

A Theological Deliberation on the Relation of Postmodernity and Christianity

포스트모더니티와 기독교의 관계에 대한 신학적 고찰

Kim, Dong Hwan

Yonsei University (Th.B.), Yonsei University Graduate School (Th.M.), Graduate School of Theology, Hanshin
University (M.Div.), Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary (M.T.S. & Ph.D.)

Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics, United Graduate School of Theology, Yonsei University

김동환

연세대학교 신학과(Th.B.), 연세대학교 대학원(Th.M.), 한신대학교 신학대학원(M.Div.), 미국 게렛신학대
학원(M.T.S. & Ph.D.), 현재 연세대학교 연합신학대학원 조교수(기독교윤리학)

Introduction: A Relational Approach to Postmodernity

Beginning with “several artistic movements that have challenged the philosophy and practices of modern arts or literature since about the 1960s,”¹ postmodern thought has had a huge influence on all spheres related to knowledge. Especially with philosophy, postmodernity² has imposed a variety of thinking paradigms on modern concepts. In so doing, postmodernity has not only showed different hermeneutic ways from those of modernity, but also challenged the established modern philosophy and even theology.

On this basis, this paper first tries to answer the primary questions: “What is postmodernity like?” and “What are its characters?” Here, the focus of this first task is on the existence of postmodernity rather than the essence of postmodernity. Therefore, it asks not what postmodernity *is*, but what postmodernity is *like*, and not what its *definitions* are, but what its *characters* are. Particularly, these questions are to be reified and clearer to be answered when they are cast by examining postmodernity in its relation to modernity, especially its proclamation

¹ “Postmodernism” in *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Encyclopedia* (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 2000), 1298.

² A general definition of postmodernism is, according to Oxford Dictionary, a late-20th-century movement that was a departure from the modernism. Meanwhile, to express a social state or condition after the modern, it is more adequate to use postmodernity rather than postmodernism. Since the crossing of the two terms is also frequent shown in their use, however, it can hardly to speak of their clear separation. For this reason, this article uses both of them in case, but it is preferable to use modernity rather than modernism because of its focus on postmodern state or condition in relation to theology. In addition, there is not always but sometimes a tendency to use postmodernity for its positive aspects, and post-modernity for its negative aspects. This article deals with both aspects in relation to theology, but prefers postmodernity to post-modernity for keeping its terminological coherence.

of the end of modernity.³

The second task of this article is to look into the relation of postmodernity and Christianity. Here, the previous examination of the relation between modernity and postmodernity is extended to that of the relation between postmodernity and Christianity. The main question in the latter extended examination is: “How are postmodernity and Christianity different from as well as similar to each other in their ways of overcoming modernity?” To answer the question, this article investigates several notable philosophical thoughts, and attempts to reflect upon them from a theological perspective. In so doing, it strives to answer the final question, “What can theology speak about postmodernity?” with a careful pursuit for Christianity beyond postmodernity.

Modernity and Postmodernity

End of Modernity

Before dealing with postmodernity, it is inevitable to look into modernity. In the flow of thought, modernity seems to be affected by nominalism that is the “theory that abstract or general terms, or universals, represent no objective real existents, but are mere words or names.”⁴ In the 14th century, according to nominalist William of Occam, “everything real must be some particular individual thing.”⁵ Like nominalism, modernity emphasizes particularity, and it rejects everything universal and absolute in all areas including economics, politics and religion. In this framework of modernity, the absolute being or power like God was, from the outset, rejected. Personal, individual and secular belief is more respected than religious holiness and divinity. Therefore, modernity has a resistant character against universal belief or absolute faith. This character seems to stem from a modern Cartesian thought in which everything should be doubted. Everything that is not tangible is doubted and rethought. Therefore, religious beliefs and standards considered as manifest truth, e.g., God, are relativized and sometimes rejected. In many cases, such a

³ Therefore, this article does not make its efforts too much to deepen into postmodernity itself, or analyzes postmodernity alone. Of course, the general reason of it is that “[p]ost-modernism’s appeal is broad and varied, difficult to identify” (Pauline Marie Rosenau, *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 11). However, a specific and more important reason is here that the main concern of this article is about the relationship of postmodernity, that is, the existential relation of modernity to Christianity.

⁴ Dogobert D. Runes, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), 227.

