologians work with the Christian narrative (i.e., with Christian tradition). We also learn that narratives which (1) make universal claims and (2) construct programs for humanity are especially dangerous, for they inevitably make victims. In the last century, victims, by the millions, cried out for justice. Unfortunately, this continues into the twenty-first century, as well. While culture may be incredulous towards such stories, people still tell them, and blood continues to flow.[78]

However, Lyotard should be critiqued for the *theological* statements he makes. Often in his work, he presumes God's non-existence, naming God as the "great Zero" and the "Kastrator."[79] Here Lyotard disregards theology's witness: namely, to experiences in time and space with the God who reveals Godself in Jesus Christ. Lyotard attempts to construct a philosophical discourse that remains open to the event, but he rejects theolo-

[78] One thinks here of the atrocities being committed around the world, which are inspired by an apocalyptic narrative governing life and praxis within the Islamic State.

[79] See Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans., Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993).

gy's witness *a priori*. He is incredulous of such an event. Thus, Lyotard silences those who bear witness to precisely such events. Ironically, his thought victimizes those who witness to such divine encounters in their lives.

Where Lyotard's critique most forcefully impinges on theology, of course, is in his assessment of the Christian narrative as the grand narrative *par excellence*. In this way, Lyotard helps theology *ex negativo* by pointing out the tendency all narratives have towards totalization. This critique should be taken seriously. However, in general, theology has not received Lyotard's thought. An exception is the Flemish theologian, Lieven Boeve, who engages deeply with Lyotard's difference thought, making it fruitful for theology.

5. Lieven Boeve

Before looking at Boeve's reception of Lyotard's work, we will briefly consider his impetus for doing so. This will take us briefly in the direction of Boeve's cultural/theological work, before we return to the philosophical/theological. However, in this detour, we will gain a rationale for engaging postmodern thought. Then we will turn to Boeve's critique of the French philosopher's work.

Boeve's work is complex, operating on two different levels: specifically, on the contextual-theological and the philosophical-theological. He thinks we need a new theological expression of the faith, because of changes in the cultural context and in the current critical consciousness. Although we cannot linger long on the cultural/theological, it will help us to briefly consider his understanding of the relationship between theology and cultural context.

5.1 Recontextualization

According to Boeve, when culture and philosophy shift, a re-expression of the faith becomes necessary. For older ideas, metaphors, or practices no longer convey spiritual truths as they once did. When this happens, theologians must reflect again on the faith and re-express it in language suitable for the new context. Boeve calls this process "recontextualization." He maintains, therefore, that with the shift from the modern to the postmod-

ern, theology must recontextualize itself once again.

In fact, theologians have done this throughout Church history. For example, the Church Fathers found inspiration in (neo-) Platonic thought for their reflections on faith. Thomas Aquinas, among other medieval scholars in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, built theologies influenced by Aristotelian thought, when that philosopher's work became the dominant conceptual framework in Europe after its reintroduction from the Middle East.[80] Similarly, modern theologians responded to the explosion of knowledge in the sciences and philosophy with new reflections during the last couple of centuries. Each shift in knowledge and culture put pressure on theology to express the faith in (then) plausible terms.[81]

Theological expressions rise out of—and are embedded in—particular cultural, historical, and philosophical contexts.[82] Thus, when cultural horizons shift, previously constructed theological reflections may begin to lose credibility for a majority of people living in the new context. [83] Theologians engage, therefore, with the current critical consciousness—i.e., with philosophers who attempt to express this understanding—to gain insights on how to re-express the faith in current, plausible thought pat-

[80] Boeve writes, "Such a recontextualization was necessary because Aristotelianism had come to dominate and determine the intellectual climate. The form in which theology had been cast up to that point was no longer capable of rendering the reflexive unfolding of Christian faith in a contextually intelligible manner. As a result, the theology, which emerged from this recontextualisation, differed fundamentally from its former incarnation, especially that which continued to pursue the Augustinian (i.e., Platonic) tradition" (Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context*, trans., Brian Doyle, Louvain Theological & Pastoral Monographs, vol. 30 [Leuven: Peeters, 2003], 30–31).

