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Essay in Postmodern Theology  
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# **Cutting the Ties that Bind: A Review of Postmodern and New Age Thinking**

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## 1. Introduction

In this essay I shall deal with two major movements of the end of the 20th century, both of which seemingly emerged out of the revolutionary movements characteristic of the late 1960's. I will attempt to describe both the so-called postmodern movement and the so-called New Age movement. These two streams of the latest "Zeitgeist" are not very easy to describe in terms of rather classic categories or just another new "ism". Moreover, the circumstance that these movements can only be described as fragmentary is apparently part-of-the-system of at least the postmodern movement.

I was struggling to find the closest definition of the "mainstream" of each of the two, but it proved very difficult to extract any clear definition at all, either because a true postmodernist would probably not really want to be described, or because a true New Age enthusiast would probably define himself in a cloud of lofty and flowery words, as we shall see on the next pages. Additionally and naturally, these movements are somewhat scattered by now, lest it may be too easy for an observer to grasp them otherwise.

Against all odds I have tried to give the best and shortest definitions of "Postmodernity" and "New-Age" I could gather from the bogs of pertinent literature before I went forth and listed the similarities and differences of the two with surprising results.

## 2. Definition of Postmodernity

To be able to define what post-modernity is, it must necessarily be clear what modernity is or what it used to be.

In our context, modernity is seen as a period in which all the values have enabled or backed the development of the situation in which we find ourselves in the last third of the 20th century. This development has taken place in the last 300 years and is supposed to have started with the rise of science and industrialisation with those classical names like Isaac Newton or René Descartes, who have initiated the "modern age" with all its well-known characteristics such as exponential economic, scientific and cultural success on the one hand and a vast decline of the influence of Christianity, together with a change, or shift, in the popular way of thinking with the result that the main values changed also. The pursuit of individual liberty and happiness, along with economic and technological progress, materialism, atheism and so on, were suddenly taken very seriously.

This development then culminated in the early 20th century and changed into the awareness of the problems it created, such as global environmental devastation or a widespread lack of spiritual support. In connection with this awareness, the reasons and cultural/mental presuppositions of this crisis were suddenly revealed to those who deemed themselves no longer able to accept the old values and the old way of thinking. After having this insight, the "proto-postmodernists", about 15 years ago, considered it a good idea to simply abolish the reasons for the crisis of modernity.

In the following, a very brief and rough definition shall be given of what may be called postmodernity (perhaps rather than postmodernism). A brief definition in this context may be enough to get the basic ideas. Two of the most important terms used by this movement shall have the function of paradigms that lead to an understanding of the main ideas of this movement: "Deconstructivism" and "Narrative".

### a) Deconstructivism

Deconstructivism basically means that something is disassembled, or taken apart instead of put together, and so the postmodernists did with the old values and ideals of modernity that were no longer acceptable. They started to **undo** those values, like the belief in authority, science, Christianity, and especially the structures of thinking that stood behind these things. For instance, the protagonists of modernity had been proclaiming the death of God, but the "mode" of dominion in the society of modernity remained fairly unchanged.

This necessarily went hand in hand with an analysis of all these structures, leading the postmodern movement to some pertinent definitions of what modernity is or was. The consequence was a radical denial, a scepticism of modernity as such, together with the emotional expression of feeling misled by the cultural paradigms of

modernity.

The case was (and is) then being made against all the features of modernity - which had been handed down to us, namely from the founders of the "Modern Age", traditional scientists, philosophers and economists -and they were exposed to a disassembly/dismantling, which could also be called deconstruction. This means that all the values and habits and former models of thinking, all those "-isms", are simply being abolished in the first place. This is a very radical starting point, for whoever tries to get rid of his thinking habits consequently will probably find him- or herself ending up either in nonsense (lack of logic, being no longer necessary) or at the least in absolute nihilism (lack of values, having no justification any more). Especially this nihilistic idea is apparently one of the significant features of the postmodern movement, since the endeavour can always be found to replace the characteristics of modernity with their negation, leading not seldom into a total rejection of all values together with a rather anarchistic, however not aggressive, worldview.