⁵ *Ibid.*

challenging stance of modernity is directed to atheism going over a pursuit for a simple individual religious freedom. In this context, the following definition makes sense:

Modernity is the attempt to secure a *certain* interiority or subjectivity against the threat that sensibility, the world and even God cannot be trusted. That interior or subjective space becomes identified as a power to suspend judgment, to doubt or to assert one's will. This *power to free oneself from* identifies the modern.⁶

Meanwhile, postmodernity can be described in relation to modernity, especially by its difference from modernity. One of the well-known definitions of postmodernity is that of Jean-Francois Lyotard, i.e., "*postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives."⁷ He asserts that the "incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences."⁸ In the process of incredulity, any type of totality, which still lies in the modern category, is denied. Moreover, the simplicity of the modern, which has been emphasized by focusing on particular individuals, is substituted by complexity; everything that has been considered as stable is suspected to be unstable. In this regard, the postmodern is, as the prefix *post-* shows, understood to be something after or separated from the modern.

However, the postmodern is, for Lyotard, not entirely separated from the modern. Rather, the "postmodern is a site for the questioning and rethinking of the modern."⁹ In a sense, "[p]ostmodernism may be described as a cultural configuration that is broadly continuous with modernism, that is as not significantly different."¹⁰ Therefore, it can be regarded "as a kind of modernism."¹¹ It is "undoubtedly a part of the modern Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant."¹² On the one hand, postmodernity tries to say something after modernity; on the other hand, it stands in a continuous relation with modernity and still within the modern category. For instance, the doubt of

⁶ This definition was lectured by D. Stephen Long at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in 2003.

⁷ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Graham Ward, "Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace," *The Postmodern God*, ed. Graham Ward (Malden: Blackwell, 1997), xxv.

¹⁰ Barry Smart, *Postmodernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 16.

¹¹ Lee Hardy, "Postmodernism as a kind of modernism: Nietzsche's Critique of Knowledge" in *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, ed. Merold Westphal (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 28.

¹² Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 79.

modernity is, at a glance, similar to the incredulity in postmodernity. Both of them are in accord in terms that they all raise questions for the past. In their questioning process, the previous settings and systems are challenged and refused. Just as the modern do it to the premodern, so the postmodern to the modern. At the same time, however, they are not in accord because their ways of questioning are different. Doubt is consistently made in a huge modernized paradigm whereas incredulity is inconsistently made in a postmodern condition resulted from the negation of all previous paradigms including the modern one. The procedure of doubt makes the premodern lose the credit that it has gained whereas the procedure of incredulity makes the modern lose the condition in which it can gain its credit. In this context, postmodernity is, despite its continuity with modernity, separated from and goes beyond modernity.

Postmodernity and Nihilism

Philosophical discourse of postmodernity begins with nihilism, which was first used by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi and has been reified by Friedrich Nietzsche. As well known, the idea of the *death of God* is located in the center of Nietzschean nihilism. Here, it is important to note that when Nietzsche claimed the death of God, the word God was not a theological concept. Unlike Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel who put God's death in a theological category by relating God's death to the death of His Son, Nietzsche spoke of it in a philosophical category. For Nietzsche, "'God' is a metonymy for 'absolute Truth,' 'absolute Goodness,' 'absolute reality,' 'absolute reason,' the origin and measure of all things.'" ¹³ With the idea of God's death, therefore, Nietzsche tried to reject any absolutism that dominates the world, rather than God in whom someone believes religiously.

At a glance, Nietzsche's thought about the death of God seems to be connected with modernity against the highest values. However, while modernity rejects the highest values and seeks to find other particular values, Nietzsche negates the highest values in themselves. For Nietzsche, the death of God means, as Gianni Vattimo mentions, the "devaluation of the highest values." ¹⁴ Here, the word 'devaluation' does not mean that it comes to underestimate something valuable in the past. It does mean that it comes to make worthless everything that has estimated

¹³ Graham Ward, "Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace," xxviii.

¹⁴ Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University press, 1988), 20.

something as valuable. Hence, Nietzsche tries not to stand over against the existing absolute thing, as modernity does. Rather, he denies the very fact that there is something absolute like God, which remains already in the framework of modernity. By speaking of God's death, Nietzschean nihilism attempts to show that there was, from the beginning, no foundation or ground in a philosophical discourse. In this regard, it can be said that "Nietzsche announces the death of modernity's god,"¹⁵ and so, the death of modernity's god declares the "End of Modernity."¹⁶ In this context, Nietzsche's work can be regarded "as the entry into postmodernity."¹⁷ Nietzsche opened the main door to enter postmodernity, and his first encounter with postmodernity, which became the first character of postmodernity, was *goundlessness*. By the groundless character of postmodernity, all absolute beings are deconstructed, and all highest values are devaluated.