[81] Theologians work as participants within the faith. "Caught up in a never-ending and open hermeneutical process, they have sought to understand what faith is about, but always from within a commitment to it. Since plausibility is always essentially contextual, they make use of thought patterns developed by their contemporaries, most often philosophers" (Lieven Boeve, "Critical Consciousness in the Postmodern Condition: A New Opportunity for Theology?," *Philosophy & Theology* 10, [1997]: 449–450).

[82] This also includes the thought patterns undergirding them. See Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 22.

[83] Boeve notes, however, that some forms of theological reflection and practice may continue to remain meaningful for a minority of individuals living in the new context.

terns.[84]

During the last two centuries, theology was confronted by narratives of knowledge and emancipation that accused the faith of superstition and oppression. Theologians responded in one of two ways: either by adapting to the context and developing a correlation theology,[85] or by rejecting the context and considering it as hostile to the Christian tradition.[86] In a word, correlation or rejection. Boeve argues that correlation strategies no longer function as a theological method in the current postmodern context. For the method assumes a close relation between "life, culture, society, [and] history."[87] With the disintegration of the Christian cultural horizon in the West, this relationship has come undone. Increasingly, theologians find themselves in a globalized and pluralized world, rather than in a (presupposed) dialogue between a modern secular context and the Christian tradition. At the same time, the modern view of knowledge has come into question. For in modernity, knowledge is seen as being communicable, transparent, and universal. In modernity the domain of truth was determined by secular reason alone (i.e., what one could demonstrate scientifically was thought to be true). In response to this modern epistemology, theologians relegated their expressions of faith, more and more, to the discourse of ethics. Ethics became the bridge for dialogue with the modern context.[88] However, these very modern epistemological assumptions of clarity and universality are critiqued in the postmodern context. In their place, postmodern authors give attention rather to "heterogeneity, difference, and radical historicity," while criticizing the universal "grand narratives."[89] Other theologians, for example those in the "Radical Ortho-

[84] Theological activity is a continual, dynamic process of "repetition and interpretation, processes of handing down and selection" (Boeve, "Critical Consciousness," 450).

[85] Correlation theologians believed they had theological grounds for attempting to connect modernity with faith, since they thought of God as present wherever people pursue rationality, freedom, and human dignity. As a theology, correlation is a modified strategy for maintaining contact with an increasingly separate and antagonistic secular culture.

[86] See Boeve's discussion in Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval*, trans., Brian Doyle (New York; London: Continuum, 2007), 30–49.

[87] Ibid., 31.

[88] Ibid., 33.

[89] Ibid., 34.

doxy" camp, embrace the postmodern criticism in order to castigate secular modernity. Once the modern framework is rejected, they look back to a "neo-Augustinian conceptual framework," to develop a new (postmodern) epistemology, where the particular "participates in its infinite eternal source," avoiding, thereby, the finite's ultimate dissolution in either a modern epistemology or postmodern nihilism.[90]

Although Boeve argues that the modern correlation strategy has ended, he contends that it should not be abandoned.[91] Rather, it should be *radicalized*. He maintains that "modern correlation theology is *not* suffering from *too much* recontextualization but rather from *too little*."[92] Indeed, Boeve maintains that the correlation method itself should be recontextualized. Dialogue with the context should continue—not on the basis of "consensus, harmony, and continuity"—but with a sensitivity toward "plurality, difference, and particularity."

5.2 Lost plausibility and radical heterogeneity

Boeve's engagement with Lyotard's thought functions on the level of the philosophical/theological. He engages in an extended conversation with Lyotard's radical difference thought, and finds insights for a plausible recontextualization of the faith. For Lyotard sensitizes theology to the hegemonic tendencies shared by all stories, thus making us aware of our own story's propensity towards oppression. He also informs us regarding the plausibility modern master narratives have lost in the current context. Lyotard gives us access to a current critical consciousness, where the particular is privileged over the universal, and one becomes conscious of irreducible particularity and plurality. Theology gains an understanding of a

[90] Boeve, *God Interrupts History*, 36–37.

