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# Australian Universities in Transition: Moral, Pragmatic or Religious Drivers?

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## ABSTRACT

Australian universities appear to be moving out of a broadly progressive liberal humanist value frame and into a more conservative, neoliberal value frame. In this transition, incompatible visions of what institutional morality and rationality are arise, due to the overlap of incommensurable value frames. Here, finding out who is being visionary, virtuous and rational is not easy. Uncovering a deeper cultural substratum than morality and rationality is needed for a meaningful understanding of what is driving this transition. This paper contends that if we use religious categories, the underlying topography of this institutional transition becomes clearer.

From a theological stance, the notion of modern secular reality underpinning liberal humanism and neo-liberalism is exposed and questioned. Then, premised on the work of John Milbank, a post-secular approach to sociology is employed exploring the drivers of the cultural transitions in Australian universities in explicitly theological terms. Jacques Ellul's conception of 'Mammon' coupled with Walter Wink's conception of 'the powers' are brought to bear on the worship orientation of the three teleological frames seen in 20th century Australian universities: the classical, the liberal humanist and the neoliberal frames. This paper concludes by advocating a post-secular re-discovery of Newman's conception of the Western university.

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## Introduction

In very broad terms, Australian universities have undergone two radical changes in cultural ethos in the twentieth century. The first of these transitions, finally flowering in the late 1960s, was from a conservative, classical and at least tacitly Christian ethos to a progressive, liberal, secular and humanist ethos (Franklin, 2003; Collingwood, 1944). The second transition, in the late 1980s, was from a progressive liberal humanist ethos to a conservative neoliberal pragmatic ethos (Dawkins, 1988; Pelikan, 1992; Readings, 1996; Coaldrake & Stedman, 1998; Coady, 2000; Norton, 2002; Hayes & Wynyard 2002; Cooper et al, 2002; Bok, 2003; Cain & Hewitt 2004).

Using an archaeological analogy, contemporary Australian universities rest on three strata of incommensurable value frames, laid in rapid succession. Australian universities when I was born (1965) had an entirely different institution ethos to the university of my undergraduate studies (1985), which, in turn, had an entirely different institutional ethos to the university now (2007). This rapid succession of teleological outlooks and operational norms means that a hodge podge of profound incongruities about the aims, values, practises and nature of higher education is swilling around in your average Australian university. But this riot of shallowly submerged incongruity is being strongly controlled by careful fiscal cultivation. As the organizationally dominant neoliberal overlay compacts down, the old foliage that could only grow in classical soil is now almost extinct, but increasingly liberal humanist foliage is suffering major depletion too, and can see itself going the same way as the classical foliage. Neoliberal foliage is, of course, well cultivated by our university executives.

What drives these transitions, and are the transformed universities that we now see improving or degrading or just aimlessly changing?

It has become increasingly common for culturally reflexive Australian academics to feel that the transitions they are caught up in are for the worse (Tyson, 2007a; Connell 2006; Davies 2005; Winefield et al, 2002). This is also true for many Australian academics working in the sciences as well (Davies et al, 2006; Woolcock, 2006).

At my Australian university, the executive is seriously considering not offering an Arts degree, and is wondered if our university can justify the ongoing existence of traditional humanities and social science offerings at all (Gardiner, 2007). The problem is primarily one of branding. Our university is strongly marketing the 'new humanities' – media studies, fashion studies and other exciting industry linked and vocationally relevant offerings in its Creative Industries Faculty – and does not want brand confusion for prospective clients (students) because we still have a School of Humanities where we teach and research enterprise and vocationally irrelevant subjects such as sociology and

history. So, the School of Humanities and Human Services is to be dissolved on 31 December 2007 and some sort of liberal arts program is, apparently, going to be introduced in 2009. If the executive are to be believed, a selective redeployment drawn from the tiny body of existing academic staff in dedicated humanities and social science scholarship will pioneer this brave new liberal arts program into the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

There can be no doubt that the direction of these broad cultural transitions are bad for academics in fields of learning tied to a liberal humanist or (worse still) classical vision of what a university is. Yet, moral and teleological judgements can only be reasonably adjudicated from within a single evaluative frame. Trying to work out who is pursuing good ends by reasonable methods, and who is pursuing bad ends by unreasonable methods where the contesting aspirants to virtue and reason operate out of different evaluative frames and teleological assumptions, is futile.

The argument put forward in this paper holds that morality and reason are not culturally basic enough to judge between neoliberal, liberal and classical conceptions of what a good university is. Each outlook has its own morality, its own rationality and its own set of tacit teleological and cosmological assumptions. Yet religion, as the basic cultural grounds out of which morality and rationality arise, is deep enough to provide credible grounds of adjudication between these incommensurable morality and rationality frames.

This approach seems strongly prejudiced towards favouring a Newmanesque classical stance (Newman, 1927; Pelikan, 1992) over the distinctly secular conceptions of the liberal and neoliberal stances, for of the three, only the classical stance has a tacitly religious teleology of what a university is. However, this paper does not find that a classical stance is better than a liberal or a neoliberal stance merely because it is tacitly religious, for this paper finds all three stances to be profoundly religious. Thinking religiously, the dynamics of ritual, belief and worship in each stance, and the consequences of the competing understandings of reality embedded in the varying practises of power and knowledge, opens up a much deeper

evaluative frame than mere morality and rationality. So this paper finds that it is religious drivers that shape the passage of transition in our culture at large, and hence in universities, and so it is from religion that we are likely to get the best understanding of whether these transitions are good or bad.