A deconstructivist's view that does not apply this absolute nihilism would still claim that **any** position would be ideological in some way. Thus a non-ideological position would not exist at all, and the only thing that is left to be a matter of proclamation would be the idea of a pluralism of different individual viewpoints.<sup>0</sup>

Paraphrasing it in my own words, deconstructivism is the effort to get rid of the boundaries and traditional patterns of thinking that persisted throughout the age of modernity, after those had come into being in the last two centuries in the course of the industrial revolution and the rise of science.<sup>0</sup>

These patterns of thinking are considered by many of the post-modernists to be responsible for the problems that we are facing these days: wars being quarrels between different ideologies, religious conflicts and so forth. It is mainly because of the structure, the manners of thinking of the struggling parties respectively, that those conflicts are a matter of fighting at all. The inner structure of a given ideology is - per definition -exclusive and cannot allow anyone to be of a different opinion; the ideology therefore tends to be rather aggressive or, in its mildest expression, missionary.<sup>0</sup>

The last consequence of deconstructing modernity in this way, however, is necessarily a nihilism rejecting almost everything possibly neglectable, including logic, language and dialectic thinking - which is, of course, inconsequent, because a radical nihilist must still speak, and does it often the louder.

So the ethical consequence of such a nihilism is anarchy, reminding of the obligatory quotation of Heraclite:  $\pi\alpha\nu\tau\alpha\ \rho\epsilon\iota$ , everything is an ever-flowing stream without any hold. Although this form of nihilism does not appear to be very constructive (as it does

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<sup>0</sup>And even so it could be defined as ideological, since there would still be a preference that makes an exclusive decision. Beware! Ideologies are everywhere!

<sup>0</sup>Nevertheless the origins of this way of thinking last back much further: the Platonic dichotomy between ideal and real, mind and body; or the mediæval notion of hierarchy "God-->(hu)man-->world" ("Good-->sinful-->bad").

<sup>0</sup>We found out during the seminar that the alternative for this "old" type of ideology could be a system which is methodologically safeguarded with the openness towards criticism, which

not even want to be constructive), it yet shows a passionate desire to overcome evil, once it is recognized, that is "modernity" in this case.

"The two types of postmodernism are different attempts to overcome the horrors of modernity. The strategy of eliminative postmodernism is to undermine horror-producing worldviews by eliminating the presuppositions of worldviews as such. It does this by taking some of the premises of modernity to their logical conclusions, thereby eliminating not only God, but also freedom, purpose agency, the self, realism, truth, good and evil, and historical meaning. Revisionary postmodernism considers this approach both inconsistent and counterproductive. It is inconsistent because freedom, purposive agency, realism, truth, and the distinction between better and worse are presupposed in the very attempt to eliminate them. It is counterproductive because freedom is not promoted by scepticism, nor contentment with the present by nihilism. A horrible meaning cannot be replaced by a vacuum of meaning, but only by a better meaning. A horrible Holy One cannot be replaced by a decentered, disenchanting universe, but only by a better intuition of its Holy Centre."<sup>0</sup>

Becoming aware of these methodical blind alley, the postmodern thinking formed also a more constructive, or *re-constructive*, wing. Unlike the radical nihilistic deconstructivism, this kind of postmodern thinking utters practical implications, i.e. to be happy about the gained freedom from any kind of authority or guidance, and thus simply to **be**, perceiving that life is a gift with which you can do what you want. The suggestion of Mark Taylor, a representative of this reconstructive wing, is to spend your life in sort of **play**, which could possibly be the analogy to a kind of universal dance that shall be mentioned in a later chapter. And once you have got rid of logic, you can eventually enjoy life. The old ideal of possession and materialism is *undone*, but replaced by the possibility to seek and find delight in the achieved way of life. To experience the meaning of that, I recommend listening to the solo concerts of Keith Jarrett, a pianist who sometimes undertakes to transcend even Jazz precisely into this idea of playing within a plurality of differences, just like story-telling: open, momentary, improvisatory, sometimes even self critical.

