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MA in Pastoral Theology

M916 Literature And Pastoral Theology

ESSAY ASSIGNMENT

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Sin, Redemption and Grace. Discuss a work of literature which explores the meaning of these theological words for contemporary culture.

This essay will seek to explore the meaning of the stated theological terms in the context of our contemporary western culture through an analysis of Douglas Coupland's book "Life After God". To do this, the theological meaning of the three words will firstly be defined as used in Christian Scripture. This will be followed by a short synopsis of the book and an exploration of contemporary culture in the light of recent sociological writings. A literary exploration of the book will be completed to identify resonance's between its' content and the three theological definitions; this will include fresh insights and connections gained through a 'naming' dialogue between pastoral theology and contemporary culture. Finally, this will be followed by a brief summary of how the narrative content of the book can be used in pastoral encounters with people living in contemporary society.

Theological Definitions

Sin, redemption and grace are very interlinked? Biblically life is seen as having two paths: sin that leads to condemnation and death as demonstrated with Adam, and repentance, righteousness, redemption and grace given through Christ. [Murray/Milne/Marshall et al, 1105-8]

Sin

There are six biblical uses of the term. [Vine, 1952, 32-4] [Murray/Milne/Marshall et al, 1996, 1105-8]

1. The sense of 'missing the mark' as a form of action, (Judges 2:16-20, Romans 3:9; 5:12-13).
2. The governing principle of power ruling life, as an organised power and personification of sin and selfish choices, (Romans 5:21; 6:12-17, 1 Corinthians 15:56, Hebrews 3:13; 11:25). It is a power that cannot be escaped with out God's intervention, and leads to death, (1 John 5:16,17). The sense of sin as a twisting, distorting power, (Isaiah 24:1, Lamentations 3:9). Related to this is the idea of the 'father's iniquity' impacting on their children and future generation, (Exodus 20:5; Exodus 34:6-7, Deuteronomy 5:9) as punishment for 'hating' God, but also as a consequence of the sinful acts.
3. As breaching established relationships and in particular between people and God as rebellion. That such rebellion is offensive to God, (Isaiah 1:28, 1 Kings 8:50, Mark 3:28, Romans 3:25). This has an effect on the environment and human culture creating lawlessness, contempt for order or accountability to the law, chaos, disorientation, moral and spiritual depravity, brokenness and a loss of society, (Genesis 3:17-19, Hebrews 4:15; 9:26, 1 John 1:7-8; 3:4,8-10, Matthew 8:22; 12:31; 13:19, Romans 1:29; 8:20, Luke 11:39, Ephesians 6:12, 1 John 3:12). In turn this creates a sense of struggle for people living in such a world, (Matthew 7:14-end).
4. That sin has become the state of things; the sin of the world, (John 1:29), the condition of all things that prompts activities that all lead to death, (1 John 5:16, 17).
5. As chosen wrong doing that damages self and others. In terms of 'self' the consequence of sin affecting flesh, the indwelling of sin that taints the body and person which is destructive, (John 8:21,34; 9:41; 15:22,24; Romans 8:3). Sin is a cruel master to those who become its slaves, (John 8:34, Romans 7:14).
6. The sense that sin distorts all, even those who stray through ignorance or lack of understanding, (1 Samuel 26:21).

Redemption

There are five biblical uses of the term. [Morris/Marshall et al, 1996, 1003-4] [Vine, 1952, 263-4].

1. Sense of freedom on receipt of payment of ransom. This was often associated with being slaves released from the market place, or reparations for damage. This includes the freeing from anomia, lawlessness, bondage of self-will, which rejects the will of God, or ignorance, curse, or torture, (Luke 24:21, Titus 2:14, Rom 7:14, Galatians 4:3, Exodus 21:28-30, Hebrews 11:35). Further, it is a cosmic restoration and reconciliation of relationship, (1 Peter 1:18).
2. Deliverance or release from evil by payment of a price, releasing prisoners of war, buying people back by Christ's actions, (Mark 10:45).
3. Redemption as the forgiveness of sins leading to liberation from guilt and the doom of sin to liberty and the newness of life, (Romans 6:4; 8:23, Hebrews 9:15). This leads to the eventual fulfilling of the second coming of Christ, (Romans 8:23, 1 Corinthians 1:30, Ephesians 1:14; 4:30).
4. Redemption as God's action completed at a cost to God's self. Christ's blood as the ransom price of a costly rescue, (Ephesians 1:7, Romans 3:24, Hebrews 9:15).
5. Redemption being available to people now but not in its fullness yet, the 'now but not yet', (1 Corinthians 6:20, Galatians 5:1).

