What Is Christian Postmodernism?

Christopher Douglas

Abstract

Christian Postmodernism is a rhetorical strategy of fundamentalist apologetics. It seeks to level the playing field of expert knowledge by developing institutions and networks of counter-expertise to produce uncertainty in fields such as evolution, Bible criticism, climate change, sex education, and others. This article analyzes a literary example of Christian Postmodernism, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' famous *Left Behind* series, where characters must learn to read the Bible as fundamentalists do, for its 'plain sense' mapping of the End Times. Christian Postmodernism characterizes the epistemic crisis among U.S. conservatives today and was crucial to the election of Donald Trump in 2016.

In the fundamentalist bestselling novel *Left Behind* by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, the protagonist Rayford Steele hurries home after the freak worldwide disappearance of millions of people to discover that his wife and son have likewise been 'raptured.' This is the evangelical doctrine that prior to the End Times appearance of the Antichrist and years of tribulation, true believers in Jesus Christ will be whisked away, bodily, to heaven. Rayford, an airline pilot, in a mid-life crisis, adulterous-hearted, erratic churchgoer, is despondent, but he finds his wife's Bible and opens its pages. It is the beginning of his turnaround, for while what he reads at first sounds "like the religious mumbo jumbo he had heard in church" (124), it is through this direct, personal engagement with the Bible, during which he will come to read it for its 'plain sense' meaning like other fundamentalist Christians, that he will soon be saved and will help lead a remnant of believers against Satan's worldly forces. He considers the Bible's last lines—"He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming quickly.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (124)—and realizes that he is at last "getting somewhere":

> Who was this who testified of these things, and what were these things? The quoted words were in red. What did that mean? He looked through the Bible and then noticed on the spine, "Words of Christ in red." So Jesus said he was coming quickly. Had he come? And if the Bible was as old as it seemed, what did "quickly" mean? It must not have meant soon, unless it was from the perspective of someone with a long view of history. Maybe Jesus meant that when he came, he would do it quickly. (124)

In fact, the best scholarly translation of the Bible, the New Revised Standard Version, translates this Greek word *tachu* as "soon." Here, Rayford comes to an intuitive, plain-sense understanding of the authors' fundamentalist Christian interpretation of the word not as "soon," but as "quickly": the idea that when Jesus returns in the Second Coming, He will be moving very swiftly, practically running. Against the mainstream scholarly, expert agreement that the book of Revelation was

written from an apocalyptic worldview most probably expecting the imminent return of Jesus within the lifetime of his listeners, and that *tachu* is therefore best translated as "soon" in this context,[1] Christian Postmodernism is the practice of deploying counter-expert knowledge that does not just refuse mainstream critical scholarship, but that produces counter-answers in the appearance of expert knowledge.

It is safest to grasp the concept of Christian Postmodernism as the epistemological practice of levelling the field of expert knowledge by cultivating networks and institutions of a counter-expertise that provides more theologically amenable answers. The purported undecidability between mainstream scholarly knowledge and what we might call Christian alternative facts is a feature, not a bug, in Christian Postmodernism because it becomes the premise for the notion that *everybody* must make faith decisions about which rival set of facts to believe, faith decisions based on our subject positions. Christian Postmodernism is a fundamentalist tactic within Christian apologetics—that rhetorical practice of defending traditional Christian theology as best one can through reason and argument. At first, it might seem like postmodernism's uncertainty and "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv) is at odds with a Christian apologetics that aims to assuage doubt. But Christian Postmodernism's goal is not so much to resolve uncertainty as to produce it. By imitating the rhetorical moves of expert authority in order to counter mainstream scholarly consensuses about issues such as evolution, historical Bible criticism, climate change, and even the efficacy of sex education, Christian Postmodernism seeks to create a picture of