But before we apply a theological approach to sociology (Keenan, 2003) in order to try and evaluate institutional morality and instrumental rationality in Australian universities, let us look a bit more closely at why both morality and rationality are not adequate conceptual frames for this task.

### **1. From liberalism to neoliberalism: the failure of Western moral theory.**

Since Kant, moral theory – and metaphysics – has been in a peculiar crisis in the West (Harrison 1995). Put simply, Kant demonstrates that the only valid grounds of approaching truth available to the modern Western mind allows us no substantive contact with transcendence. This creates the distinctly Western, distinctly modern problem of meaninglessness that we have yet to conquer (Casey, 2001), fuelling our morality depleted political discourse of instrumental rationality. Substantive moral and metaphysical truths can no longer be anchored to qualitatively intrinsic, teleologically inherent or religiously transcendent absolutes that have a broad cultural acceptability.

After Kant we have tried as hard as we can to produce moral certainty from non-transcendently referenced evaluative constructs. The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the high water mark of post-metaphysical and uncontestedly materialist realism. This realism signals the triumph of the truth discourse of modern secular reason. The cultural success of this realism launched secular liberal humanism as a progressive intellectual force that steadily eroded its traditional more transcendently referenced competition in Western high culture. However, this progressive 19<sup>th</sup> century stance easily undermines itself too. Its hermeneutic of suspicion worked like a charm unmasking the exploitative self interests that were the *real* (i.e. material) realities behind the convenient self delusions of so called traditional moral truth (Ricœur, 1970). Thus, religiously referenced absolutes were exposed as necessary self

deceptions furthering the economic, political, ego and sexual interests of the patriarchal ruling class at the expense of the masses on whom their power and privilege depended.

But here the dog of suspicion bites twice. For if material self interest is indeed the only reality, then what can make any human power – be it regressive or progressive – fair and just? Progressive ‘critique’ becomes a stance only of destructive value, for if power itself is an inherently self interested business, you cannot construct or maintain a fair society with power, and yet, how else are you going to have a revolution and create and sustain a politico-economic utopia? Callinicos (1989) ably locates the birth of French poststructuralism in a profound disappointment with revolutionary socialism in the aftermath of the brutality of Stalin, and in the failure of 1968 to produce a genuinely socialist polity in France. However, this disillusionment with progressive revolution itself, and hence, with classical Marxism, may be not nearly as ill-founded as Callinicos maintains. Progressivism only works as a political ideology if its destructive power is premised on the moral appeal of liberation for the oppressed. But, given a dogmatic commitment to materialism and given the hermeneutic of suspicion, is revolutionary liberation itself a mere ideological ruse? It seems we have produced an inherently self defeating progressive liberal humanism.

Critique – an essential revolutionary component of 19<sup>th</sup> century progressivism – explicitly maintains that transcendentally referenced value beliefs are inherently false, hence oppressive and regressive, and must be over thrown. Critique also tacitly assumes that there are such things as substantive progressive moral values (i.e. equality and liberation) that should replace the old values. However, both of these beliefs cannot be sustained by the neo-Kantian onto-epistemological assumptions that underpin them.

Kantian anti-realism in epistemology provokes the Hegelian idealistic ontology of spirit in a bold attempt to recover transcendent and substantive absolutes, yet the failure of this attempted to be concretely grounded produced a functional and pragmatic ontology of materialism (truth as historical and

material praxis). From this materialist realism, atheism and scientific anti-idealism arise as the necessary pre-requisites for genuinely progressive 19<sup>th</sup> century thought and politics. Yet, when there are no knowable transcendent absolutes, when all values are constructs, then the value constructs of modern secular realism are no inherently better and no more objectively demonstrable than the constructs of traditional transcendentally referenced moral beliefs. So the self defeating grounds of 19<sup>th</sup> century positivistic progressivism produced the 19<sup>th</sup> counter-Enlightenment tendency seen in both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

Kantian epistemology, Hegelian idealism and positivistic materialism are all decisively rejected in Kierkegaard (1992). Armed with these unfashionable disbeliefs, Kierkegaard rejects the entire modern secular outlook on reality that was emerging in his times. Kierkegaard is a non-secularist, not, as Milbank (1990) and Dupré (1993) are, on the grounds of a powerful critique of secular modernity stemming from the nominalist theology of Scotus and Ockham. Rather, being in various ways in agreement with Hamann and Jacobi (Surber, 2001) Kierkegaard never found Kant and Hegel's epistemological arguments and existential consequences at all convincing. So Kierkegaard gets a name for being an irrationalist because as he ridicules the whole belief frame of modern secular reality. And yet, in doing so, Kierkegaard is actually strongly embedded in the inherently religious genealogy of truth underpinning Western thought since Plato (Tyson, 2007b). Unlike Kant, Kierkegaard does not abandon knowable transcendent truth; yet truth is only accessed via faith. Christian theology becomes the basis of Kierkegaard's epistemology, his ethics, his aesthetics, his psychology and his sociology. Kierkegaard never accepted a secular view of reality as being either credible or possible. This insight is shared by the post-secular thinkers of our day (Blond, 1998) and is a necessary starting point for a philosophically serious critique of the materialist and pragmatic reality frame in which neoliberalism is situated.