Furthermore, the postmodern character of groundlessness, which stems from nihilism, is expanded into the concept that there is *nothing new*. According to Vattimo, the postmodern is defined "not only as something new in relation to the modern, but also as a dissolution of the category of the new."¹⁸ At first sight, postmodernity seems to be new in terms that it presents a new paradigm different from that of modernity. However, it actually has no intention to present any new paradigm. Speaking differently, modernity ultimately seeks to achieve something new. There is always a strong effort to find a new way or alternative behind the modern critique for the existing order. On the contrary, postmodernity is, from the outset, not directed toward the new. Since there is no foundation or ground, there is no attempt to figure out something new. There is simply groundlessness inside of the first door of postmodernity, and so, there is nothing new behind the last door of postmodernity. *Goundlessness* and *nothing new* are two sides of a coin named postmodernity. They are twofold characters distinguishing postmoderntiy from modernity.

In order to explain the difference between modernity and postmodernity, Vattimo uses two creative terms, *Überwindung* and *Verwindung*. He proposes,

Verwindung indicates something analogous to *Überwindung*, or overcoming, but is distinctly different from the latter both because it has none of the characteristics of a

¹⁵ Graham Ward, "Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace," xxix.

¹⁶ It is the title of Gianni Vattimo's well-known book. He mentions that this concept originates with Nietzsche, and that is introduced into philosophy by Martin Heidegger (Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 164).

¹⁷ Especially, Jürgen Habermas describes like this (Graham Ward, "Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace," xxix).

¹⁸ Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 4.

dialectical *Aufhebung* and because it contains no sense of a 'leaving-behind' of a past that no longer has anything to say to us. Precisely this difference between *Verwindung* and *Überwindung* can help us to define in philosophical terms the 'post-' in 'post-modernism',¹⁹

According to Vattimo, *Überwindung*, or overcoming, is "a typically modern category, and therefore will not enable us to use it as a way out of modernity."²⁰ *Überwindung* means to begin with another thing on the basis of something to be overcome. Therefore, it can neither belong to the postmodern category of groundlessness nor signify the dissolution of the new, that is, nothing new. On the contrary, *Verwindung*, or going-beyond²¹ does neither start from nor stand over against anything that has existed. It also does neither anticipate nor suggest something new. Rather, it goes beyond everything that modernity has overcome, and wants nothing. As a result, what postmodernity leaves by *Verwindung* are the groundless condition and the state of nothing new.

Postmodernity and Christianity

Beyond the End of Modernity

Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt uses two expressions of postmodernity to close modernity: "postmodernity as the end of 'metanarratives' and postmodernity as the end of 'suspicion.'"²² At first, the former expression is almost the same with Lyotard's '*postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.' For both Lyotard and Bauerschmidt, metanarratives mean mega-narratives or master-narratives that have been firmly established by modernity in its battle against premodern schemes. It was the Enlightenment that had completed this modern establishment. Indeed, the Enlightenment was the "liberating dawn of reason that dispelled the darkness of medieval superstition and dogmatism, oppression and authoritarianism."²³ Inspired and empowered by

¹⁹ Ibid., 164.

²⁰ Ibid., 166.

²¹ "The term *Verwindung* indicates, as Heidegger told his French translators, a 'going-beyond that is both an acceptance [or 'resignation'] and a deepening'" (Ibid., xxvi).

²² Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, "Aesthetics: The theological sublime," *Radical Orthodoxy*, ed. John Milbank, et al. (London: Routledge, 1999), 201.

²³ Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 25.

pioneers such as Francis Bacon who challenged the Europe-based society through *New Atlantis* (1627), René Descartes who founded a man-centered logic represented by *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) in *Discourse on the method* (1637), and Isaac Newton who propelled the scientific revolution through *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (1687), the Enlightenment kindled the torch of modernity in the eighteenth century. In a huge support of the Enlightenment, modernity has constructed very certain metanarratives. However, postmodernity started to reject the certainty of modern metanarratives and deconstruct their narrative systems as a whole. As a result, postmodern ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’ was to be the incredulity toward modernity itself, and in so doing, the end of metanarratives was to be the beginning of postmodernity.