Grace

There are five biblical uses of the term. [Vine, 1952, 169-71] [Stringer/Marshall et al, 1996, 433-4]

1. Sense of action of a superior, (human or divine) to an inferior of undeserved favour. A giving of faithfulness and loving-kindness, (Genesis 33:8, 10, 15; 39:4, Revelation 2:2, 10, Jeremiah 31:2). A gift of mercy, (Romans 9:15-18, 23; 11:30-32). A gift of steadfast love, (Psalms 5:7; 57:3).
2. Christ as the mission, personification, deity and identity of grace which is freely given and undeserved, (Titus 2:11, John 1:17, Matthew 20:1-16, Romans 5:15). A gift given by God the Father and Christ, (2 Corinthians 1:12, Galatians 1:6).
3. Grace as a gift given for all, expressed in the parable of the great supper, (Luke 14: 16-24), and as universally available to all, (Acts 14:26). However, repentance of sins is stressed as a condition of salvation, (Mark 1:15; 6:12, Luke 24:47).
4. Grace as a state of blessing from God, as the sum of God's earthly blessing – human and environmental, (Romans 5:2, 1 Peter 5:12, 2 Peter 3:18, 2 Corinthians 9:8).
5. Grace as associated with Shalom. The Apostle Paul opens many of his epistle letters with 'Grace and Peace', following ancient Hebrew greeting of Peace meaning God's Peace, the character and way of God.

Synopsis of 'Life After God'

The book is a collection of eight connected short stories originally intended as a series of vignettes for the author's close friends. [Katz, 1994, 1-2] These fast-paced stories or 'snapshot moments' are connected by their characters' isolation and spiritual explorations of 'late twenty and thirty something people', (sometimes called

Generation X), living in western post-industrial Canada and the USA. [Willimon, 1994, 1-2] The narrator 'Scout', leads us through experiences of contemporary life, engaging the reader in a journey through dissolution, desperation, depression, isolation; we encounter family breakdown, a boring job and broken relationships. [Brockington, 1994, 2-3]

The first story "*Little Creatures*" explores the experiences of a long road journey of the narrator and his daughter before his divorce. "*My hotel year*" explores the narrators life experience, and of two friends 'Cathy' and 'Donny', who struggle for survival in a period of time following the narrators divorce from his wife where he lives in a run down hotel room. "*Things that fly*", is a mixture of depressed escapist imaginations of the narrator mixed with some melancholic interpretations of why his world feels so broken. "*The wrong sun*" continues with a melancholic imaginative narrative but in the context of a nuclear bomb explosion happening in contemporary culture. "*Gettysburg*" is addressed to Scout's daughter, telling her the story of the formation of his relationship with her mother, her birth, childhood and finally the demise of the marriage relationship in divorce. '*In the Desert*' continues the theme of searching, where Scout drives into a desert to find some form of meaning for life, gets lost but meets a drifter who gives him food and water. They eat together before the nomad shows Scout back to the main road and safety. In this story it is revealed that Scout believes in God but not in religion. He comes across a Christian radio station on his car radio which challenges some of his assumptions, and the kindness of meeting the drifter in the desert enables him to keep searching for what he feels is out of reach. From this encounter, Scout starts to hope that his situation can change through a spiritual understanding of everyday life. [Mannes-Abbott, 1994]

The story '*Patty Hearst*' explores the childhood of the narrator's older sister, and her destructive impulses. The story tells of her gradual demise in adulthood to the point of her disappearance, which is told in the context of a potential sighting that the narrator explores with heart felt angst. In the final and longest story, '*1000 years After God*' the narrator becomes aware of the need for inspiration through a sense of wonder of the world. He explores the possible reasons for the complexity of his life in the context of his parent's decision to avoid bringing up their kids without any sense of inherited belief systems. He decides to take himself off anti-depressants that helped him cope with anxiety by feeling nothing and heads off into a forest. Here Scout experiences a religious awakening, a climax where he begins to understand himself in the context of God and his becomes aware for his need for God to sustain him. [Sheremata, 1994, 1-3]