In Nietzsche, however, materialism itself is mytho-ritualistically radicalised. Now morality is inherently and jubilantly exploitative, and is better than

Christian morality because it is honest about the materialist and agonistic nature of all moral construction (Nietzsche 1994). So, Nietzsche advocates, the West can be redeemed only by recovering the pagan myth of power as a struggle for conquest amongst outstanding elites. This is a rejection of progressive revolutionary values premised on the incipient Christian slave mentality of equality and the inherent resentment of the mighty by the masses. Marx (though possibly not Stalin or Hitler) is too Christian for Nietzsche.

Given the absence of knowable transcendent truth and the philosophically unconvincing reductively materialist reality outlook of 19<sup>th</sup> century positivism, the credibility of progressive and revolutionary liberal humanism as an improvement on the West's old transcendentally referenced truths, looks, given the passage of time, increasingly like a massive confidence trick. Further, to swing in a more Durkheimian direction, where there can be no valuable reality bigger than "all too human" cultural construction, and where individual economic freedom, as the underlying material praxiology of our industrialised consumer society is the tacit political value, there can be *no* culturally unifying substantive value beliefs of any solidity (Durkheim, 1966).

Liberal humanism as the grounds of critique undermining the 'old' transcendentally referenced order, and as a basis for constructing a 'new' scientific and humane order, falls over and is devoured by its postmodern philosophical progeny and its neoliberal political progeny.

Neo-liberalism is the praxis of conformity to existing political and economic status, and hence it involves the 'post-ideological' advocacy of the current ideology underpinning the politico-economic conditions of global capitalism that sustain this status (Greiner, 1990). Neo-liberalism is the natural and logical political child of liberal humanism. In many ways it is the triumph of liberal humanism. Traditional transcendent values have been dispensed with, so now the task of high culture is to preserve rather than critique the new entirely instrumental and inherently agonistic status quo (is this resonating with ancient Babylon's Marduk?). Neo-liberalism is also undoubtedly an

intellectual improvement on liberal humanism, if, that is, one is committed to the non-transcendently referenced world view of 19<sup>th</sup> century materialistic realism. 19<sup>th</sup> century progressivism was still enamoured with the absolute values of its tacitly religious cultural opposition, and so it tried – vainly – to attribute purely secular and rational absolutes to the progressive world view. 20<sup>th</sup> century neo-liberalism is serious about abandoning transcendent reference points, and so the very concept of ‘critique’ becomes meaningless, and the preservation of the existing status quo – in whatever form that status quo takes – tied very materially to the economic base that supports the status quo – however that base is configured – defines normality, rationality and acceptability for any purely humanly constructed social cohesion and morality.

There can be no prophets to denounce idolatry and violations of intrinsic value now, and there can be no final redemption, no visions of an eschatological City of God to be divinely realised, against which to measure all human constructs of reality as inadequate and needing constant moral and metaphysical challenge. Instead, there is only the entirely constructed world of ‘economic reality’ to be fully embraced, power is now only situated entirely in terms of manipulating ‘economic reality’, and we are now expected to be spiritually content with the fully realised eschatology of Money (Mammon) as the ontological frame out of which we must construct all value, meaning and reasonable aims, here and now. Political and economic power – Marduk – is now inherently about preserving the status quo’s ability to impose its own order, by force, on chaos.

The transition from liberal humanism, the progressive force of yesterday, to neo-liberalism, the conservative force of today, is one propelled by neo-Kantian anti-realism, the philosophical foundation upon which both outlooks rest. So, in thinking about whether Australian universities are governed by institutional bullies who squash intellectual freedom and negate the civic role of universities, or rational and conscientious managers, it seems that both of these apparently competing evaluative frameworks are part of the same underlying belief system: modern secular reality. If modern secular reality is true then neo-liberalism, as essentially constructivist and as inherently

unconcerned with the very idea of qualitative absolutes, is clearly intellectually superior to liberal humanism. But if secular reality itself is false, and some form of substantive contact with transcendent absolutes is, after all, intrinsic to the human condition, then in practise neo-liberalism will turn out to be inferior to liberal humanism, even though liberal humanism is premised on the same false confidence in secular reason as neo-liberalism. So, can modern secular reality itself be critiqued?

## **2. Theology and Social Theory**

It may be that post-secular philosophy (Blond, 1998) provides us with a more powerful view of the situation in which we are placed than a merely moral or merely pragmatic frame of conceptual evaluation. Given the meta-contestation of evaluative frames underlying the debates about what is happening and what should be done in higher education in Australia, and given the philosophical unity underlying the apparent meta-contest between liberal humanism and neoliberalism, a more basic understanding of social reality seems needed in order to reveal what is actually going on.