In this postmodern view, it is a fact that Christianity seems to be put in the modern category, and its narrative is regarded as one of the modern metanarratives. However, it is also a fact that this is not always true because there are some postmodern-like narratives in Christianity, which postmodernity cannot easily put into the modern scheme. For instance, Jesus’ narrative on the kingdom of God shows it:

Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is in your midst.”²⁴

Here, Jesus deconstructs the modern certain metanarratives of the Pharisees on the kingdom of God, and proposes a postmodern-like narrative by letting it go beyond them and radically stay ‘in their midst.’ His other parables on the kingdom of God also show that he deconstructs the certain metanarratives that are able to be recognized by the modern reasonable thinking, and drives a postmodern-like ambiguous narrative. In this regard, it can be said that both Christianity and postmodernity speak of the end of modern metanarratives, and they are closely related.

However, Christianity is distinguished from postmodernity because there is still a ground in Christianity in spite of its postmodern-like deconstructing and going-beyond process. For example, if the biblical narrative of God’s kingdom is revised into a postmodern narrative, the last part of the narrative must be changed like this: ‘because the kingdom of God is nothing and

²⁴ Luke 17:20-21.

nowhere.’ Unlike such postmodern narrative containing the postmodern character of groundlessness, Christian narrative concludes that the kingdom of God *is* in your midst. Here, ‘is’ implies that there already and always exists a certain ground, i.e., God’s kingdom itself. At this point, Christianity and postmodernity are separated in their narratives. Furthermore, ‘is’ implies that Christian ontology of God’s kingdom embraces not only the present, but also the past and the future as well. In time, ‘is’ was *is* in the age of Jesus; it is still *is* now; it will be also *is* in the future, because whenever the biblical narrative is read, the tense is always the present. Here, the *is* in Christianity is concerned with postmodernity in terms that it goes beyond the time. However, it is not concerned with postmodernity because it goes beyond the time (*chronos*) but always *exists* in the midst of the time (*kairos*).

Of the two expressions, i.e., ‘postmodernity as the end of metanarratives’ and ‘postmodernity as the end of suspicion,’ the main concern of Bauerschmidt is the latter. His main concern is here how postmodernity as the end of suspicion can be dealt with from a theological perspective. To begin with, he speaks of ‘suspicion’ as one of the most notable concepts in modernity.²⁵ Following Descartes’s meditations (*Meditations on First Philosophy*, 1641), modern thinkers has doubted and rejected all established firm ideas.²⁶ Postmodern thinkers also deny them, but they no longer do it in the category of suspicion. Postmodernity is different from modernity in terms that the former negates the foundation of certain notions such as truth, goodness, beauty, and the sublime while the latter renounces these notions themselves. The latter needs the logical procedure of suspicion to renounce them, but the former needs no procedure to negate their foundations. In this respect, postmodernity goes beyond suspicion, that is, the main method of modernity.

This postmodern posture going beyond suspicion is similar to that of Christianity. According to Bauerschmidt, “Christianity moves beyond suspicion in its proclamation of faith in Jesus Christ as God incarnate, the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15).”²⁷ Faith in Christianity seems to be a primary way of being able to deconstruct all existing virtues and values, and go beyond them because “faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see”

²⁵ The term suspicion seems to be, for him, used as almost the same meaning with doubt. His point is that the term suspicion or doubt is not only to represent modernity, but also to demonstrate the limits of modernity.

²⁶ His method of thinking shown in *Discourse on the method* (1637), that is, the well-known methodological skepticism is entirely about doubt or suspicion.

²⁷ Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, “Aesthetics: The theological sublime,” 205.

(Hebrews 11:1). For example, Jesus goes beyond the suspicion of Thomas who phenomenally doubts His resurrected body, and suggests the faith of resurrection for “those who have not seen yet have believed” (John 20:29). Likewise, in going beyond the modern suspicion, Christianity is in parallel with postmodernity.