Context of contemporary culture

There are many connections between the book's cultural context and what has been called 'liquid modernity'. For the purpose of this essay it is assumed that contemporary culture translates to living in what is called a 'liquid modern' consumerist society, and that most of Western post-industrial countries conform to the same new cultural paradigm. [Bauman, 2001, 1-15] This has been defined as:

“A term for the historical shift, the rise of a new epoch, it names a liberation into plurality (from provincialism), relativity (from absolutism), and difference (from the old frozen authorities). At the same time it describes the void and anxiety we experience when our very selves are dispersed, beaucratized, isolated and rendered autonomous.”
[Farley, 1996, 12]

This change in cultural paradigm has resulted in global economics and consumerism increasingly replacing inherited modes of culture. [Bauman, 2001, 1-15] A new master corporate and consumerist narrative has largely replaced old voices including the Christian narrative. Culture has increasingly become estranged from Christianity to the point of being shattered and annihilated. [Bruner, 1947, 1-6] The Christian story, the meaning of its symbolic and theological words are on the whole increasingly unknown and occasionally anachronistic. [Farley, 1996, 13] Instead of defining themselves through religious narratives, many are defining who they are solely by consumption – by what they wear and the car they drive. [Bauman, 2001, 53-90] Consumer preference and choice has become the organising principle of society, which is idolatrous and far removed from the sacred. [Lyon, 1985, 6-7, 89-101] This process of self-identity formation is of course unsustainable, so that people have to constantly reinvent themselves in a world that is fast and fluid. However, paradoxically, there is also a resurgence of spiritual questing in response to the questions ‘who am I?’ and ‘is there more to life?’, but where most ‘do not trust the church’. [McCarthy, 2000, 193-205]

With such a gap between contemporary culture and the stated theological concepts, it is impossible to engage in a ‘translation’ contextual-theology exercise to enable ‘generation X’ people to comprehend the terms. [Bevans, 2002, 30-7] Instead a more creative ‘naming’ approach is required, to enable people from contemporary society to understand the terms through human imagination. This method conforms to a transcendental contextual-theology approach that assumes that people from differing cultures can understand and encounter the Christian narrative through spiritual experiences and human imagination. [Bevans, 2002, 97-102] This essay will seek to explore the stories within the book that express ‘naming moments’, which correspond to the three theological terms.

Literary explorations

Sin

Most of the book has resonates with a theological understanding of ‘sin’. There are many references to the dark side of contemporary culture that damages people. Life is fast pace, made up of long car journeys, sleeping over in motels and eating junk food. This speed of life is dehumanising and creates uncertainty:

“You assume that life...next week is going to be shockingly different” [pp288]

“It’s the spirit of the age...time collapses. I used to think time was like a river...but now I think that time is a flood...I feel like I’m in a flood”. [pp334]

The narrator repeatedly reports that this style of life makes him ill, which results in insecurity and loneliness.

"The nomadic lifestyle had taken its toll. I had been feeling permanently on the cusp of flu, ...where I just wanted to borrow someone else's life" [pp3] "my poverty, my fear of death, my sexual frustration, and my inability to connect with others....I was acquiring a veneer of bitterness". [pp29]

Life then becomes focused on coping in an extreme age, where you have little control. There is no escape, as powerlessness pervades everything. To those who were able to see beyond contemporary culture to the spiritual, many have fallen away.