[1] I take this mainstream view of Revelation to be represented by Oxford University Press' 2016 sixth edition of its undergraduate introduction to the New Testament (Ehrman, *New Testament* 529-42). See also Bart Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted* 156-62 and 262-66 for this sense of Jesus as an apocalyptic Jewish prophet who taught that the Son of Man was to imminently return "from heaven in judgment, and people needed to be ready for it by mending their ways and living as God wanted them to" (160). As Ben Witherington puts it: "It is no accident that the historical apocalypses begin to disappear from Jewish literature after A.D. 70 and from Christian literature in the second and third centuries A.D. […] The grip of imminentist eschatology on believers gradually loosened after the first century A.D." (34). This conclusion is widespread enough so that those who wish to dispute it recognize its currency: "This view, that what early Christianity preached is that the seed of God's action has been sown in the ministry of Jesus but will come to fruition in the imminent future, is widely endorsed by New Testament scholars and historians of Christianity; so widely, in fact, that it has been described as 'a growing consensus'" (Burley 444).

unresolved—indeed unresolvable—knowledge, of an active debate in which two purportedly equal sides must be expressed (and taught in schools). The goal is to create an undecidability about areas of general academic, professional agreement—a situation which believers and unbelievers alike must resolve by opting for whatever truth is more convenient to them personally. In *Left Behind*, Christian Postmodernism mostly takes the form of generating a counter-expert body of fundamentalist Bible hermeneutics that undoes the mainstream scholarly consensus that many of the New Testament writers were steeped in an apocalyptic worldview entailing the expectation that Jesus was to imminently return in power and glory to defeat Satan and his worldly forces. The Christian Postmodernism highlighted in the novel is the hallmark of contemporary Christian Right epistemology, with profound consequences for U.S. politics and society today, as we shall see.

Left Behind's Christian Postmodernism is articulated through what we might call an epistemological drama of conversion and proper faithfulness, a drama that has everything to do with this question of academic expertise and professional skills. In this drama, Rayford is joined by his daughter Chloe, a university student, and Buck, a professional journalist. Rayford is the first among the three to come to proper faith, but his conversion story is not less defined as a struggle about expertise. Though an "airline captain," that is, a pilot, the novel compares him to "other scientific types" who might have credible views on what caused the disappearance of millions of people across the world (360). (Attempting to conceal the truth of the Rapture, the as-yet-unrecognized Antichrist floats the scientific-sounding idea that nuclear weapons testing and such produced an "atmospheric phenomenon that may have caused the vanishing of so many people instantaneously" [258].) The idea seems to be, strangely, that because science underlies the engineering design of airplanes, the techniques on how to fly them also count as scientific expertise. As a "scientific type," then, Rayford is a "professional" whose opinion on the Rapture matters (368), because he is "technically minded" (387), and "organized, analytical" (397). The novel imagines that the problem for Rayford is that he has misdeployed his intellectual abilities in a secular world. When he finally

watches a DVD left behind by a trained fundamentalist interpreter and has the End Time prophecy explained to him, he is confounded that he has never realized this before:

> How could he have missed this? God had tried to warn his people by putting his Word in written form centuries before. For all Rayford's education and intelligence, he felt he had been a fool. Now he couldn't get enough of this information […]. (316)

As a "scientific type" at home in the world of secular knowledge, Rayford had entirely missed the true information that only fundamentalist counter-expertise can provide.

Buck, meanwhile, is represented as "Ivy League educated. He had left the church when he left the claustrophobic family situation that threatened to drive him crazy as a young man" (361). But the return of the "supernatural"—God's fire falling from the sky destroys the Russian air force attacking Israel, and Moses and Elijah appear at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem—is not explicable according to his secular presumptions (361). These "unexplainable things out there could not be dissected and evaluated scientifically from a detached Ivy League perspective" (398), and so "[e]veryone in the world, at least those intellectually honest with themselves, had to admit there was a God that night" when He destroyed the Russian air force (399). Like Buck, Chloe is represented as a modern secular skeptic. When the newly born-again Christian Rayford asks his daughter about whether she is convinced that the current events are signs of the End Times, Chloe says that she wants to believe, "[b]ut I have to be intellectually honest with myself" (241). Rayford thinks this is "pseudosophisticated" but remembers that he had been like this too: he also had "run everything through that maddening intellectual grid—until recently, when the supernatural came crashing through his academic pretense" (241).