In particular, Bauerschmidt explores threefold bodies of Jesus with regard to postmodernity. First, he explains that the body of Jesus signifies *negation* of all values that include even himself: “[Jesus’] whole life is one of negation of himself so as to be a sign that is transparent to the will of the Father (John 4:34; 14:7).”²⁸ In this case, Bauerschmidt points out that Jesus’ negation cannot be understood as Nietzschean nihilism. He asserts that Jesus’ “negation is not will to power but love unto death ... [and] the outpouring in love of God’s plenitude, even to the ultimate point of human sin and alienation.”²⁹ Moreover, Jesus’ final love or negation, that is, the “cross presents us with a path beyond suspicion.”³⁰ It arrives at negation (*corpus*), but leaves soon for resurrection beyond the negation. Unlike the nihilistic postmodernity transcending suspicion by will to power and speaking of nothing but negation, Christianity transcends suspicion by the love of the cross and speaks of something with negation. In this respect, Christianity (especially its love through self-negation) not only goes beyond suspicion, but also transgresses postmodernity (especially its nihilistic negation).

Second, Bauerschmidt connects the body of Jesus with the ecclesial body. He asserts that the body of Jesus cannot be imprisoned within a limitation of time and space because it extends to the ecclesial body throughout the Church history. In terms that the ecclesial body moves beyond existing boundaries, it relates to the postmodern thought. Unlike postmodernists, however, Bauerschmidt mentions the role of the Spirit working in the transgressing process: the “Spirit is the ecclesial *bricoleur*, that blows where it will, along whose errant path the *ekklesia* is gathered from the world into Christ’s body, only to be impelled forth again by that same Spirit, to dwell in peace among the nations.”³¹ As the ecclesial bricoleur, the Spirit moving freely beyond time and space transgresses what postmodernity has transgressed in its time and space. Third, Bauerschmidt suggests the eucharistic body. “If Christ is the sacrament of God, and the Church is

²⁸ Ibid., 210. In terms that Jesus’ negation is an autonomous sacrifice according to the will of God, Milbank expresses the incarnation of Jesus as the “sovereign victim” (John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) ,61).

²⁹ Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, “Aesthetics: The theological sublime,” 205.

³⁰ Ibid., 211.

³¹ Ibid., 214.

the sacrament of Christ, then the Eucharist is the sacrament of the Church.”³² As in the union of Christ and God, the union of the Church and Christ is made through the Spirit, and the union of Christians and Christ is made through the Eucharist of the Church. In the continuous practice of the Eucharist, eucharistic bodies and their union are made throughout all the ages and all the places beyond the postmodern transcending age and place.³³

Beyond the End of Metaphysics

Thomas Aquinas first accepted metaphysics into his logic and defined that metaphysics “simultaneously distinguishes the general being and the prime being, separate from matter.”³⁴ Ever since Aquinas, metaphysics had been developed in the way of interpreting the difference between the general and the prime being. Especially in the question of God, metaphysics was an indispensable method. Many thinkers had used metaphysics in order to prove or deny God’s being. In so doing, metaphysics underwent a turning point in its encounter with Martin Heidegger. “For Heidegger ontological difference – the difference between Being and beings – makes possible the metaphysical project.”³⁵ Although Being was, for Heidegger, not God of faith, “God was conflated with Being as such.”³⁶ In this sense, metaphysics dealing with ontology relates to onto-theology.³⁷ In the ontological difference between Being and beings, “Heidegger wishes to think this fundamental difference *as* difference.”³⁸ However, this difference cannot be understood in the structure of metaphysics because Being is understood not as in itself but only through beings. Moreover, the “difference is forgotten” because “Being itself is other, external, transcendent, and cannot be appropriated.”³⁹ Here, it is recognized that such metaphysical

³² Ibid.

³³ Here, Bauerschmidt’s main point seems to separate theology from postmodernity rather than to overcome postmodernity by theology. He argues, “[t]heology ... is the language given to a community, the *ekklesia* that exists only insofar as it is called and claimed by God.” On this basis, he concludes, “theology cannot tie its fate to postmodernity” in spite of its close similarity with postmodernity (Ibid, 216).

³⁴ Jean-Luc Marion, “Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Summary for Theologians,” *The Postmodern God*, 280.

³⁵ Graham Ward, “Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace,” xxxi.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ From this theological perspective on metaphysics, Jean-Luc Marion speaks of ‘onto-theo-logy.’ “The terms ‘metaphysics’ and ‘onto-theo-logy’ are used almost interchangeably in his theological texts” (Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Reading Jean-Luc Marion: Exceeding Metaphysics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), 39).

³⁸ Graham Ward, “Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace,” xxxii.