Post-secular philosophy has its origins in a seminal work by John Milbank titled *Theology and Social Theory* (1990). In describing Milbank's thesis Fergus Kerr observes:

Milbank ... is struck by recent developments within social theory itself that suggest that ... there is *no* socio-economic reality which is more 'basic' than the reality of religion. Social theorists, influenced by Nietzsche, trace the formation of social structures to the will-to-power. While they mostly want to get rid of religion they acknowledge the subterranean presence of the mythic-ritual elements that social structures characteristically contain...

... the Nietzschean legacy is ambivalent. On the one hand it seems the last word in post-Enlightenment rationalism, a 'truly non-metaphysical mode of secular reason'. On the other hand, for all its claimed scientific positivism and evolutionary naturalism, Nietzsche's work also embodies an ontology of non-human power and primordial conflict which is simply a return to a pagan perception of life. It looks as if something metaphysical, and thus in some sense something theological, rears its head in even the most obsessively pagan 'genealogy of morals' so far invented... (Kerr, 1996: 430)

Kerr notes that 'Post-Nietzschean social theorists have recognized that the mythic-religious dimension of social structures cannot be treated as superstructural.' (Kerr, 1996: 430) Indeed, the *Verstehen* tradition of German sociology has never held itself distinct from theology, philosophy and economics. This tradition has a profound interest in the theological roots of social rationality structures (Honnfelder, 1995), and has often resisted the more dogmatically materialist tendency to separated out and subordinate the cultural and the religious to the material and the factual (Weber, 1987). If this tradition is basically right about the complexities of human reality, and if – due to the counter-Enlightenment's postmodern intellectual progeny – we are indeed leaving behind the epistemologically and sociologically naïve vision of a discretely positive and material reality, then neoliberalism itself may be on the way out with liberal humanism, and both may soon prove to be strange aberrations in the human history of reality, rather than definitive modern breakthroughs forever displacing superstition and ignorance (Berger, 1999).

On the other hand, the unbelief in transcendence propagated by 19<sup>th</sup> century materialism may make it very hard for us to recover a more spiritually enchanted (Tacey, 2000), that is, historically normal view of truth and reality. Given a tacit materialistic realism, the alliance of praxis, perception and power created by the ruling triumvirate of neoliberal economics (Pusey, 1991; Stiglitz 2002), consumer irrationalism (Frankfurt, 2005; Klein 2000) and neoconservative politics (Kingston, 2004; Maddox, 2005), now constitutes the status quo underpinning our Western *Weltanschauung*. These unholy three are our principalities and powers (Wink, 1992). Here, as Kierkegaard saw, media image and the shameless political manipulation of the fears and base prejudices of the public, the strangely collective yet apolitical values of mere atomistic satiation, and the logic of the preservation of order and control for its own sake, are inherently conformist and are the only public realities we can collectively access (Kierkegaard, 1978). Here, truth, intrinsic dignity and substantive values are notions entirely devoid of meaningful signification.<sup>1</sup>

But – in the light of the grudging appreciation for the cultural depth of the mytho-ritualistic arising from post-Nietzschean social theory – let us not take

materialism as a necessary reality given. Thinking more mytho-ritualistically, human communities, language and the moral values they produce, are always situated in a context that theology describes as worship. Worship is a function of the human condition to the degree that cosmological beliefs, symbolic meanings and teleological practises are socio-linguistically unavoidable. Worship is grounded in a set of cosmological and value beliefs that can never be merely materially given, and that orientate the actions and rationality of every human action. Hence, a theological anthropology holds that we are all devotees to one object of worship or another, as the mytho-ritualistic underlies all the social realities in which we live. Practical rationality, too, is always situated ontologically. What is instrumentally rational is never self evident, but is premised on cosmological beliefs that are inescapably ontological.

A good example of this way of understanding worship as central to the actual social, economic and political reality in which people live has been done by Paul Ricœur, some time ago, in his fascinating work *The Symbolism of Evil*(1967). Ricœur's exposition of the Babylonian politico-ritual myth of primal and redemptive violence reveals the religious substrata underpinning the operational logic and socio-cultural meaning of the *Realpolitik* of modern Western states just as effectively as it does of the Ancient Babylon. Wink, following Ricœur, points out very persuasively that this Babylonian myth of primal violence underlies the survivalism that is touted as modern realism in our politics, economics and marketing, and is thus adhered to by all modern realists be they neoliberal pragmatists or revolutionary utopian romantics. Wink (1992:13-31) argues that Babylonian redemptive violence is far more the real religion of the USA than Christianity. Yet, contemporary revivals of an Augustinian primal ontology of harmony (Milbank, 1990; Pickstock, 1998; Cunningham, 2002; Hanby, 2003) and an Anabaptist theology of the politics of peace (Hauerwas, 1983; Yoder, 1994; Gingerich & Grimsrud, 2006) bring modern realism, and hence the very parameters of political, social and economic possibility assumed by that realism, into fundamental question. But whether one's base spiritual commitments are set in an ontology of violence or harmony, or some tense or reposed balance of the two, it seems clear that there is no pure rationality that can be instrumentally applied to reality that is

ontologically neutral or objectively rational. Assuming a realism that is of a modern materialist nature, reality is falsely assumed to be ontologically void and practical rationality objective, and hence we are blind to any spiritual dynamism in human affairs, and our modern secular realism, as theological phenomenologists and others point out, may be hopelessly unfaithful to reality as we actually experience it.