[91] Boeve writes, "For theologians who analyze the contemporary situation in terms of plurality, there is no longer an easily identifiable secular culture to which Christian faith is related and in which Christians live their faith. Theology is no longer engaged in a dialogue between two partners but immersed in a dynamic, irreducible, and often conflicting plurality of religions, worldviews, and lifeviews. Many Christians today, especially in Western Europe, are becoming increasingly aware that the Christian faith (with its own plurality) is only one position among others on the field of religions and convictions" (ibid., 34).

[92] Ibid., 37.

postmodern critical consciousness that is vigilant against overarching, oppressive narratives. Boeve engages with these insights in order to fund a recontextualization of the faith that is plausible for the postmodern context.

Boeve reads Lyotard's assessment of the current condition as "incredulity towards master narratives" as the lost plausibility of such stories.[93] The narratives of knowledge (rationality and technology) and of emancipation have failed to achieve absolute clarity or the utopias they promised.[94] Failure of such master narratives stimulates the postmodern consciousness. One becomes aware of the way that these stories try to explain complex reality in an absolute and universal way. In the process, grand narratives try to reduce complexity to the logic of their own internal rule. However, their hegemony is unmasked and the idea that any all-encompassing universal story can regulate the linking of all phrases in our world is abandoned. No universal perspective exists; rather every discourse and narrative is seen to be contingent and particular. But modernity continues; its processes are unabated. So it is legitimate to call the current postmodern context as hyper-modern or "radicalised modernity."[95]

With the loss of a single, universal perspective we discover the radical contingency of all narratives—personal, national, or of a people. Our story is not necessary; it could have been different. For instance, a founding narrative is tied to a particular people, place, and time. The events narrated in such a story are not necessary. Rather, they are contingent on the context in which they occurred. Things could have occurred differently. From a postmodern perspective, only those narratives that recognize their limits and contingency—as grounded in a particular context—can be con-

---

[93] Lieven Boeve, "Thinking Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context: A Playground for Theological Renewal," in *Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context*, ed. L. Boeve and L. Leijssen, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 14.

[94] Master narratives of knowledge aim for absolute clarity in order to dominate reality through technology; whereas narratives of emancipation posit a future utopia towards which history aspires. The narrative, therefore, wrestles against the present (and previous) context(s) on its way to establishing the longed for utopia. Boeve maintains that the promises themselves became obstacles to human flourishing. See ibid.

[95] Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 51.

sidered legitimate.[96]

According to Boeve, we cannot help but tell stories, and he points to Lyotard's assessment of the current situation. Namely this: the postmodern critique unmasks the Enlightenment narratives of knowledge and emancipation as hegemonic.[97] But today there is a master narrative that attempts to regulate the linking of phrases and gestures in terms of *exchange*. Lyotard maintains that capitalism is the master narrative now dominating the world. The economic narrative strives to regulate the event (i.e., the *Is it happening?*) according to the schema of making money by gaining time. Rather than trying to realize an ideological program (i.e., an historical utopia), capitalism is building a worldwide market.[98]

Boeve identifies Lyotard's philosophy of the phrase as a discourse of the Idea of heterogeneity. Lyotard argues that philosophy should attempt to remain open to the event, while bearing witness to radical heterogeneity. However, as Boeve makes clear—and as Lyotard himself recognizes—in the concatenation of phrases something is always forgotten, "often even this forgetting is forgotten."[99] By regulating the event according to their own particular logic, discourse genres translate the differend into a litigation. Thus, they necessarily forget the event. It never happened. Master narratives are particularly culpable here. Boeve summarizes Lyotard's view as such: "Philosophy is therefore first of all the critique of master narratives."[100] As a result, Boeve identifies master narratives as "degenerated discourses of the Idea, where the Idea as Idea, that is to say as an unpre-

---

[96] Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 91.

[97] We agree with Boeve's assessment: people continue to tell stories to make sense of their world. And narratives continue to emerge that attempt to master human existence (e.g., the attempt to bring the world into submission under Sharia law). Some have claimed the demise of the master narratives, following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War; however, we continue to see the terrible influence such stories have in the world today.

[98] Lyotard, *The Differend*, 179 [D255].