³⁹ Ibid., xxxiii.

argument belongs to the modern category. To be sure, the “modern is the culmination of a metaphysical tradition, which does not think the meaning of being, but only foundations and causes.”⁴⁰ Hence, to speak of the end of metaphysics by pointing out its lack of thinking the meaning of being comes to be to speak of the end of modernity, that is, the beginning of postmodernity that can think of that meaning.

Metaphysics is also renounced by postmodernity in so far as it has grounding. According to Jean-Luc Marion, metaphysics always demands foundations. “[M]etaphysics alone can reach its foundations—foundations that, from the beginning, have belonged to the domain of metaphysics, and metaphysics alone.”⁴¹ For example, “in metaphysics, ‘God’ essentially has the function of the ultimate ground, the ‘last Reason,’ the *causa sui*.”⁴² In the scope of postmodernity, however, “[n]othing can ground, since nothing requires or necessitates a grounding.”⁴³ Hence, it is imperative to proclaim the end of metaphysics in the discourse of postmodernity. Especially it is because the end of metaphysics signifies not death of God Himself, but death of God as foundation. In this context, Marion asserts that the “question of God cannot be said to begin with metaphysics.”⁴⁴ Here, Marion suggests phenomenology as a way of overcoming metaphysics. He argues, “phenomenology goes unambiguously beyond metaphysics to the strict extent that it rids itself of any *a priori* principle.”⁴⁵ In other words, phenomenology, unlike metaphysics, does not begin with any ground. “Therefore phenomenology could free itself absolutely, not only from all *metaphysica generalis (ontologia)*, but also from the question of Being (*Seinsfrage*).”⁴⁶

John Milbank also speaks of the limit of metaphysics, as Marion does. However, Milbank’s way to overcome metaphysics is not phenomenology but *theology*. Milbank attempts to overcome metaphysics by connecting Being in metaphysics with God in theology, even though Being is not God for Heidegger.⁴⁷ Milbank argues, “It was possible, in identifying God with Being, to think

⁴⁰ Robyn Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion: A Theo-logical Introduction* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), 37.

⁴¹ Jean-Luc Marion, *Cartesian Questions: Method and Metaphysics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1999), 66.

⁴² Jean-Luc Marion, “Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Summary for Theologians,” 288.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 282. As already mentioned, it is firmly molded by Nietzsche in his nihilistic postmodern thought.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 279.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 286.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁴⁷ Especially, Being that Heidegger understands is not God who is Being as *esse* (existence) that Aquinas describes. Therefore, “Heidegger says nothing at all about Aquinas on *esse*” (Lorenz B. Puntel, *Being and God: A Systematic Approach in Confrontation with Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Marion*, trans. Alan White (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 73.)

the ontological difference in a manner that Heidegger denied was accessible for theology.”⁴⁸ If Being is understood as God, the ontological difference between Being and beings is meaningless because there is no such difference in God. When Aquinas defines metaphysics, the general being relates to God’s *esse* (existence), and the prime being relates to God’s *essentia* (essence).⁴⁹ In this case, there is, for Aquinas, no longer ontological difference between the general and the prime being because God’s essence *is* God’s existence.⁵⁰ In this context, the ontological difference between Being and beings disappears when the Being/beings structure is connected with the essence/existence structure.⁵¹ Moreover, if the ontological Being/beings difference is deconstructed by the theological essence/existence identification, then both Being and beings come to belong to only Being (God).⁵² Thus, there only remains Being/Not-Being instead of Being/beings in a theological paradigm. In this case, since Being means God, there is nothing outside and without God. As a result, nothing, which is nihilism in postmodernity, is contrast to God as Being in the theological paradigm. “For without God, *nothing* becomes as real and actual as actuality itself. This is the *irrational* conclusion which reason *must* reach.”⁵³ In this respect, it can be said that theology is able not only to overcome metaphysics, but also to go beyond postmodernity overcoming metaphysics by its encounter with nihilism without God.

Conclusion: Christianity with and beyond Postmodernity

The questioning and challenging tendency of modernity comes to be meaningless in the postmodern category. In other words, modern thought, which especially resists the established absolute truth and values, is deconstructed by postmodernity that renounces such establishment in

⁴⁸ John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange* (Malden: Blackwell, 1997), 41.

⁴⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benzinger Bros. edition, 1947), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.i.html> (assessed on 08August 2015), Ia, q. 3, art. 4.