So, when liberal humanists seek to shame neoliberals from their critical vantage, and when neoliberals seek to discipline and control liberal humanists from their power vantage, both typically fail to even understand the value orientation of their opponent, and this gets us no-where. (More to the point, it gets you into serious trouble if you are 'critical truth' seeking to speak to 'practical power'.) Explicitly contesting liberal humanism with neoliberal pragmatism as competing philosophical belief systems gets us further, but does not adequately recognise the underlying unity in a modern secular view of reality common to both alternatives, and does not address the inherent weaknesses of that reality perspective itself. So, if Milbank is right, it is theology that provides us with a deeper set of conceptual tools with which to try and understand what is going on at Australian universities.

### **3. Paradigm transition**

Kuhn's sociology of knowledge notes that conceptual paradigms are always being incrementally developed until their fundamental limitations become unavoidable. But the period when a conceptual paradigm may be impossible to sustain and a better paradigm is accepted, can be a very long time (Kuhn, 1970). Whilst the status quo of any belief system is able to keep any given paradigm alive, alternative conceptual frames are always deemed to be the work of crack pots. However, when the status quo finally fails, one of the crack pot alternatives will become the new orthodoxy.

Modern secular reality has been in serious trouble, probably for 200 years now, but as yet, and particularly after the cultural triumph of progressive 19<sup>th</sup> century realism, the status quo in our Western institutions of higher learning

has tended to uphold secular reality and designate all religious understandings of reality as the work of crack pots. Questioning the believability of secular materialist reality itself opens up new ways of thinking about what is happening in our universities that re-introduces the possibility of strong evaluative frameworks that are not merely human constructs and may have some contact with intrinsic or transcendent value realities. From here it may be possible to escape the liberal humanist tendency towards mere critique on the one hand and the neoliberal tendency towards the mere conservation of power on the other hand often driving the apparent conflict between academics and university administrators.

By stepping outside of the frame of modern secular truth, we are transitioning far further than the step between liberal humanism and neoliberal pragmatism. This transition may risk us encountering both re-enchantment (Tacey, 2000) and the demonic (Wink, 1992); though many voices, such as Havel (1992) and Latour (2007), in different ways, have told us that enchantment has never really gone away anyway, and other voices, like Bauman (1989) and Ricœur (1967) have found the demonic alive and well in modernity. Given the size of this paradigm shift away from secular reality, it would be natural for what follows to be entirely unacceptable to both liberal humanists and neoliberal pragmatists. On the other hand, the leap may not be as big as it seems.

As profoundly non-religious a thinker as Weber (1987) carefully describes the power that religion has as a driver of broad cultural values and rationality frames, and also clearly saw the often sinister quasi spiritual life forms that human institutions themselves take on. Then, Whitehead, and a stream of theoretical physicists since Einstein, and religious existentialists from Kierkegaard to Buber, branching out to the recent theological turn amongst Continental phenomenologists, have been plugging away at a non-secular truth paradigm for some time now. And as Morgan (1992) and White (1992) note, Plato's vision of truth was always religiously grounded, and his epistemology was always of a metaphysical nature, and this belief grounds has been the womb of universal and absolute truth itself in Western cultural

history. Secular materialist truth may be but a strange aberration soon to be passed over again in the human history of truth and reality.

A broad cultural transition back to a spiritually richer conception of reality may be re-asserting itself in the West, the only culture ever to briefly abandon this outlook (Tacey, 2003; McGrath, 2004; Jenkins, 2007). If this is so, then a far bigger transition than the evolution of liberals into neoliberals is underway. Given that liberalism and neo-liberalism are ancillary to the same secular truth discourse, and given that that discourse is in crisis and is hence unable to adjudicate between the competing value and rationality claims fighting it out in Australian universities in the present, the shift to a more belief dynamic and less dogmatically materialist view of truth itself may be easier for us to do than we often assume. As Milbank saw, this entails what can appear to be a postmodern rejection of the meta-narrative of secular scientific truth. But the theological truth paradigm is not postmodern, for it is premised on belief – though entirely historically and culturally situated – being our primary grounds of contact *with* reality. Simone Weil (2002: 128), for example, observes that ‘we know by means of our intelligence that what the intelligence does not comprehend is more real than what it does comprehend. Faith is experience that intelligence is enlightened by love.’ Theologically (in sympathy with Plato), our grasp of reality is always metaphorical and always embedded in our particular, contingent and temporal cultural context, and yet it is also always far more than a merely unreal social or personal construct.

In thinking theologically about Australian universities I am going to reason from within a frame of belief that I cannot justify in so called objective, materially realist terms. But this does not mean I have abandoned truth. To the contrary, I do not see how the very idea of truth can possibly survive if one is committed to modern secular reality. Postmodern epistemological nihilism is a persuasive stance that makes very good sense if one is committed to modern secular realism. Given that postmodernism tends to produce an irrealist (and self defeating) dogmatic abandonment of *every* meta-narrative of truth, the conceptual possibilities seem pretty clear; truth and religious belief

of some sort on the one hand, or mere constructivism and meaningless power and the abandonment of truth on the other hand.