"When you are young, you always expect the world is going to end....on the apocalypse" "For many thoughts of a nuclear confrontation are one's first true brush with non-existence." [pp108-9]
"I was wondering what the ...end product ...of feeling less and less. Is feeling the inevitable end of believing in nothing?" [pp177] "I never expected to become this strange person I had become, but I was determined to know who this person was." [pp328-9]

"I felt saddest for people who once knew what profoundness was, but who lost or became numb... who had the doors closed for them by time and neglect and decisions of weakness." [pp51]

In the stories of other characters in 'My Hotel Years' and '1000 Years (Life After God)' we encounter the brokenness of others who cannot escape their situation. An old friend called Julie exclaims:

"I'm trying to convert my voice these days. You know, I'm trying to escape from ironic hell: cynicism to faith; randomness to clarity; worry into devotion. But it's hard because I try to be sincere about life and then I turn on my TV and I see a game show host and I have to throw up my hands and give up. Too many easy pickin's! Clarity would be so much easier if there weren't so many cheesy celebrities around agreed?" [pp286-7]

In the hotel we meet Donny, who is a hustler caught in a cycle of deprivation and violence, where he expressed excitement about being stabbed as a form of nihilism. Eventually he is killed, and we are left with a sense of inevitability of his death. That Danny's brokenness and nihilism are a form of sin ending in death. [pp57-66]

Cathy who lived next door to Scout in the hotel with her partner. They often had fights, and bore the scars and bruises of the violence the next day. Eventually the partner runs off with another woman. We are left viewing Cathy as a tragic figure wanting to be loved so much that she tried to make a relationship built on 'domestic violence' work. Again we are left with the sense of brokenness and sin which fragments the hopes and dreams of the characters. [pp29-41]

We find out in the last story, that the narrator attributes problems with contemporary culture to his parent's generations' who rebelled against God.

"You are the first generation raised without religion" [pp161] "It was the life of the children of the children of the pioneers – life after God...I think the price we paid for our golden life was an inability to believe in love; instead we gained an irony that scorched everything it touched. And I wonder if this irony is the price we paid for the loss of God...We are living creatures – we have religious impulses...and yet into what cracks do these impulses flow in a world without religion?" [pp273-4]

From this, the narrator attributes his own struggle for identity and survival in a broken world to his parent's rebellion to God.

"My own task had been made more difficult because I had been raised without religion by my parents who had broken with their own pasts...who had raised their children clean of any ideology" [pp177]

Relating these themes to the theological concept of sin, there are clear connections between sin and the narrator's parent's rebellion to God. We can see that the narrator's life has been made difficult as this sin impacts on future generations. Religion has been replaced by consumerism and technological speed, which has become the controlling power or spirit of the age. This has created a culture of chaos, disorientation and brokenness. A loss of society in a continuing breach of relationship between people and God. Clearly the narrator is dissatisfied with the state of things, and is looking for spiritual escape. Sin distorts society and those attempting to live in contemporary culture.

The narrator clearly thinks that living in such a difficult context coupled with his own wrong choices, have added to his sense of sin by 'missing the mark', resulting in him feeling a broken person.

" I think I am a broken person. I seriously question the road my life has taken and I endlessly rehash the compromises I have made in my life. I have an insecure and vaguely crappy job with an amoral corporation so that I don't have to worry about money. I put up with half way relationships so as not to have to worry about loneliness. I have lost the ability to recapture the purer feelings of my younger years in exchange for a streamlined narrow-mindedness that I assumed would propel me to the top. What a joke" [pp309-10]

With this understanding of the impact of sin, the opening pages of the book with the story 'Little Creatures' brings new meaning. In the long car journey we see Scout ruminating over his anxiety and lost-ness whilst his daughter is lost in awe and wonder at creation and in particular the mountains she sees out of the car window.

They are on the same journey but the difference is profound. Scout is lost in a introspective self-searching form of narcissism and is blind to the natural revelation of God passing outside. On the other hand, his daughter who is looking away from the self to creation, is finding out new and exciting things about the world and its mystery. We are left with the sense of Scout's blindness by sin to God's reality, which is the opposite of what happens at the end of the book where redemption helps him to see again. [pp 3-24]

Redemption

In the story '1000 years Life After God', the climax of the narrator's spiritual questing ends with Scout entering a forest after failing in an attempting to return to work. He clearly is expecting something extremely significant to occur, with openness to spiritual encounter. He has driven into a remote spot, pitched a tent near a pool under a waterfall, slept overnight and now awaits the dawn.