⁵⁰ In this context, while *being* is not *meaning* in postmodernity, both of them are equal in theology because the very fact that God *is* equals a meaning in theology. In this sense, Aquinas speaks of a coincidence among being, the true, and the intellect (Ibid., q. 16).

⁵¹ In this respect, Milbank mentions, “for Franciscan, ‘Being’ is the highest name for God’s essence” (John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 46).

⁵² In addition, there is no *différance*, as Jacques Derrida mentions, in the Trinity because “love ... is the act of the Trinity” (Gerard Loughlin, “Erotics: God’s sex,” *Radical Orthodoxy*, 145). To concisely understand the *différance* of Derrida, see Chan-soon Lim, “The Theology of Change in the Context of Derridean Deconstruction and Postmodernity” in *Madang*, vol. 10, December, 2008, 103-105.

⁵³ John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 32.

itself. In this postmodern flux, not only philosophical but also theological truth and values, e.g., faith, hope, love, and even God, is disintegrated.

Above all, one of the most important characters in postmodernity is the notion of *groundlessness*. All existing philosophical and theological discussions are rethought in the groundless postmodern paradigm. A representative conclusion of such rethinking is that God does not matter. The idea of God is not simply rejected, but meaningless in a postmodern discourse. “[W]ith postmodernism God emerges from the white-out nihilism of modern atheism.”⁵⁴ In this sense, postmodern nihilistic atheism is more dangerous to Christian theology than modern offensive atheism, because it does not accept any theological root such as God, Jesus, the Spirit, the Bible, and the church.

In this situation, there are some efforts to keep theology from the postmodern wave. As already examined, for instance, the thinkers of so-called ‘radical orthodoxy,’ which is a Christian theological and philosophical school of thought approaching to postmodernity against modernity, as an alternative. In contrast to postmodernity, they “seek to re-envision particular cultural spheres from a theological perspective which they all regard as the only non-nihilistic perspective.”⁵⁵ Like the groundless postmodernity, Christian theology also states, “Everything is meaningless” (Ecclesiastes 1:2). However, it does not only come to be separated from, but also seek to overcome the nihilistic atheism of postmodernity by confessing its firm ground: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7).

With regard to Christianity, another conclusion of postmodernity is the notion of *nothing new*. In this postmodern paradigm, Christian ideas about something new, e.g., the kingdom of heaven that is near and the Lord who is to come,⁵⁶ are collapsed. There is only *khora*⁵⁷ or “trace”⁵⁸ of the absolute in the postmodern category. Therefore, any idea of the new in

⁵⁴ Graham Ward, “Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace,” xxi.

⁵⁵ John Milbank, Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock, “Introduction: Suspending the material: the turn of radical orthodoxy,” *Radical Orthodoxy*, 4. In this case, “It is *radical* not only in re-membering the *roots* (radix), but also in re-membering the intrinsic and necessary connection between theology and politics, and this calls into question modern politics, culture, art, science, and philosophy” (D. Stephen Long, “Radical orthodoxy” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 131).

⁵⁶ Mark 1:14; Revelation 4:8.

⁵⁷ *Khora*, which means the “space that escapes God’s gaze,” “is used in postmodern philosophy to deconstruct any secure presence” (D. Stephen Long, “Radical orthodoxy,” 129).

⁵⁸ Dong Hwan Kim, “A Postmodern Inquiry into the Idea of God” in *Korean Journal of Christian Studies*, vol. 81, April 2012, 146. This term is derived from Emmanuel Levinas’s postmodern approach to the ambiguity of the