We precede then, to a brief theological sketch evaluating the morality and rationality of the neoliberal corporate behaviour of my university, the Queensland University of Technology (QUT).

#### **4. QUT and Mammon**

To get at the sub-structure on which the neoliberal managerial mind set controlling institutional power at QUT rests, a theological frame asks, what does this outlook worship? The spiritual orientation of the power ethos of the institution then gives substantive shape to its morality and rationality. Whilst this sort of analysis is indeed undertaken by theological sociologists such as Jacques Ellul, this is an approach that is strangely parallel to the 19<sup>th</sup> century radical heritage grounded in Marx. The difference between Ellul and Marx is not in their appreciation of the primacy of worship in the concrete reality of daily life, nor in their discernment of how worship shapes the parameters of political and economic life. Rather, Marx and Ellul disagree over Who is the true object of worship. Marx maintains that as Feuerbach and others have demonstrated that there is no God and no spirit, so all worship that is not the worship of material Man is false worship. Marx, in terms interestingly similar to Kant's conception of his epistemological Copernican revolution, proclaims:

The criticism of religion disillusion man, so that he will think, act, and fashion his reality like a man who has discarded his illusions and regained his senses, so that he will move around himself as his own true sun. Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself. (Marx, 1975) [1844]

Ellul's orthodox Christian understanding of idolatry, however, finds the Marxist worship of economically self created Man indistinguishable from the worship of Money. Ellul, in full agreement with Marx, finds that capitalism subordinates being to personal having, and yet Ellul notes that socialism subordinates being to doing and collective having. Both are profound alienations where the role of money itself in de-ontologising humanity is unchanged. Marx's

redemptive goal – the re-humanizing of Man, or the self creation of Humanity – cannot be achieved by any politico-economic system. Embracing orthodox Christian belief, Ellul holds that the fallen order of reality itself must be redemptively transformed by its Creator for humanity to realise its essential dignity. Until the eschaton then, all answers are provisional – some worse than others of course. But only the worship of God placed above every economic or political system allows for any real degree of economic and political justice. Ellul explains:

When we open the Bible we do not find a philosophy, a political system, a metaphysic or even a religion. We find instead the promise of dialog... addresses to me, asking me what I am doing, hoping, fearing – and especially what I am. All that the Bible has to tell me about money is found in this dialog. It offers no objective discovery on which to base a general system. It instead offers truth about all things – including money. But it leads us to this dramatic conclusion: truth is not objective (nor is it subjective!). It is found in relationship with God, and nowhere else. (Ellul, 1986: 26)

For Ellul all concerns about money and politics are primarily concerns about the relationship between God and people. To fail to understand this is to miss the reality vision of the Bible, and hence it is no accident that the first of the ten commandments – to have no gods before God – is pivotal to any theological understanding of money as grounded in the Abrahamic religions.

The idolatry of a praxis of life in service to the accumulation of money is what the Christian Scriptures call bondage to Mammon (Matthew 6:24). If we accept Dupré's (1993) argument that modern materialism's confidence in the ultimacy of what Ockham called *natura pura* is premised on Ockham's questionable theological outlook, and this nominalist theology is the heart of modernism's philosophical metaphysical bankruptcy, then we can pick up Marx's fascinating religious analysis of money without needing to accept his captivity to materialism. This, in fact, Ellul does, and whilst the results are very different from Marx, Ellul makes it possible to believe that a Christian praxis of worship, when not hopelessly corrupted via its participation in the pervasive Western idolatry of Mammon, should indeed be deeply economically and politically radical.

Ellul's *Money and Power* (1986) recovers the New Testament notion of Mammon as the spiritual power that is either generated or surrendered to in the inherently idolatrous worship of money. Mammon, Ellul argues, has always been a pervasive spiritual reality in economically sophisticated societies; and is, as Marx well saw, particularly evident in modern Western life.

The notion of worship carries drivers more basic and powerful than the drivers of morality and instrumental rationality; that is, worship empowers different moral and rational frames of belief and action. Worship involves a recognition of ultimate worth and/or authority to which one fully surrenders final loyalty. A Judeo-Christian theological anthropology finds that worship – whether conscious or not – is basic to the practise of human life in all socio-cultural contexts.

Since Michael Pusey's *Economic Rationalism in Canberra*, (1991) it has been clearly evident that Mammon has been the central site of worship in Australia's national political parties and institutions of political power. Further, since the Dawkins reform of higher education in the late 1980s, that spiritual orientation has progressively come to displace the more liberal humanist and classical loyalty orientations that previously defined the moral and rational goals of universities in Australia.