"Here I now lie, on my stomach, looking out at the dark wet world, pulling the blanket tighter around me, smoking a cigarette, and knowing that this is the end of some aspect of my life, but also the beginning – the beginning of some unknown secret that will reveal itself to me soon. All I need to do is pray." [pp352]

"I kneel down and sip water from the pool. I raise my head and look through the clearing of the trees. I see the sun shining in the sky – a spinning ball of fire... This same sun – the same burning orb of flame that shone over my youth – over...swimming pools and lego and kraft dinners and malls and suburbia and TV and books about Andy Warhol... I remove my blanket and fold it on the warm rocks beside the water. I then remove my shoes and socks and stick my feet into the water, and oh, it is cold... And the water from the stream above me roars. Oh does it roar! Like a voice that knows only one message, one truth – never-ending, like the clapping of hands and the cheers of the citizens upon the coronation of the king, the crowds of the inauguration, cheering for hope and for that one voice that will speak to them. Now here is my secret: I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem capable to giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love. I walk deeper and deeper into the rushing water...the water enters my belly button and it freezes my chest, my arms, my neck. It reaches my mouth, my nose, my ears and the roar is so loud – this roar, this clapping hands. These hands – the hands that heal; the hands that hold, the hands we desire because they are better than desire. I submerge myself in the pool completely. I grab my knees and I forget gravity and I float within the pool and yet, even here, I hear the roar of water, the roar of clapping hands. These hands, the hands that care, the hands that mould; the hands that touch the lips, the lips that speak the words – the words that tell us we are whole." [pp355-60]

There is much in these two quotes that corresponds with the theological understanding of 'redemption'. The second quote acknowledges that Scout cannot make it alone, that the myth of 'independence' is shown for what it is, a form of rebellion against God. Instead Scout acknowledges his need of God to enable him to be fully human, that his identity is dependent on his relationship with God, which has been called the 'I Thou' relationship. [Brueggemann,1999,2-6] The second quote can be interpreted as an act of submission and repentance to God, but what God? The first quote creates the image of God as King of nature that brings hope to the citizens. An invisible King God and invisible citizens. This scene makes striking connections with the Christian sacrament of baptism as an outward act of redemption and the forgiveness of sins, and the Old Testament laws regarding purification of sin. In the traditional liturgy of baptism the candidate either stands in the water or by water and makes vows to reject rebellion against God, to renounce the deceit and corruption of evil, repent of the sins that separate us from God and our neighbour and to recognise Christ as the way, the truth and the life. Much of the story relates to these elements of Christian baptism. At this point the candidate is fully immersed or sprinkled with water. [Common Worship,2000,352-3] [Kuhrt,2000,14-19] Clearly entering the water of the pool is of deep spiritual meaning as a ritual action. The narrative makes it clear that this is further linked to healing and an encounter with God through the imagery of 'the hands'. This use of hands, implies a sense of intimacy, of expressed and received care and belonging, as a form of embrace or physical connection.

Scout expresses ritual action as a form of baptism and an experience of release from the old broken life into a new one. The text creates the sense that it is God who is doing the freeing in response to Scouts act of repentance and acknowledgement of his need of God to be fully human. This becomes a freeing experience full of wholeness and hope. It appears to be a liberation from guilt and brokenness to new life. The event seems to draw strongly on sacramental theology as encountering God or receiving God's blessing through ritual action. [McGrath,2001, 487-91] However, Christ is never named as part of this redemptive experience, and we do not know at the end of the book whether it is a journey to accept Christ as God or another form of religion.

Grace

In the story "*In the Desert*" the narrator's experience corresponds to the theological understanding of 'grace'. The story begins with Scout driving into the desert to search for meaning and truth. He follows his intuitions to a remote dirt track whilst listening to a Christian radio station. Although the narrator is cynical about some of the content he reflects whether there is some truth in what they experience:

"These radio stations all seemed to be talking about Jesus non-stop, and it seemed to be this crazy orgy of projection, with everyone projecting things that had gone wrong in their lives. He is Love. He is forgiveness. He is compassion...I was feeling a sense of loss as I heard these people. I did not deny that the existence of Jesus was real to these people it was merely that I was cut off from their experience in a way that was never connectable. And yet I had to ask myself over and over what it was that these radio people were seeing in the face of Jesus. They sounded like their

lives had once been so messed up and lost as they spoke; at least they were no longer so lost anymore – like AA people. So I figured that was a good thing.” [pp182-4]