Christianity is deconstructed by postmodernity at all times. In this regard, there seems to be only one way to think of something in postmodernity: *deconstruction*, and there seems to be nothing after the postmodern deconstructing thinking. However, Christianity talks about something new after as well as with the postmodern deconstruction. On the one hand, Christianity deals with the notion that “there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Going beyond such postmodern-like deconstruction, on the other hand, Christianity proclaims, “Behold, I[God] will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind” (Isaiah 65:17). Christianity “is therefore outside the reach of deconstruction.”⁵⁹ In this respect, there is not only deconstruction, but also *reconstruction* in Christianity. Every value and virtue deconstructed by postmodernity can be reconstructed by Christianity. As already examined, it is one of the Christian theological attempts that John Milbank seeks to go further than the end of the metaphysic on which postmodernity steps. After such an attempt, he bravely proclaims, “Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics.”⁶⁰ On the one hand, it dares to be proclaimed in its philosophical-theological strong logic. On the other hand, however, it needs to be more carefully proclaimed in terms that theology is too much similar to and not entirely separated from postmodernity especially in its way to overcome the limitations of modernity. In this sense, Graham Ward’s proclamation is more adequate: “only theology can complete the postmodern project.”⁶¹ Nevertheless, it is still a fact that Christianity can fathom out a ground after groundlessness and something new after nothing new. On this basis, it also dares to be, but carefully, said that theology can go with *and* go beyond postmodernity, as postmodernity has gone with *and* beyond modernity. It is because Christianity can see in its faith a radical entrance behind a wall of postmodern in itself: “‘Son of man, now dig into the wall.’ So I dug into the wall and saw a doorway there” (Ezekiel 8:8).

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the relation of postmodernity and Christianity. The first task for it is to understand postmodernity. Since this article adopts relationship as a methodology,

transcendence (Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Comes To Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 75-78).

⁵⁹ John Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,” *The Postmodern God*, 270.

⁶⁰ John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 36.

⁶¹ Graham Ward, “Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace,” *The Postmodern God*, xxxiv.

this task is performed in a way of comparing postmodernity with modernity. Concretely, the comparison shows how postmodernity deconstructs what modernity has constructed, and goes beyond modernity by its nihilistic characters, i.e., groundlessness and nothing new. The second task is to investigate postmodernity in relation to Christianity. On the one hand, the investigation reveals that both postmodernity and Christianity can overcome the limitations of modernity in a very similar way, that is, in the way of going beyond the modern metanarratives, suspicion, and metaphysics. On the other hand, it discloses that they take very different poses after proclaiming the end of modernity. While postmodernity that has overcome modernity maintains its nihilistic characters, Christianity that has overcome modernity manifests its own faith. Concretely, Christianity, unlike postmodernity, proposes a ground after groundlessness and something new after nothing new. Since it is arguable only in a theological discourse, the fellows of so-called radical orthodoxy claim that only theology can overcome postmodern philosophy. Encouraged by them, on the one hand, this article vindicates that Christianity certainly has something to speak about postmodernity. To the extent of being not entirely persuaded by them, on the other hand, it carefully seeks to pose a possibility to speak of theology beyond postmodernity.

Key Words: Modernity, Postmodernity, Christianity, Theology, Relation, Nihilism, Metaphysics

Bibliography

- Aquinas, Thomas. *The Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benzinger Bros. edition, 1947), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.i.html> (accessed on 08August 2015).
- Borgmann, Albert. *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Gschwandtner, Christina M. *Reading Jean-Luc Marion: Exceeding Metaphysics*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007.
- Hardy, Lee. "Postmodernism as a kind of modernism: Nietzsche's Critique of Knowledge" in *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*. ed. Merold Westphal. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999.
- Hornr, Robyn. *Jean-Luc Marion: A Theo-logical Introduction*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2005.

- Kim, Dong Hwan. "A Postmodern Inquiry into the Idea of God" in *Korean Journal of Christian Studies*, vol. 81, April, 2012, 145-58.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Of God Comes To Mind*. trans. Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986.
- Lim, Chan-soon. "The Theology of Change in the Context of Derridean Deconstruction and Postmodernity" in *Madang*, vol. 10, December, 2008, 99-116.
- Long, D. Stephen. "Radical orthodoxy" in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*. ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Marion, Jean-Luc. *Cartesian Questions: Method and Metaphysics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1999.
- Merriam Webster's Collegiate Encyclopedia*. Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 2000.
- Milbank, John, et al., eds. *Radical Orthodoxy*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Milbank, John. *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Milbank, John. *The Word Made Strange*. Malden: Blackwell, 1997.
- Puntel, Lorenz, B. *Being and God: A Systematic Approach in Confrontation with Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Marion*. trans. Alan White. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011.
- Rosenau, Pauline Marie. *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Runes, Dogobert D, ed. *Dictionary of Philosophy*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1983.
- Smart, Barry. *Postmodernity*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Vattimo, Gianni. *The End of Modernity*. trans. Jon R. Snyder. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University press, 1988.
- Ward, Graham, ed. *The Postmodern God*. Malden: Blackwell, 1997.