This is only to get an idea of the reconstructive postmodernists' enterprise to not only abolish the values of modernity but to replace them with something that seems more appropriate.

I do not want to go into too many details here, mainly due to limitation of space, but it is remarkable how many of our habits do not hold the ground when they are postmodernly uncovered. See now Table I.

**Table I.: Suggestions of Ibn Hassan<sup>0</sup>:**

Modern	Postmodern
Form	Anti-Form
Purpose	Play
Design	Chance
Hierarchy	Anarchy
Mastery	Exhaustion
Presence	Absence
Metaphysics	Irony
Determination	Indetermination

<sup>0</sup>David R. Griffin, Postmodern Theology and A/Theology, in Varieties of Postmodern Theology, p.52.

<sup>0</sup>This name occurred only once during the Seminar, and I cannot quote the exact reference

Transcendence  
GodFather  
to do

Immanence  
Holy Spirit  
to let be/go (added by myself)

Regarding this particular way of thinking, our typical postmodernist would prefer to think a sequence of events rather as a spiral, whilst modernity's view used to be linear. You may find thousands of other examples.

## b) Narrative

Narrative has the meaning of "story" or "tale". This term was introduced into postmodernism because of the great role it plays in defining language - and finally understanding the humans who use language. It seems different from the deconstructive way of rejection, but it is easy to understand that language is the medium of any possible effort to express thoughts and ideals. To put it in other words, language is inseparably connected with what humans do and which forms of society and culture they form. The use of language can therefore be regarded as the key of deconstructing modernity, because dominion, mastery and authority had necessarily to be rendered into a certain way of thinking and speaking: Indeed, language itself would thus be a synonym for mastery and authority.

Starting from that, the great role of language in any definition of human beings, the postmodern thinkers found out (or took over) the idea that human language always expresses itself in narratives, which basically consist of the classical styles of literature, such as drama, poetry, tale, myth, comedy and so forth. This also means that everything which humans have ever created in their attempt to describe the reality and the world in which they live is nothing more than a story, having no other ontological status than fiction.

History, for instance, would then be a nice tale, but the notion of absolute plurality implies that there is neither a certain order of historical facts nor any truth, for no truth-claim can possibly be made in such a pluralistic worldview.

Nothing remains of an aim or absolute meaning of history, and therefore the past fades before our minds, leaving us alone but free with our individual presence.

Interestingly, the tendency of human storytelling to create a **variety** of narratives to describe the world has always been around, and all the intolerance in human history (sorry, the faint past) are a result of oppressing this variety of different stories. A "single narrative", however, would always be unsatisfying, because of both its oppressive and its dissatisfactory character. Any ideology **is** such a single narrative, for it tries to oppress any other ways of describing reality and puts forward the claim for a certain way of acting. The opposite would be a pluralism of manifold narratives without competition, which means that philosophy would find itself right next to poetry.

There is of course not only a given narrative in the form of a written or spoken text. For there is also the reader, or there is only the reader

for he or she is not only receiving the narrative, but is the only instance to give an interpretation, and this interpretation would not be supposed to be valid for anyone else. The author no longer has any authority. Any "responsability" is withdrawn from him/her. Interpreting a text is a creative, meaning-making process, in which the individual makes his or her very own sense out of given information.

This causes the problem that the reader of a text must have at least some idea of what is "truth" in relationship to what the author is saying; the reader must have some original faith in the author, he must trust him and even believe in some serious intention of the author, such as truth (even the truth of humour) or existence (even nonsense presumes existence). This gives a metaphysical dimension to the reading process: the reader must be ready to open him- or herself in order to dwell in the world of the text<sup>0</sup>. The author, however, communicates to the reader through symbols and signs, and thus the creative meaning-making process produces another dimension of narratives: a metaphorical dimension.