[99] Lieven Boeve, "The End of Conversation in Theology: Considerations from a Postmodern Discussion," in *Theology and Conversation: Towards a Relational Theology*, ed. J. Haers and P. De Mey (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003), 198.

[100] Ibid.

sentable general concept, is not respected."[101] Of course, discourses of the Idea are one of the plurality of discourse genres functioning in language. Boeve recognizes the validity of this genre, but he rejects its ambition to dominate all other phrase regimens and discourse genres through determining the rule for the linking of phrases.

5.3 Boeve and the Christian grand narrative

So what should theology make of Lyotard's critique of Christianity? As stated earlier, Lyotard identifies the Christian narrative as the grand narrative *par excellence*. The Christian grand narrative is extremely hegemonic: able to link to any event under its rule of loving whatever happens *as if* it is a gift from God. Boeve writes that "from the perspective of Lyotard's language pragmatics, the main problem of master narratives is diagnosed as a severe and structural forgetfulness of the differend, which results in massive forms of injustice."[102] Boeve argues that the Christian narrative can function as a grand narrative, identifying such as "the hegemonic discourse of the Idea of love."[103]

Boeve cites Lyotard's statement that the Christian narrative became the dominant grand narrative, through linking to whatever happens, according to its rule of love.[104] Boeve notes that the event is already loved before it occurs, for the Christian narrative recuperates whatever happens—in advance—bringing it within its own narratival border.[105] The Christian master narrative does this through an *idea* of love. In this sense, it shares a similar strategy with the modern master narratives, which regulate the event according to the ideas of emancipation (liberty) or knowledge (reason). Boeve identifies how the master narrative—as discourse of

---

[101] Lieven Boeve, "Jean-François Lyotard on Differends and Unpresentable Otherness: Can God Escape the Clutches of the Christian Master Narrative?," *Culture, Theory, and Critique* 52, no. 2–3 (2011): 274.

[102] Lieven Boeve, *Lyotard and Theology: Beyond the Christian Master Narrative of Love*, Philosophy and Theology (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 49.

[103] Ibid.

[104] Boeve, *Lyotard and Theology,* 50. For the passage cited, see Lyotard, *The Differend*, 159 [D232].

[105] Boeve, *Lyotard and Theology,* 50.

the Idea—forgets the differend.

> In a modern master narrative, however, this particular nature of the Idea is forgotten, for within such a discourse, (a) the Idea is the goal that legitimizes the narrative from the end, (b) it universalizes the instances of the universe of phrases, (c) it explains reality (and thus its referent can be presented), and (d) it regulates the linking of phrases in an exclusive and thus hegemonic way (e.g., connecting prescriptive phrases to descriptive ones quasi-automatically), while at the same time discrediting whoever links (= thinks or talks) differently.[106]

However, the Christian narrative has a characteristic that distinguishes it from the modern master narratives. The Christian narrative is not legitimated by a longed-for-end; rather, it flows from a primeval set of narratives.[107] Still, Boeve recognizes that the narratives found in scripture are re-told and recontextualized through the faith community's experience with the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, Boeve writes, it is possible that "origin and end... come together" as the early Christians met together to celebrate "in word and gesture, in story and ritual" the resurrection-event as "promise" or "anticipation."[108]

Secondly, when the Christian narrative universalizes the phrase instances, it functions like a modern grand narrative. In so doing, the Christian narrative shows that it has "universal pretensions." This is seen in the disappearance of particular names and the exclusive use of general categories.[109] In the Christian master narrative, the Idea of love is instantiated over each of the (universalized) phrase instances, which idea circulates among each of the instances. Boeve summarizes the narrative in this way:

---

[106] Boeve, *Lyotard and Theology,* 50.

[107] Boeve writes, "The Christian narrative is not legitimized proceeding from the end. Rather Christianity stems from a *particular, partly mythical, narrative tradition.* The roots of the Christian narrative lie in a canonized set of stories, so that one comes to conclude that its legitimation comes from the origin, or its beginnings, rather than from the end, or its sense of finality" (ibid., 51).

[108] Ibid., 52.

[109] Ibid., 54.