After this experience his car runs out of petrol and he becomes anxious and worried about what he should do. He walks out in the desert, gets lost, but is found by a wondering nomad who gives him comfort, offering him some water to drink and invites Scout to eat with him. After this the ‘drifter’ takes Scout to the nearest road to take him back to safety and help. This experience of unexpected kindness and charity has a profound affect on Scout. In response the narrator appears to remember who he was and encounters a form of hope.

“There is so much more you don’t know about me, things I haven’t told you, for instance, that I do have a family, that I believe there is a God, that I was once a Child...” [pp210]

“But I talk too much here. Yet how often is it we are rescued by a stranger, if ever at all? And how is it that our lives can become drained of the possibility of forgiveness and kindness, so drained that even one small act of mercy becomes a potent lifelong memory? ...It is with these thoughts in mind that I now see the drifter’s wind burned face when I consider my world, his face that reminds me that there is still something left to believe in after there is nothing left to believe in. A face for people like me who were pushed to the edge of loneliness and who maybe fell off and who when we climbed back on, our world never looked the same.” [pp 212-3]

There are many resonances with the theological meaning of ‘grace’. Firstly it is a gift of undeserved favour, a gift of love. In many ways it corresponds to Jesus’ parable of the ‘Good Samaritan’ in which he taught the new commandment, to love your neighbour as yourself, as a sign of grace. The event was an encounter of unexpected and freely given love, which has spiritual and humanising results as a form of blessing. Scout is transformed from a self-loathing, anxiety-driven, lonely man who does not know who he is, into a person who experiences a depth of feeling in response to an act of kindness. He remembers who he is and that he does believe in some form of God, and that there is some good in the world. Scout is able to see beyond his own brokenness, not through his own strength and resolution, but as a direct experience of grace. As a Christian we could interpret the event as God giving blessing through the drifter via the Holy Spirit, to transform him from despair to hope. The image of them eating together the same food and drink has connections with the sacrament of Communion. That Christ is present and brings blessing through the eating and drinking in a moment of community and relational connection. [McGrath, 2001, 493-4, 522-3]

From this point on in the book, Scout is clearly on a spiritual journey, (although there is more heart-ache to follow), where the existence of God has become a given. Before this event of ‘grace’ Scout was a ‘spiritual tourist’ ruminating on his misfortune. From here on, Scout becomes a ‘spiritual pilgrim’ open to wonder and transcendent experience. This significant moment of grace is clearly an important signpost in the book. We see Scout holding onto this experience of grace in the next story ‘Patty Hearst’ where the narrator wanting to

Speak to his lost sister:

'I wanted to tell her that she is kind. I wanted to tell her that she is good. I wanted to tell her that God is good, too, and that beauty surrounds us – and that the world is knowable.'

[pp256]

We are again left not knowing whether Scout's understanding of God accepts Jesus as the 'face of God' as with the Christian Radio experience, or whether God is pantheistic or a form of neo-pagan spirituality. The final words do imply that Scout is intending to re-participate in community relying on God's strength to give and receive in relationship with others. This demonstrates a shift from individualism to communalism which is an important step on the journey to formalising a Christian faith.

Implications of the stories in relation to contemporary culture

- That the Christian narrative of the reality of 'sin redemption and grace' are present within the stories of contemporary culture, where 'Life After God' enables these concepts to be named. The Christian narrative is therefore not a discredited or invalid 'unstory'. It is instead an ancient story that has resonance and deep meaning when applied to the human condition and relevant for today's world.
- A challenge to see beyond the consumerist comfort zone, cynicism and self-preoccupation of many living in contemporary culture, to rediscover the awe and wonder of creation and hope.
- To recognise 'independence' and defining self by consumption as forms of idolatry. True identity is less about consumer choice, and more about engaging with God's otherness through the human imagination. The 'thou' which constantly inspires us to relationship with God and undermines us if we attempt to try and choose who we want to be devoid of God. [Bruggemann,1999,3-6]
- The importance of recognising a healthy society as a communal inter-dependence of relationships.
- That amoral business corporations create structural forms of sin.
- The importance of recognising our own need for God to be fully human.