It can be said that the self is seen as a search for narrative, being another word for meaning in this case, because the reader would utter this meaning in some kind of narrative language. And as every self, every reader of a given narrative seeks for a meaning, a narrative is thus defined by the others, also seeking for a meaning and therefore creating a plurality.

To put it less abstractly, narratives are representing the realm of human actions, that means being within time or temporality. Narratives are dealing with human possibilities in time, which gives them a social dimension, as humans are not alone: As they are closely connected with human actions, they integrate an individual into a community of similar rules, habits and rites, defining the setting of human communication within a society.

The postmodern situation is that we find ourselves within a variety of different and polyvalent narratives, none of them being worse or better than the other. A binding truth is not existent, or, in other words, truth has become a non-cognitive value, just as no ideology could make a truth-claim without being oppressive.

By now, the postmodern movement has split itself up. There are (or must be: Where are they?!) radical postmodernists, zealous followers of the one true nihilism, as well as mediating postmodernists, known as "revisionary" such as Mark Taylor or David Griffin, who, for instance, acknowledge authority to some extent. Representatives of the latter form try to bring the ideas of postmodernism closer to formulating ethics and its practical implications. There is also a "humanistic postmodernism" with the obvious desire to integrate postmodernism and tradition.

In conclusion of this very brief definition I present another table to illustrate the idea of replacing the values of modernity:



**Table II.<sup>0</sup>:**

Modern	Postmodern
utopian	popular
idealist	pluralist
Zeitgeist	tradition
purist	eclectic
antiornamental	ornamental
antirepresentational	representational
antimetaphor	prometaphor
anti-historical memory	pro-historical memory
antihumor	prohumor
antisymbolic	prosymbolic

### 3. Definition of New-Age

As in the postmodern movement, it might be helpful to define what the old age could have been like, before defining a new one.

It may be said that the New Age movement also starts with accusing the (western) cultural development of the past 300 years of having produced industrialisation, scientific materialism, the "Death of God", the alienation of humans from their natural state of unspoiltness. In other words all the features of "modernity", as cited above<sup>0</sup>. A strenuous effort is undertaken to point out the key factors of the development into the modern age. For instance, the representation of Christianity is mostly very negative, since the Christian tradition is - and that cannot be totally wrong - to be made responsible for the rise of a certain attitude towards the earth in which man is the governor of nature, allowed to exploitation and mastery<sup>0</sup>. But also the spirit of the Enlightenment is rebuked, since it helped to put up (or was itself put up, it makes no difference in this case) the presuppositions for the foundation of a science which has been becoming more and more narrow-minded, exclusive and orthodox since then - again, this cannot be totally incorrect.

Especially through the reign of scientific materialism and logic during the modern age, there has been an increasing suppression of an individual form of spirituality, creating a vacuum that needs to be refilled these days<sup>0</sup>. However, because the scientific materialism was unable to be satisfactory in this regard, there has been growing a thirst for this original form of spirituality and individual life among humans (of our culture) that lies beyond "a worldview so

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<sup>0</sup>W. Oden, *After Modernity...What?*, p.73. **He refers to a model of Charles Jencks, originally stated for the change of architectural styles.**

<sup>0</sup>It may occur to our minds that the modern age might not have been totally bad, but for this context it is important to get rid of its bad features rather than to praise its commonwealthy goodness, even if that would be the case.

<sup>0</sup>Anyhow this is to be seen as a rather evident development, for a culture that needs to justify its practise of exploitation and mastery will always find a way to quote the fitting scriptural passage, following an almost irresistible cultural pressure.

mechanical and limited that it totally denied the invisible realities of existence"<sup>0</sup> - Rajneesh Baghwan spoke about the "Aristotelitis" of western culture: a worldview that "raped the earth and robbed humans of their humanity"<sup>0</sup>.

This age is to be overcome. As the latest development at the end of our century shows, there must be an immense desire for alternatives from the "modern" values and notions of human life, much like the "ancien regime" of the French absolutism.