Left Behind characterizes Rayford, Chloe, and Buck as skeptics and not "religious fanatics" (172), who eventually come to true faith and make the born-again prayer, asking for forgiveness of their sins and ac-

cepting Jesus's sacrificial crucifixion. But, moreover, their skepticism is characterized by the diction and connotations around 'science' and 'academia.' Importantly, a couple of ideas are developed with this discussion of expertise. On the one hand, the novel portrays skepticism as pretense, a pose learned in Ivy League universities; in this view, to have secular assumptions (as scientists and historians have when they seek natural explanations for phenomena rather than supernatural ones) is a kind of bad-faith false consciousness, a pose by which one seeks social approval. On the other hand, the authors also, seemingly contradictorily, want to show these hard-minded secularists like Buck, Chloe, and Rayford coming to faith in the face of evidence like the Rapture precisely *because* of their training, skepticism, and rationality: in doing so, the characters model a process for their skeptical readers to likewise be convinced and turn to God. The series is a guidebook for potential converts to Christian fundamentalism, with the characters' precise born-again prayers recitable by repentant readers (cf. 220).

This seeming contradiction is signalled by the phrase "intellectually honest," which the writers use approvingly about people like Buck who recognize God's miracle in the destroyed Russian air force, but disapprovingly when Chloe applies it to herself when resisting such recognition, at which point Rayford imagines it to be part of her "maddening intellectual grid" linked to university training. What unites these two contradictions is the idea that modern, secular skepticism is a kind of social fashion, not a grudgingly-learned academic or professional premise: that characters under the overwhelmingly secular pressure of society ignore the daily evidence of God's will all around them in their lives and in worldly events. It is only when these smart characters give up the love of the world's secular approval and embrace their faith in God's design that they can truly become saved, accepting the miracles of the Rapture and the Resurrection.

As the example with Rayford above suggests, the Christian Postmodern premise of the novel is that the historical critics of the Bible have radically misunderstood the fact that God put "information" about late twentieth-century End Times events—prophecies, in short—in New Testament books written in the late first century CE. What

occurs here is not so much a denial of the idea of expertise, as the creation of counter-experts who might contest the mainstream scholarly consensus that in general, the New Testament writers are writing for and about their immediate audiences, with contemporaneous events in mind. Thus, it is not only Rayford's immediate, personal engagement with the Bible (implicitly encouraged by the Holy Spirit) that leads him toward the truth, but his careful education by fundamentalist Bible "experts" who teach him how to read the Bible properly—that is, against this scholarly agreement. Thus, one of the characters in *Left Behind* is Bruce Barnes, a visitation pastor who was not an authentic Christian with a proper relationship with Jesus. Bruce discovers the DVD left by true Christian pastors who explain to the left behind that the Rapture has occurred, and, at last realizing what has happened, Bruce becomes a leader and a teacher of the remnant group who will oppose the Antichrist's plans. "I've been studying Revelation and several commentaries about end-times events," Bruce explains to Rayford and others (313). Bruce begins to sketch a "time line" of these "end-times events," and further comments

> I'll take the time to carefully teach you this over the next several weeks, but it looks to me, and to many of the experts who came before us, that this period of history we're in right now will last for seven years. (313)

As the language here suggests, the fundamentalist "experts" are providing the learned explanation for the way in which the Bible miraculously encodes "information" about events nineteen hundred years after it was written—if the characters can learn to read it properly.

What follows, and forms the premise of the novel and its sequels, is a series of mistaken assumptions and conclusions about what the Bible's many authors were writing about, and for whom. The "time line" that Bruce creates likely looks, in outline at least, a lot like this popular timeline of the premillennial dispensationalist theology that animates much of U.S. Christian fundamentalism today (see Figure 1). Throughout the rest of the series, learning to read the Bible through this lens of funda-