"God, who is love, as addressor tells us addressees the story about love (referent): 'because I, who am love, have loved you, you must love (me).'"[110] By universalizing each instance, its particularity is undone. Once again, the differend is forgotten. The event can never happen.

The Christian master narrative shares a third characteristic with modern master narratives, when it makes the cognitive claim that reality is all about love. Love is seen as the dynamic force that drives history towards its goal—which is love. The story pretends to be able to explain reality, as all master narratives do. It claims to "present reality as it is."[111] According to the Christian narrative, history is established by the dynamism of love. The story provides a way of measuring historical events, and it places them within a historical field that love establishes. Boeve notes that the distinction between history and salvation history disappears in this hegemonic narrative. Persons and events contributing to the forward movement of love are good and holy. Whatever resists is considered sinful and evil.[112]

Finally, Boeve receives Lyotard's criticism of the Christian narrative. It functions as a hegemonic discourse when it regulates the linking of phrases according to its rule of love. The narrative forgets the diversity of phrase regimens and discourse genres, as well as their radical heterogeneity. However, in contrast to the modern master narratives, the Christian narrative does not forget the event. Instead, the narrative retells the event as a gift of love, thus signifying whatever happens as grace. Thereby, the occurrence is inscribed within the Christian narrative of love. As Boeve notes, "The occurrence remains, but its event-character is disowned."[113] As a master narrative, the Christian narrative regulates all phrases, includ-

---

[110] In this regard, Boeve refers to such passages as John 14:21–23 and 1 John 4:7–12, to show how Lyotard might come to such a conclusion. See Boeve, *Lyotard and Theology,* 54.

[111] Ibid., 55.

[112] Boeve says that the cognitive pretension becomes especially evident when authorized groups (such as a magisterium) instantiate themselves in the addressor-instance, "as the spokesperson of love and deems itself able to make authoritative pronouncements within a cognitive language concerning history and reality" (ibid., 56).

[113] Ibid., 56.

ing the descriptive and the prescriptive. In this way, the Christian narrative describes love and prescribes it as normative. Love is both the origin and the end of existence. This results in love governing every form of discourse, including "history, prayer, ethics, ritual, cognition, argument, etc."[114] Again, those who work to fulfill its goal for history, from within the narrative, are saints who have a right to speak. However, those who find themselves outside of that narrative are heretics, who are silenced.

According to Boeve, when these four considerations are taken into account, one can understand how Lyotard came to see Christianity as a hegemonic master narrative. Boeve identifies this grand narrative as a discourse on the Idea of love, which elevates love into a universal principle for the governing of all discourse and gestures. The divine command to love begins to circulate around the (now) universalized instances in this way: "If you are loved, you must love; and you will be loved, only if you love."[115] The question Boeve asks, therefore, is this: "Can God escape the clutches of the Christian master narrative?"[116]

5.4 The model of the Open Narrative

For Boeve, Lyotard helps theology see its own tendency towards ontotheology. For, according to the latter, all narratives tend towards totalization. And the Christian narrative, qua narrative, is not exempt from such. Theologians too quickly forget the particularity of the context from which they make—often universal—claims. Indeed, Boeve writes that theology appears "to be possessed" by an "ontotheological impetus."[117] Too often the radical witness of the event is (always, already) received and recuperated as grace within a closed theological narrative, where the occurrence helps the narrative achieve its goal. Theology often attempts to situate God within its narrative as a way of authorizing the latter,[118] or it func-

[114] Boeve, *Lyotard and Theology*, 57.

[115] Ibid., 58.

[116] Ibid., 59.

[117] Boeve, "The End of Conversation in Theology," 208.