One example that is important for our context is that the widespread religion of Christianity has allowed "only one kind of belief or approach to the divine unknown"<sup>0</sup>. Much of the way of thinking of the modern age was indeed like a "single narrative" as described above (cf. chapter 2.b): Ideologies were too exclusive for encouraging a broader notion of individualism and personal spirituality - unlike personal belief in the sense of obligate piety.

In the late 20th century, this desire to reinforce individual spirituality and to overcome the recognised failures of the modern age led to the rise of a movement that tried to give birth to those ideas and dreams. The revolutionary upheavals of the late 1960's can also be interpreted as the outburst of spiritual disappointment into all different sorts of individual spirituality, not very convicting at the beginning, of course, but with a power that was big enough to initiate a worldwide spread of these new ideas, so that many of the participants could soon launch the proclamation of the beginning of a **New Age**.

This went hand in hand with the sophistication of elementary physics in this century. Theories of the atomic structure were cleansed of some major flaws, and the implications and consequences appeared to be more than interesting: They seem to testify that the structure of matter is much less solid and much more "spiritual", in the sense that the old dualism between spirit and matter seems to dissolve according to the latest insights of physicists. The "clou" of these new theories is that they seem to be transferable to all branches of science, like biology or even psychology. It is being spoken of a historical coincidence.

I do not intend to forget the astrological support of this new idea. Soon after - or long before - the saying of the coming of a New Age became popular, astrologists disseminated the prediction that the sun would soon leave the zodiac of the Pisces and would enter into the influence of Aquarius: A New Age of peace and glory would begin, with a total change of human conditions on our planet, to paraphrase the most optimistic wing.

All this was backing the rise of the New Age movement which took up the analogies between those new theories and old Far-Eastern religious traditions which had always been assuming that the world is an immaterial, undetermined illusion rather than a solid and determined, and probably human-centred clockwork<sup>0</sup>.

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<sup>0</sup>Bloom, p.xv.

<sup>0</sup>Wilkinson in *Tending the Garden*, p.8.

<sup>0</sup>Bloom, p.xv.

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Especially the similarities between the insights of elementary physics and the doctrines of ancient religious traditions (Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Islamic and Christian mysticism, Platonism, Gnosticism and so forth) have become a key factor of the truth-claim of the "mainstream" New Age teachings, not to mention the growing consciousness for environmental issues, which can also be backed by many of the ancient religious traditions.

It is important for this context to note the spiritual implications of this: For example, the traditional Christian "Menschenbild"<sup>0</sup> of the mastery of humans over the earth has given way to the idea of a "holy connectedness with the universe"<sup>0</sup>. Great efforts are undertaken to lead humans back to a state of health that is wholesome and happy and powerful. "In the New Age movement there is an enthusiasm, humour and release."<sup>0</sup>

I think it is now time for some quotations of essential authors to get a clearer idea of how it "feels" to be in the New Age movement; and please feel free to compare this feeling with the impression of the postmodern movement as described in the last chapter:

"Quantum theory has shown that subatomic particles are not isolated grains of matter but are probability patterns, interconnections in an inseparable cosmic web that includes the human observer and her consciousness. Relativity theory has made the cosmic web come alive, so to speak, by revealing its essentially dynamic character; by showing that its activity is the very essence of its being. In modern physics, the image of the universe as a machine has been transcended by a view of it as one invisible, dynamic whole whose parts are essentially interrelated and can be understood only as patterns of a cosmic process. At the subatomic level the interrelations between the parts of the whole are more fundamental than the parts themselves. There is motion but there are, ultimately, no moving objects; there is activity but there are no actors; there are no dancers, there is only the dance."<sup>0</sup>

"I worked with a powerful joy to try to understand the Story of Creation at the dawn of the Universal Age. I read constantly, piecing together cosmology, geology, biology, psychology, current events, futuristics, religious visions. ... All my relationships changed. ...

I became convinced that we stand upon the threshold of the greatest age of human history. Anyone who can see the opportunities will emancipate their own potential through involvement in the world. Personal and planetary growth are not merely parallel, they are one. ...