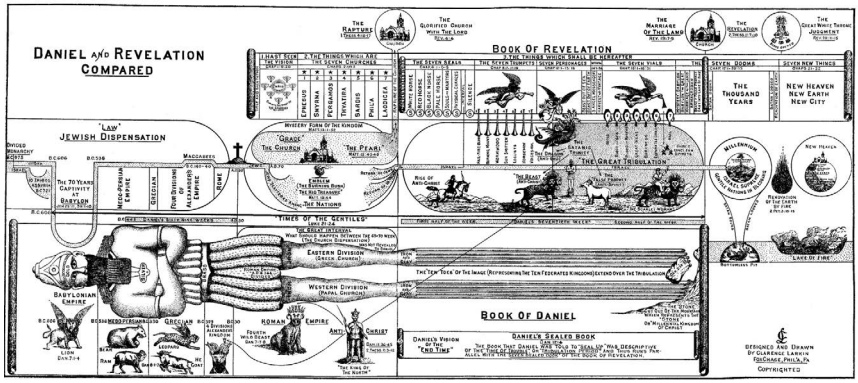

Figure 1. Clarence Larkin, "Daniel and Revelation Compared." Public domain, via chartgeek.com.

mentalist hermeneutics provides a map for the action, as the remnant believers become the Tribulation Force anticipating and countering the Antichrist's moves. The result makes for some truly strange plot developments whose inspiration comes from a series of ahistorical misreadings of the Bible.

We might wonder, for instance, what geopolitical goals the Russians might have in launching a surprise attack on Israel. But the *Left Behind* series does not think this needs explaining in terms of political dynamics or historical perspective; it simply happens because the Bible, in this fundamentalist reading, says it would. As the paratextual material at the end of the novel explains: "The Hebrew prophet Ezekiel was given a detailed prophecy twenty-five hundred years ago foretelling that Russia would become a dominant player on the world scene in the last days" (479). Russia, they explain, is "'Rosh' in the Bible" (479), presumably because they sound similar. To see the ingenuity of this Christian Postmodernism, it pays to briefly explain why the mainstream scholarly consensus sees this view as an error.

To Christian fundamentalists like *Left Behind*'s authors, the author of the book of Ezekiel was divinely inspired to foretell actions twenty-five hundred years in the future by nations that did not yet exist. To main-

stream Bible scholarship,[2] Ezekiel was addressing his own historical circumstances in sometimes symbolic language: he was among the religious and political elites in exile in Babylon after the Babylonian empire besieged Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, in 597 BCE. When their puppet king in Judah rebelled, the Babylonians returned and destroyed Jerusalem and, traumatically, the Temple, exiling much of the rest of the population. Addressing the contemporary situation, Ezekiel rhetorically speaks to "Gog, of the land of Magog," a symbolic reference to Babylon itself. But, explains mainstream critical scholar Michael Coogan, the identification of Gog of Magog as Russia "is based on an improbable identification of Gog's title, *rosh meshek* (literally, 'head of Meshek'), as a cryptogram for Russia and Moscow. Most likely, however, Gog is a veiled reference to Nebuchadrezzar, the king of Babylon" (395). In other words, the author of Ezekiel is expecting God to imminently punish Nebuchadrezzar and the Babylonians for the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah, destroying their military forces and restoring Judah. Perhaps aware of the danger of prophesying about the imminent divine retribution against Babylon while a captive there, Ezekiel couches his vision in symbolic language that would come to have rich mythological resonance for many Jews and Christians. Hundreds of years later, similar apocalyptic expectations saturated the speeches and writings we have from Jesus, John the Baptist, and Paul, all of whom seem to have expected an imminent cosmic battle between God and his opponents. Thus, in the Epilogue to *Left Behind*, the authors quote Jesus:

> For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. (473)

[2] Note that what distinguishes fundamentalist Bible "experts" (as the novel calls them) from mainstream scholars is not that the former are Christians and the latter are secular unbelievers. There are many professing Jews and Christians among mainstream critical Bible scholars. As with 'creation science,' it is important to note this crucial asymmetry about Christian Postmodernism: there are scientists and critical Bible scholars of faith who accept evolution and mainstream historical criticism, but there are no non-fundamentalists who do creation science or this kind of premillennial dispensationalist Bible interpretation.

The passage is from Matthew 24.38, but the authors have pointedly left out a preceding verse in 24.34, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." The author of Matthew, like the author of Revelation, seems to have understood the climactic battle between God and his cosmic and worldly enemies to be only years or decades away.