Historically three frames of worship seem operative in Australian universities. Weakest of all in the contemporary context is a classical frame, where contemplative and transcendent absolutes, connected with our long and deep Christian roots in the Western university tradition, defined basic loyalties and produced a particular set of moral and operational institutional characteristics. Here, the influence of the British Idealists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century can still be vaguely felt in Australian universities and public institutions. Here, God (pursued in devout contemplation of the medieval transcendentia – Truth, Beauty and Goodness) is, paradigmatically, the first object of worship in all knowledge pursuits. Next is progressive secular humanism, with its rejection

of divine transcendence, its insistence on methodological atheism and materialist realism, yet its great romantic capacity to believe in natural and humanly created truth, beauty and goodness. Here the optimism that the productive, creative and rational radiance of Man can be His own Sun, and that reason and science will provide a secular paradise on earth, places Man at the centre of worship. As noted, this heritage is now increasingly marginalised in our universities. Finally, neoliberalism. Here money itself is the centre of worship. Worshipping not even Man, but rather the crafted idols than Man explicitly sets up for himself, removes even the *imago dei* within Man from worship, and renders worship inherently dehumanising, desacralising, and devoid of ultimacy. Values and rationality premised on any commitment to intrinsic human dignity, inherent goodness and transcendent absolutes are, from this stance, totally incomprehensible.

The worship of Mammon is in the ascendancy at QUT, and it rolls effortlessly over all opposition because of its position of power. The institutional values and rationality defined by this worship orientation are increasingly dislodging the previous two worship frames and their resultant institutional characteristics. So now universities are businesses, students are clients, academics are human resources, and marketing, branding and funding concerns attract the first attention of the planning and operational energies of our university's executives. Here Lauchs' insights into the manner in which ethical procedures are now constructed in order to rationally avoid ethical responsibility (Lauchs, 2006), and Bauman's concerns about the potential for evil in pure instrumental rationality and conformist socializing (Bauman, 1989) give us good reason to be worried about the future of our civilisation. Though Freud's fears (Freud 2004) are grounded in the very secular materialist reality frame this paper critiques, these fears do indeed seem well grounded.

So, it seems that the religious category of worship reveals the underlying drivers that shape QUT's purely financial values and its shamelessly manipulative (yet legally and procedurally defensible) operational norms – as well as disclosing the strangely demonic energy staff and students have encountered in the above mentioned displays of executive will.<sup>2</sup> Yet, if there is

no God, then there is not much to worry about. All that is really happening is that one set of norms that liberal humanists like is being replaced by another set of norms that they don't like – but in the end the value and operational differences concern style rather than anything of a substantive moral nature.

Where contingency and relativism (Rorty, 1991; Rorty 1989) mean that there can be no substantive moral truths, then everything – even solidarity – is ultimately a matter of contextually determined preference and style. Even so, the transition from one life form to another is always unpleasant for those who had been formed and were at home in the out-moded life form. Indeed, when one ethos of collective worship is replaced by another, the demonic is always present from the perspective of the old order of worship. In World War Two the demons of fascism were manifest in that form of worship's attempt to replace the norms of worship associated with the British empire and liberal democracy across the Atlantic. That is, Hitler's Axis was not just a military expansionist nation seeking imperial dominance by the usual means of such conquest; it was evil. With the transfer of global imperial power to the USA after World War Two, basically familiar forms of power populating the English speaking world's politico-economic pantheon managed to maintain their governing hold on the West. And so the demons of a foreign form of worship were repelled. Should neo-liberalism replace liberal humanism successfully, those committed to the old forms of worship will feel the power of the demonic killing their gods and replacing the frame of valuing, thinking and acting that sustains their first loyalties. It is unpleasant, but after a while, a new equilibrium becomes, if not comfortable, at least inevitable and normal. Something like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1983) will turn out to be quite palatable in the end. But if there really is a God, or if, as Peter Berger suspects, humanity has an instinct for transcendence (Berger, 1979: 247), then we are in trouble.

If there is a human condition and if the need to worship is basic to that condition, then the more inhuman our gods are, the more sub-human we become, the more our cultural norms become morally and spiritually dysfunctional (Durkheim's anomie), and the more purely controlling, ruthless

and barbaric our rulers become in order to maintain power and status. Once the worship of Mammon becomes the only form of life open to us, then Weber's iron cage, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1954) and C.S. Lewis' *That Hideous Strength* (1996) imaginatively prophesy what disconnection from the liberal humanist and classical worship heritages of Western culture may mean.

If, as Augustine (1983) claims, God has made us for Himself, and our hearts find no peace until we rest in Him, then something inherently human is lost when Mammon is the primary object of our collective culture of worship. If this is the case then the banality of money as the primary object of our culture's dominant form of worship will become increasingly spiritually unendurable. If this happens we will need ever more distracting, sedating and escapist leisure (stronger narcotics, more penetrating and saturating media), ever more frenetic careers, and ever strengthening external political control to prevent our spiritually hollow life form from collapsing. The so called war on terror may be symptomatic of the drivers of Mammon in both entertainment and power in Western culture, as the globe groans under the weight of the fabulous exploitation of humanity and nature that this god demands of his Western devotees (Hauerwas, Lentricchia, 2003). As Mammon grows in power in proportion to the number and depth of its devotees and victims – as can already be seen – evangelistic fervour for the pursuit of wealth as the first goal of true humanity and the dynamics of religious power itself promotes universal monotheism on a global scale like we have never seen before; thou shalt have no gods before Mammon.