We live at the most marvellous moment in human history. Everyone now alive is involved in the greatest upheaval since humanity emerged out of the animal world."<sup>0</sup>

"In the transformative process we become the artists and scientists of our own lives. Enhanced awareness promotes in all of us the traits that abound in the creative person. Whole-seeing. Fresh, childlike perceptions. Playfulness, a sense of flow. Risk-taking. The ability to focus attention in a relaxed way, to become lost in the object of contemplation. The transformed self has new tools, gifts, sensibilities... The practises of other cultures suggest endless human possibilities."<sup>0</sup>

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foundation process of the New Age movement. There are lots of good introductions to elementary physics to do a better job in this issue.

<sup>0</sup>German, meaning "image (notion) of humans".

<sup>0</sup>P. Winter, liner notes of Missa Gaia, quoted in Wilkinson, p.22.

<sup>0</sup>Bloom, p.xvii.

<sup>0</sup>Fritjof Capra, The Turning Point, pp.91-92.

<sup>0</sup>Barbara Marx Hubbard, The Evolutionary Journey, pp.10 and 12.

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"It seems to me that there are four major fields:

New Paradigm/New Science  
Ecology  
New Psychology  
Spiritual Dynamics"<sup>0</sup>

"...Seeking for the sacred in all forms of human activity and culture, members of the Association share the following goals: the spiritual transformation of individual consciousness; the realization of the inner harmony of the great universal religions; the resacralization of the relations between nature and culture through the development of an appropriate technology for a meta-industrial culture; and the illumination of the spiritual dimensions of world order."<sup>0</sup>

#### 4. Comparison

As we can very easily see, there are some important **similarities** between the two movements:

a) Both are claiming or even proclaiming a change of the paradigms that determined a cultural period: the age of modernity (mechanistic, scientocentric, ratiocentric, ideocentric, ... ). New scientific and cultural paradigms arise<sup>0</sup>, and dogmas like the diversity of matter and spirit or the mechanical notions of space and time are at least widened by these new theories.

b) Both are having a vision of a future which would be a deliverance from the modern age, even though the New Age movement is much more radical and utopian in this concern.

c) Both are forming a growing group involving the intellectual middle and upper class within advanced western industrial societies that moves through a crisis of values and worldviews. Nevertheless, only the New Age movement is becoming increasingly popular among **all** social graduations, or "classes".

d) Both are influenced by the post-68 influence of Far-Eastern philosophies, especially old Hinduist, Zen and Taoist traditions. Actually, the most plausible explanation for the emergence of these movements is the vacuum of spirituality<sup>0</sup> that imploded and then expanded into a large variety of new ways of thinking during the 60's and 70's revolutionary upheavals in western societies, even though this vacuum had come into being much earlier.

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<sup>0</sup>Bloom, p.xvi.

<sup>0</sup>As cited in the liner notes of Missa Gaia of P.Winter, cited in Wilkinson, p.23.

<sup>0</sup>Most marvellously the actual upheaval was part in the scientific camp itself, seemingly backing the cultural changes by providing the necessary theoretical background.

<sup>0</sup>Perhaps it is necessary to be careful with this term, because it tends to be used very blurry and carelessly sometimes. I would define it as a description of an attitude of pursuing a religious way

In spite of these remarkable resemblances I also found some great **differences**:

a) The New Age movement seems to have left out much methodological reflection before it started to get on with the replacement of old values. This is natural, because the New Age movement has formed itself out of a revolutionary period rather than what would have been the foundation of a mere philosophical school. Thereby the threshold of hindrance was lower for the New Age movement to adopt ideas and doctrines from other, religious and non-religious, traditions.

b) One must take note of the fact that the New Age movement is definitely not uniform, but shattered into many, many shards and pieces which altogether form a growing part of a cultural mood rather than a delimited movement. And then, maybe, even the postmodern movement is nothing but another fragment of exactly the same cultural mood which might indeed become an important power corresponding to an actual change of cultural paradigms.

c) The postmodern movement appears to be much more "intellectual" in the sense that it is not as popular as the New Age movement. It is anyhow difficult to describe the postmodern movement as a closed system, since the constitutional ideas of postmodernity are explicitly rejecting the conventional structures of a movement or an ideology.