If mainstream Bible scholarship contends that if we want to know what the text means, we have to look at the historical context of the author's writing, fundamentalist hermeneutics operates on the assumption that "Bible prophecy is history written in advance" (Lahaye and Jenkins 219), and asks the different question of how the text can be understood to support Christian apocalyptic expectations about the imminent Second Coming of Jesus at the turn of the twenty-first century to defeat Satan, the Antichrist, and their sometimes unwitting human servants. *Left Behind* is peppered with the similarly odd results of this strategy of interpretation. Because the Christian apocalyptic author of the New Testament Book of Revelation uses Babylon as a symbol for the Roman Empire (for a similar reason that Ezekiel used Magog to talk about the Babylonian Empire centuries before), the authors of *Left Behind* face a conundrum: what to do with the prophecies about the imminent destruction of Babylon? They come up with an improbable solution: the Antichrist, anointed as Secretary General of the United Nations, decides to move the headquarters of the UN from New York to a "New Babylon" atop the ruins of ancient Babylon.[3] And if Russia's strange attack on Israel was not loopy enough, *Left Behind* has it allied with Ethiopia—because Ethiopia is mentioned as an ally of Magog in Ezekiel 38.5. As these examples suggest, the literalism of fundamentalist interpretation need not automatically and inflexibly be always applied—but it is always subordinated to theological requirements. Thus, Ezekiel's Gog of Magog can be Russia, but Revelation's Babylon requires its literal reconstruction to rise up as the Antichrist's new home.

[3] As the authors breathlessly note in the first novel's paratextual apparatus, Saddam Hussein had started to rebuild Babylon, and Taiwanese tourists were already visiting "the city of Babylon as it is being rebuilt" (484-85). They conclude: "Skeptics take note: the Bible is coming true, one prophecy at a time" (485).

The twelve-part *Left Behind* series—as well as three prequels and a sequel, and forty teen novellas—have sold over 63 million copies worldwide. One of the co-authors, Tim LaHaye, helped Jerry Falwell form the Moral Majority in 1979, which considerably advanced the Christianization of the Republican Party (cf. Williams). Not coincidentally, LaHaye was involved in another, perhaps more prototypical, kind of Christian Postmodernism: creation science. LaHaye fundraised for the Institute of Creation Research, which sought to provide a creationist alternative to evolution after statutes against teaching evolution were struck down by the Supreme Court in 1968.[4] Creation science flourished in the 1970s and was included in many high school biology curricula, especially across the southern states, under an 'equal time' approach treating the creation story in Genesis on a six thousand-year-old earth as a scientific theory as equally valid as evolution. The legal controversy around creation science lasted into the 1980s, providing the context for evolutionarily-interested novels like Carl Sagan's *Contact* and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, until the Supreme Court struck down this equal time approach in 1987.[5] The Intelligent Design movement is an updated version of creation science that accepts some evolution principles but argues that there is an irreducible complexity in biological life that cannot be accounted for without some kind of supernatural supplement by an Intelligent Designer.

What makes creation science and Intelligent Design good examples of Christian Postmodernism is their superficial appearance as science. They have graphs and charts; they talk about the fossil record and carbon dating; they argue about geological strata and DNA. It is through this imitation of scientific discourse that they appeal to conservative Christian politicians to call for a "teach the controversy" approach (Humes 166)—as though there were a genuine debate among scientists about whether evolution occurred at all. This form of Christian Post-

[4] LaHaye would also later produce what we might call Christian Postmodern historiography: his book *The Faith of Our Founding Fathers*, which reimagines the late eighteenth-century Founding Fathers as "the evangelical Protestants who founded this nation" (1).