[118] An example that Boeve gives is a sacramento-theology constructed upon a neo-Platonic cosmology, where every creature's being is grounded upon God's being in an *analogia entis* (analogy of being). Here theological truth is built on a discourse that situ-

tionalizes the event to make it work for whatever is at stake in its discourse. In the current postmodern context, such strategies must be abandoned. Rather, heterogeneity, plurality, and difference should be respected. Boeve contends that theology should not relativize itself, but link phrases together in confession of "the God who reveals Godself in history, but can never be grasped or encapsulated in it" (i.e., in our theological narratives).[119]

Boeve finds inspiration in Lyotard's philosophical project, for the latter mentions other discourses which attempt to bear witness to the event. Among these are the philosophical and Jewish discourses. Lyotard describes the former discourse as one in search of its rule.[120] As we said earlier, Lyotard understands philosophy as a discourse attempting to bear witness to the event through a search for the inexpressible phrase: i.e., for the rule or phrase that can express what cannot yet be put into words. Jewish discourse, on the other hand, is based on the voice, spoken to the patriarchs, which is now inscribed in the scriptures. Jews listen to the voice—now text—and interpret what it says by reading, re-reading, and reading once again those same scriptures. The Jew positions him- or herself as one who does not "ask for an answer" but asks "in order to remain questioned."[121] Lyotard views this practice as a remaining open before the event, as a discourse without a governing rule, that witnesses to the heterogeneity of discourses and phrases. These two discourses (one philosophical, the other theological) point to the possibility of discourses striving to remain open to radical difference. Boeve recognizes in Lyotard's philosophy a specific discourse that attempts to remain open to otherness and difference. The philosophical discourse, according to Lyotard, is one that

---

ates God as the ground of Being. As Boeve notes, "In this perspective, theological truth is supported by ontology" (Boeve, "Thinking Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context," 6–7).

[119] Boeve, "The End of Conversation in Theology," 209.

[120] In *The Differend*, Lyotard remarks concerning that same book, "You really are reading a book of philosophy, the phrases in it are concatenated in such a way as to show that that concatenation is not just a matter of course and that the rule for their concatenation remains to be found" (129 [D180]).

[121] Boeve, "Can God Escape?," 269.

tries to link to the presented phrase in a way that remembers the differend, while critiquing those discourses that functionalize the event.[122] This causes Boeve to ask if there are other such "open" discourses. From this intuition, Boeve develops his model of the "open narrative."

An "open narrative" takes heterogeneity seriously, while recognizing its own particularity and contingency. Influenced by the postmodern critical consciousness, such a "little" story abandons attempts to tell a universal story. Rather, it tries to tell a particular narrative situated within a specific time and context. It is *our* narrative,[123] rather than one told by an objective observer. As Boeve writes, "Our narrative is not *the* narrative about humanity and the world in which we live: it is *our* narrative."[124] The open narrative functions as a model—a conceptual pattern, since, according to Boeve, no ideal open narrative exists "as such."[125]

An open narrative has three characteristics. First, it has "an *open sensitivity to otherness*."[126] Such a narrative cultivates a sensitivity towards whatever interrupts it, paying particular attention to those events occurring at the boundaries of our story. An open narrative resists the impulse to close itself off—and protect itself—from that which challenges its narrative, choosing a certain vulnerability before whatever happens. Secondly, an open narrative "offers [a] witness to otherness" as it "attempts to express its *interruption*."[127] The experience of unexpected otherness, at the border of our narrative, makes us aware of the limitations of our own particular narrative. An open narrative refuses to reduce the strangeness of

---

[122] The differend will be translated into a litigation and forgotten by the phrase that follows. But Boeve writes, "We should learn to do this in a way which does not forget this forgetting" (Boeve, "The End of Conversation in Theology," 208).

[123] Boeve maintains that the postmodern condition teaches us that "culturally speaking" our narrative is "a *particular narrative* among a plurality of other narratives" (Boeve, *Lyotard and Theology*, 95).

[124] Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 93.

[125] Ibid., 92. Boeve also writes, "'The' open narrative as such does not exist. There are only particular narratives which can learn the lessons which can be gleaned from the recent past. This might also be true for the Christian narrative" (Boeve, *Lyotard and Theology*, 94).

[126] Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 95.