Differing from that, one could define the New-Age as a bunch of single -isms (although in a fancy new way of combining them), only with the difference that there is no strict distinction between the particular worldviews. Moreover, it **is** very eclectic in practice, and distinctions would not even be necessary - feel free to steal anything you wish from any other philosophical system.

d) Postmodernism appears to be slightly more pluralistic. In the New Age movement there is a wide acceptance of different ways aiming at same goal, but this still means that each of those positions would be judged from a certain point of view under usage of certain criteria, which fulfills the definition of ideological viewpoint. A postmodern view would rather not have the readiness to judge and decide in favour of anything; and therefore it would be found closer to a relativistic or agnostic worldview.

e) A true postmodernist, in my eyes, would rather be the loner who performs his or her own life, secluding her- or himself from the world rather than getting involved, whilst the "mainstream" New Age person would throw her- or himself into the endeavour to save eventually the planet. Radical postmodernism seems very much about letting things go, whilst an average New Age enthusiast would struggle to change things. The good thing about all this is that both persons would have changed their lives in a way that is at least more peaceful and less aggressive than most of the "missionary" ideologies which are, hopefully, about to be superseded.

f) The postmodern movement is - at least in its rather philosophical wing - less spiritual than the New Age movement, if it is spiritual at all.

**plus** methodical reflection **minus** spiritual involvement. A postmodernist would be a Diogenes rather than a Herakles.

## 5. Criticism

### a) of Postmodernism:

First, it is striking that postmodern authors speak of the end of modernity, as though it would have been unified "enough that we can speak of its ending"<sup>0</sup>. It seems plain that in this context the term "modernity" contains a somewhat idealized notion of what modernity **was**. Perhaps it is neither over nor was it uniform, and even if might be over in part, this does not necessarily mean an instant shift into another age. I would not dare say that the period of modernity has already faded into another one - at the very most, the climate in what used to be called the "Western World" has been changing for a very short time.

As I stated above, the postmodern movement has been developing almost entirely within western industrial civilisations of the late 20th century. This circumstance determines the mental background of its protagonists, who are seemingly not too interested in tackling global problems. They have to be reproached, by an observer, with the question if they are indeed not too unconcerned and indifferent, forming a slightly elitist group that seems to be stealing away from responsibility... Postmodernism may be a good idea, though. Only that it is alas! not applicable to today's global reality, due to an obvious (and perhaps intentional) absence of moral implications.

### b) of the New Age movement:

Much can be criticized in the New Age movement: the methodological vagueness, e.g. the fact that the movement is "bewilderingly eclectic"<sup>0</sup> with a shamelessness that seems to make many people end up with a "do-it-yourself syncretistic religion."<sup>0</sup>

Through the analogy of elementary physics and ancient religious traditions, the "foundation is laid for asserting the legitimacy of a variety of occult and paranormal experiences."<sup>0</sup> When reading certain books about occult religious praxis, it seems to me that a kind of order is launched:  
Be irrational - out of spite!

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<sup>0</sup>P.Kolb in The Critique of Pure Modernity, p.262.

<sup>0</sup>Wilkinson, p.9.

<sup>0</sup>Wilkinson, p.10.

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Also, the rejection of traditional thinking methods like the oppressive logic of the age of scientific materialism is not done very consistently, apparently with little reflection about the possible necessity of logic or the problems arising if values and doctrines are but replaced without being intensively examined. Whatever appears to be undone and **then** revised by the postmodern movement is seemingly only being exchanged and replaced in some important parts of the New Age movement, even though there might also be the effort to tidy up the exuberant growth of new spiritual conceptions and doctrines.