Implications of the stories in relation to pastoral theology

- Forms of society that are found to be de-humanising are structures of 'sin'. These can include technologically led cultures, born under the guise of utilitarianism and choice.
- There is a key focus on the language of sacramental theology, of God's presence through redemptive ritual action.
- Although Christ's name is never mentioned, the themes of sin redemption and grace are central to the narratives so that Christ inhabits the text in all but name. The absence of Jesus paradoxically points directly to Jesus. Any literature that deals with the stated theological terms (even if this is unknowing) and explores what it means to be human, teaches us about Christ who was fully human and fully God.
- That God draws people to an awareness of the reality of God, that there is a secret spiritual world, [pp 38,73] and that God is present through the Holy Spirit reconciling people back into relationship with God. [2

Corinthians 5:11-21]

- The importance of hospitality and loving care in an impersonal contemporary culture.
- The challenge to Christians not to treat faith *literally* in a complex world, as this not only creates a barrier to those spiritually seeking God, but also blinds the Church to face the complexity of contemporary culture. A literal expression of faith is in danger of creating a stereotyped 'Jesus' which serves only to marginalise the Christian narrative, and de-legitimate its truth for today.
- The importance of creation as natural revelation of God, and of the ancient apophatic tradition, as encouraging people to stand back from their situation to reflect and encounter God. This includes the place of retreat into the desert and forest. [Lynch, 2002,92-5]
- The importance of the transcendent Christian tradition, and its importance in Christian worship and mission as resonating with contemporary culture, enabling people to know God through mystical encounter.
- Our spiritual search for meaning living in contemporary culture is a difficult one, but there are transcendent moments of grace, hope and encounter with God, that can resource our sense of being Christian.
- The importance of seeing life as a spiritual journey. There is a clear journey in the book - not that dissimilar to reading the psalms - of the attempt of people to develop a relationship with God in the constant struggle of orientation (grace), disorientation (sin), reorientation (redemption) of daily life.
- The radical view that God can speak through any text and not just through the bible contrary to some traditions of the Christian faith. Secondly, that God will give his revelation or inspiration to who God chooses and not just Christians. There are plenty of examples of God speaking and using others in the Old Testament outside the Jewish faith and Hebrew culture to be central in God's salvation history. In the same way the book could be argued to be a form of encultured inspiration and revelation to speak to us today.

Pastoral Applications

- To enable people to understand what is going on spiritually in the context of contemporary culture through the various narratives and dramatisations of the book.
- To use the many narratives and characters within the stories to name the theological concepts. This illustrates their meaning in the context of contemporary culture, and thereby avoids subcultured 'christian-speak'.
- To be able to name where you are in the story, and in the various characters and situations. In this way people can find themselves in the story through the human imagination, who otherwise may find it very difficult to articulate what is going on in their lives.

Conclusion

This essay has explored the biblical meaning of the 'Sin, Redemption and Grace' for which there were a number of definitions. This was followed by a synopsis of the book that summarises the plot of each story. The context of contemporary culture as 'fluid modernity' was explored along with its impact on those living in such societies sometimes called 'Generation X'. The gap in understanding between this culture and the theological terms was explored. The use of the transcendent model of contextual theology was identified as a way of enabling

comprehension of 'naming narrative moments' that corresponded with 'sin, redemption and grace' through the human imagination. These 'naming moments' were then explored within the text of 'Life After God' as representing contemporary culture.

The implications of this dialogue between contemporary culture through 'Life After God' with pastoral theology were summarised. This included potential factors for Christians to consider when attempting to assist people from contemporary culture to grow spiritually. The importance of the sacraments, spiritual reflection by retreat, and transcendent wonderment on encounter with God were listed amongst other implications.

Finally, the potential uses of the book in pastoral ministry were summarised as a powerful narrative tool; so in the words of Coupland we can enable people from contemporary culture to understand and know '*A God that is good, and that beauty surrounds us*'.

4449 Words

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