[127] Ibid.

the other to simply one more event concatenated in, or encapsulated within, our story. For the disruption of our particular narrative makes us aware of the other that exists outside of our own personal experience, which challenges us to bear witness to its witness. Finally, an open narrative stimulates a "*critical praxis*." Encounters with irreducible otherness cause us to conduct both an internal and an external critique. This stimulates a critical consciousness as we choose to take "*self-critical* and *world-critical* judgments and actions."[128] An open narrative recognizes difference and eschews attempts to negate the other's alterity. This occurs on the level of one's praxis. As Boeve notes, one who follows an open narrative refuses to use God to legitimize his or her particular narrative, or abandons attempts to functionalize the other. Such a person refuses to absolutize his or her own truth, unlike the Nazi who claimed "*Gott mit uns*."[129]

Boeve believes that the question of truth comes down to relationship and praxis. Through an open narrative, the theologian relates to the Truth—in all its intangibility—while bearing witness to that which ultimately eludes any particular narrative. Truth is no longer limited to the *content* of a story. Rather, narratives "*live in the truth*" as they "point to the elusive other, to that which continues to escape them."[130] The theologian gives up on mastering God or neighbor through narrative. Rather, in postmodern thought, s/he finds "a manner of expressing contextually and understandably the evangelical option for the poor, the refugee, [and] the 'sinner.'"[131]

5.5 Interruption and the event of grace

As we said earlier, in the current postmodern context, Boeve thinks that correlation theological methodology should be radicalized. In place of a too-easy correlation between context and faith, or a perceived rupture between both, Boeve argues for "interruption." He thinks that "interrup-

[128] Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 96.

[129] Ibid.

[130] Ibid., 99.

[131] Lieven Boeve, "De Weg, De Waarheid En Het Leven. Religieuze Traditie En Waarheid in De Postmoderne Context," *Bijdragen. Tijdschrift voor filosofie en theologie* 58, (1997): 185–186 (my translation).

tion" as a theological concept is both "*contextually* adequate" and "*theologically* legitimate."[132] This concept recognizes both continuity and discontinuity between Christian faith and the context, while holding them "together in an albeit tense relationship."[133]

Interruption does not mean rupture. It does not signify that the relationship between faith and the context has ceased; rather, it signifies that the linking of expected phrases in the narrative is disturbed, delayed, or suspended. Room is made for an otherness, within the narrative, that cannot be witnessed to but *through* the narrative. As Boeve says,

> It involves the intrusion of an otherness that only momentarily but nonetheless intensely halts the narrative sequence. Interruptions cause the narrative to collide with its own borders. They do not annihilate the narrative; rather they draw attention to its narrative character and force an opening toward the other within the narrative.[134]

In place of a presumed continuity between Christian faith and a secular Western context, Boeve argues for the experience of pluralization. Within the context of a pluralized field, many different stories signify the words "truth, rationality, and humanity." And, unlike previously, secular rationality, as a meta-discourse, is no longer able to regulate the meaning of these terms across multiple lesser narratives. They no longer function as univocal terms. Rather, truth, rationality, and humanity are seen to be already signified within the particular narratives in which the words are already embedded. No single narrative—nor its governing rule—can regulate the signification of these terms.

However, Boeve views the experience of interruption as a benefit for the Christian narrative. For the encounter with the other interrupts the natural closure of the narrative, interrupting its tendency to make victims. And Boeve believes that there are *theological* reasons for thinking in terms of interruption. For Boeve gives a number of examples where God interrupts the narrative of scripture, forcing it open precisely at the point

---

[132] Boeve, *God Interrupts History*, 41.
[133] Ibid., 42.
[134] Ibid.

where it threatens to close. Among those examples are: sending Moses to liberate the people from Egyptian slavery, Jesus' ministry of healing bodies and forgiving sinners, and Jesus' identification with the naked, poor, hungry, and imprisoned.[135] Indeed, Boeve considers God as the "interrupter," who is most clearly seen breaking open closed, repressive narratives in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

6. Conclusion

Development brings about—along with technological advancements—the dispersal of knowledge within radically heterogeneous, particular languages, or discourses. In the postmodern condition, knowledge is no longer legitimated by a single over-arching narrative, whether of religion, emancipation, or science. For the modern grand narratives—birthed out of the Enlightenment—proved incapable of keeping their promises. Often these stories became oppressive and totalitarian, and millions of people were victimized in the past (and current) century. Lyotard calls the situation of their lost credulity "the postmodern condition."