Furthermore, the future visions of the New Age, honourable they may be, are in my humble opinion interlaced by an - often enough hair-raising - optimism regarding the future fate of mankind. Whatever the "Menschenbild" of some New Age people may be, it seems to overlook some basic characteristics of human beings. It also seems to me that many of these ideas and visions reflect only the background of a western industrial civilisation and yet utter the claim to be universal for the whole of mankind. To our sharpened, postmodern senses that would mean that another ideology, though being a less destructive one this time, begins to enter the scenery again through the back-door, if not openly.

There **is** a great need to overcome the age of the last few centuries in all its destructivity, vanity, arrogance and inhumanity. Most of the desire to get rid of our global problems is honourable, necessary and true - if only the New Age movement would put more emphasis on reflecting its methods self-critically. I would personally like to see this endeavour, high-spirited as it is, led by more wise a thought and more caring about what humans could really be like, now more than ever as we find ourselves in the awareness of all the global problems.

This ascertainment, anew, leads to a more pessimistic view than that of some New Age folk, but it could be healing if we would sharpen our senses for the present situation instead of substituting or confusing the "is" with the "ought to be", again a very old problem.

Anyhow, these two movements are at least a counterforce to the condition defined by both of them as modernity. I personally do find it necessary to overcome much of this age that can no longer be binding upon the way we live - simply because of the destruction it has been causing. It might well be the case that the postmodern movement as well as the New Age movement are to become an increasingly important factor in the attempt of non-confrontationally changing the conditions of what we can do with our lives as part of a western civilisation, in the process being somewhat responsible for the problems we have now and for those yet to come.

## **6. What it might have to do with theology**

First, the question is how to continue theological thinking at all in a world of postmoderism and New Age, which already implies that this

challenge is indeed to be taken seriously, for "there **is** a major shift in consciousness, values, and epistemology occurring in our time."<sup>0</sup>

As for the postmodern situation, there might be a continuance of acting, saying and writing. Regarding the notion of narrative, this would mean that theology could now try to re-tell the story of humans in the light of divine activity. It still remains a discipline, but being now one way among many others without any superior position. And even so, it could still attempt to describe the relationship between God and humans, now having the awareness of a more open character of theological thinking.

"Believing in the God of postmodernism provides a model for a selfhood characterized by empathetic nurturing, not by invulnerable controlling."<sup>0</sup>

As for the confrontation with the New Age, this movement seems indeed to be endowed with a great integrative power which guarantees its members a foundation of (spiritual) identity that cannot be found anywhere else at the present time. The Christian Church, no matter if Catholic or Protestant or whatever, has miserably failed to present an alternative, although it tries meanwhile to adapt to the new cultural changes, either feeling guilty or seeing the need to reform its previous worldview. As expected, the Churches' conservative voice of reason is not silent, either, deeming and damning the new spirituality as entirely satanic, the devil in disguise - which "greatly exaggerates the occult element in the New Age movement and ignores the genuine challenges."<sup>0</sup>

There are actually some attempts to bring theology closer to the ideas of tolerance and plurality. Some of the ideas of postmodern theologians are to make the Christian religion become less missionary and orthodox, and therefore more tolerant: "We believe in it, but we are not going to force anybody to do the same."<sup>0</sup> Biblical texts are still considered to be obligatory, but they are now "metaphorical narratives" that provoke a creative process of re-interpretation<sup>0</sup>.

All in all it seems to me that the present situation is open enough to be both challenging and promising.

"I teach and learn.  
I am breathing so that  
I can be present and authentic.  
It is very hard.

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<sup>0</sup>Wilkinson, p.27.

<sup>0</sup>Griffin, p.49.

<sup>0</sup>Wilkinson, p.25, not representing his own opinion.

<sup>0</sup>This reminds me of Paul Tillich's Method of Correlation. It leads to the most astonishing question if Tillich was a postmodernist.

<sup>0</sup>This, of course, is not totally new for theology, but even if it were a mere semantic innovation it



It is also very graceful."<sup>0</sup>

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