## **Conclusion**

It seems reasonable to conclude that the deepening obeisance to Mammon in the governing structures of Australia's political, economic, media and educational institutions, is the best way of understanding what is really driving the sweeping cultural transition going on in our universities. If, then, there either is a God, or humanity does have an instinct for transcendence that must be carefully cultivated if we are to be humanized, then this trend lays us

open as a culture to our own demonic energies, and the delicate flowers of beauty, truth and goodness necessary for our collective humanity are under serious threat. If this is the case, then the contest between liberal humanist and neoliberal value frames within our universities, battled out between competing claims to morality and reason, is only a superficial symptom of a far deeper problem. The focus of our collective worship in the assumed norms, accepted practises and prevailing power structures of our way of life is the real problem.

If the above is correct, then we will only recognise the causal dynamics of our present state of transition if we stop looking at the symptoms of our present crisis as if they are its drivers. If the real drivers are indeed religious, then our entire frame of modern secular reality will have to be seriously re-considered. This is something the modern Western university is going to find very hard to do, be it of a liberal humanist or neoliberal bent. For since the Russell's materialist coup (Collingwood, 1944) English speaking 20<sup>th</sup> century universities have been first home to what Peter Berger calls the 'reality police... who watch over the cognitive boundaries of the culture. In their perspective transcendence in *any* of its historical forms is viewed as contraband goods.' (Berger, 1979: 247) After Russell, our universities have been becoming temples of modern secular reality, grooming and initiating the priests of modern Western knowledge and power. And this, we have now seen, is a temple that houses and honours Mammon so naturally that we academics are unable to even identify the pervasive forms and habits of our worship to this crass deity of our own making.

Yet, now that we have Milbank's work, and now that neo-liberalism may itself be failing (Fukuyama, 2006; Saul, 2005), and failing as a viable higher educational ideology (Gallagher, 2005; Davies et al, 2006) perhaps we can start looking at the post-secular possibilities of understanding reality and universities. Escaping the secular materialist frame of reality may at last make it possible for us to not only identify how remarkably tenuous the economic theory underpinning neo-liberalism is (Keen, 2001; Stretton, 2000; Hausman, 1992) but to develop an approach to economics that keeps it subservient to

higher human ends. Some notion of human society as inherently liturgical and reality as inherently sacred is needed for humane economics. And only if the ends of every human activity are humane can the science of that activity be meaningfully rational.

Perhaps we can even apply a post-secular frame of evaluation to the operational norms, cultural ethos and teleological assumptions of our universities. If Tacey (2003) is right, a cultural reality shift towards 'spirituality' is underway in the West, so it may now be the right time to ask about the worship orientation of our universities. This leads us back to Newman (1927) and re-embedding the question of the nature of the Western university in its own spiritual and theological heritage. Indeed, Pelikan (1992) of Yale demonstrates how easy it is to find gold in Newman now, even though Pelikan does not adequately address Berger's concern about the underlying non-transcendently referenced view of reality which makes it so hard for our educated minds to grasp what Newman is really driving at. For the progressive Neo-Kantian anti-realism which supports the logic and value system of neo-liberalism is premised on the whole sale dumping of our transcendently referenced past. But in a cultural environment where 19<sup>th</sup> century atheistic materialism is waning (McGrath, 2004), a return to the traditions of spiritual orientation underlying our distinctly Western institutions of learning may well be necessary for our universities to have any future of cultural relevance to our civilisation. And, as Newman points out, these traditions hark back a long way, even to Augustine of Canterbury at the close of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Describing the religious passage of Western learning from the close of the Classical era to the High Middle Ages Newman notes: 'Such was the foundation of the School of Paris, from which, in the course centuries, sprang the famous University, the glory of the middle ages.' (Newman, 1927:33) And the University of Paris is the foundation from which sprang Western university learning, in all its richness and variety, over the past 900 years. So why should not the West seek to re-discover its own historical heritage of spirituality underpinning the very birth and development of the Western university? Why should we not again turn to the transcendentia, and pursue Truth, Beauty and Goodness as acts of worship to the God in

whose Being we all live and move and have our being (Bonaventure, 1990)? The value and nobility of this task vastly outshines the glory of the worship of Man, the first fall of this original Western university vision in recent times. But in comparison with the second fall of Western learning into the banality of the worship of money, the 'McDonaldization of Higher Education' (Hayes, Wynyard, 2002) reveals itself to be nothing other than a destructive prostitution of human intelligence that can only result in the degradation, exploitation and bondage of the human spirit. Let us recover true learning through a return to right worship.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The most intriguing feature of literature such as Andrew Wilkie's *Axis of Deceit* (2003) and Margo Kingston's *Not Happy, John!* (2004) is how irrelevant carefully documented revelations of public deception are to Australia's contemporary political landscape.

<sup>2</sup> I have had talked with many academics, students and office staff at QUT's Carseldine campus about the School of Humanities and Human Services' transition into oblivion. I have heard not a few stories about strange and sinister 'vibes' surrounding the 'change management' process.

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#### **Acknowledgements:**

I would like to acknowledge the long and helpful discussions I have had on this topic with seven remarkable men – a poet, a Marxist activist, two sociologists, a scientist, a budding scholar of Islam and a seaman. My thanks to Ben Tarren, Robert Nicholas, Gavin Kendall, Paul Harrison, John Woolcock, David Lawson and John Maycock.

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