This change in the culture inspires theology towards an inner critique of its own narrative. This inspires a recontextualization of the faith, since previous expressions or understandings may no longer be credible or understandable for a large number of our contemporaries. Theology's task is to explain the faith for such people. For theology bears witness to the Truth, and to the event of love—what Boeve calls the "event of grace." Boeve provides theology with a thoughtful engagement with Lyotard's thought regarding the current context, and he indicates a plausible way of re-expressing the faith in terms relevant for people living in a postmodern culture. For we indeed find that the event of divine love comes unexpectedly, surprisingly into our lives, as Boeve suggests. Theology, therefore, bears witness to this event.

However, theology should pay particular attention to the stories it tells, for every witness must betray the event somehow. A different link could have been made. Another phrase could have followed. Every narrative forgets the event as it concatenates a string of phrases, striving to

[135] Boeve, *God Interrupts History,* 46.

come to a good end. Lyotard gives us insight into the current critical consciousness: namely, that grand narratives have lost credibility. Even so, groups continue to tell these destructive, dangerous, oppressive tales—even in our time. Lyotard helps theology *ex negativo*, by explaining how the Christian narrative degenerates into a master narrative. In fact, it can become an especially strong hegemonic narrative, since the Christian narrative is a story about love.

Thus, Boeve encourages theology to bear witness to the event of grace, to the experience of love that transcends language. After all, our story—the Christian narrative—is a particular story. It tells us of a God who reveals Godself in time and space, to specific individuals. God's love is revealed preeminently in Jesus of Nazareth. For cultural and *theological* reasons, Boeve suggests that we bear witness in "open narratives"—stories that try to remember its own forgetting, even though our best attempts will always fall short of the event. Language is limited. But we must tell our story somehow, through language, as we remember the necessary betrayal of the event. In this way, we bear witness to one who refuses to be mastered by our narrative, and who interrupts them when they threaten to close. To the God who escapes every attempt to enclose Him in a narrative.

Bibliography

Boeve, Lieven. "Critical Consciousness in the Postmodern Condition: A New Opportunity for Theology?" *Philosophy & Theology* 10, (1997): 449–468.

Boeve, Lieven. "De Weg, De Waarheid En Het Leven. Religieuze Traditie En Waarheid in De Postmoderne Context." *Bijdragen. Tijdschrift voor filosofie en theologie* 58, (1997): 164–188.

Boeve, Lieven. "Thinking Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context: A Playground for Theological Renewal." In *Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context*, edited by L. Boeve and L. Leijssen, 3–35. Leuven: Peeters, 2001.

Boeve, Lieven. "The End of Conversation in Theology: Considerations from a Postmodern Discussion." In *Theology and Conversation: Towards a Relational Theology*, edited by J. Haers and P. De Mey, 189–209. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003.

Boeve, Lieven. *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context*. Translated by Brian Doyle. Vol. 30 Louvain Theological & Pastoral Monographs. Leuven: Peeters, 2003.

Boeve, Lieven. *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval*. Translated by Brian Doyle. New York; London: Continuum, 2007.

Boeve, Lieven. "Jean-François Lyotard on Differends and Unpresentable Otherness: Can God Escape the Clutches of the Christian Master Narrative?" *Culture, Theory, and Critique* 52, no. 2–3 (2011): 263–284.

Boeve, Lieven. *Lyotard and Theology: Beyond the Christian Master Narrative of Love* Philosophy and Theology. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *Le Différend*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1983.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Vol. 10 Theory and History of Literature. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Vol. 46 Theory and History of Literature. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *Pacific Wall*. Venice, CA: Lapis Press, 1990.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *Libidinal Economy*. Translated by Iain Hamilton Grant. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *Postmodern Fables*. Translated by Georges Van Den Abbeele. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Lyotard, Jean François. *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport Sur Le Savoir*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979.

Readings, Bill. *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics* Critics of the Twentieth Century, Edited by Christopher Norris. London: Routledge, 1991.

Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr I. *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation I - Ii*. Translated by Thomas P. Whitney. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998.