[5] See Douglas, *God* 183-244 for a larger account of evolution and creation science as the context for Sagan's and McCarthy's novels.

modernism significantly resembles Jean-François Lyotard's "report on knowledge" outlined in *The Postmodern Condition*. To summarize Lyotard's scheme, he conceives of science as a set of "language games" played among scientists, wherein scientists produce 'new' knowledge by making rhetorical moves within their shared publishing and conferencing sphere. Lyotard analyzes these rhetorical moves—as, say, publications or conference papers—in terms of pragmatics, not as denotative utterances that attempt to describe the real or true. Drawing on the linguistic pragmatics of J.L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Lyotard argues that new utterances are valid if they are seen to accord with the rules of the game, and if the scientist is recognized by peers as a legitimate 'sender' (and hence also sendee) of new rhetorical moves. Fredric Jameson summarizes this vision:

> [T]he cognitive vocation of science would however seem even more disastrously impaired by the analogous shift from a representational to a nonrepresentational practice. Lyotard here ingeniously "saves" the coherence of scientific research and experiment by recasting its now seemingly non- or postreferential "epistemology" in terms of linguistics, and in particular the theories of the performative (J.L. Austin), for which the justification of scientific work is not to produce an adequate model or replication of some outside reality, but rather simply to produce *more* work, to generate new and fresh scientific *énoncés* or statements, to make you have "new ideas" […] or, best of all […] again and again to "make it new" […]. (Lyotard ix)

What Lyotard's analysis of the rhetorical structure of the scientific enterprise does, in other words, is to remove it from the positivist realm which aims at accurate description of the empirical real and to shift it to the performative and pragmatic realm where rhetorical utterances are social acts of mutual recognition by members of a closed guild. It

makes science into a game involving questions of rules and audiences, instead of an expert project of making sense of our natural world.[6]

My argument is not that fundamentalist Christians seeking to contest fields of expert scholarship in biology or Biblical criticism seized on Lyotard's theory when it was published in French in 1979. (Creation science antedated this publication by at least fifteen years.) Rather, it is that fundamentalist Christians realized that to contest science in the public realm and courts (which is where decisions about curriculum were ultimately being made), the audience of their utterances would have to recognize them as being 'scientific.' That is, fundamentalists understood that they needed to convince non-expert audiences, like the public, politicians, and the courts, that what they were doing in their textbooks resembled science. In this respect, they understood, with Lyotard, that 'science' was a set of rhetorical conventions whose denotative truths outsiders could not generally properly evaluate. How sincere these creation scientists and Intelligent Designers really are is a good question, but some at least appear to believe that science will eventually catch up to the Bible's revealed truths about Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden.

Christian Postmodernism, then, is the strategy of contesting mainstream realms of expert academic knowledge by forming networks of counter-expertise; that is, a rival set of purported experts who contend more Biblically-amenable answers than evolution and mainstream critical Bible scholarship offer. Despite Kurt Andersen's claim that America's current "Fantasyland" dominated by conspiracy theories, paranoia, outlandish ideas, fake news and alternative facts came about partly through the influence of academic postmodernism, there is almost no evidence of conservative Christians paying any attention to postmodern theory, as I argue elsewhere ("America"). This is not to say that some academic Christians have not recognized the possibilities for convergence. Indeed, in trying to level the playing field, Christian Postmodernism clears a space for increased participation by conservative Christian truth claims. As self-identified evangelical Christian aca-

[6] For a larger account of this Lyotardian dimension of the Christian Postmodernism of creation science and Intelligent Design, see Douglas, *God* 207-16.

demic Crystal L. Downing puts it in *How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith: Questioning Truth in Language, Philosophy and Art*, "Lyotard's suspicion toward metanarratives is a reaction against the arrogant confidence of modernists [that is, those who embrace modern science, empiricism, and reason] who, thinking they have a special handle on truth, disdain narratives based on faith" (75). What is valuable about postmodernism, Downing suggests, is that it levels the playing field between faith and reason, insisting that all experts speak from specific subject positions of belief or unbelief. Downing was an enthusiast of Intelligent Design, writing as she was in the early 2000s, before ID's cover was blown by the 2004 Dover trial (see Douglas, *God* 216-18). I take Downing's book to be evidence that some academic evangelical Christians were drawn to postmodernism's promise to level the playing field, even if other, yet more theologically conservative fundamentalist Christians were already engaged in the Christian Postmodern enterprise of constructing networks of counter-expertise without explicitly drawing on academic postmodernism.

Christian Postmodernism is the dominant epistemology of the Christian Right in the United States today. It acknowledges no neutral tradition of scholarly expertise or professional journalism; all forms of knowledge are articulated from subject positions built around assumptions of faith or unbelief.[7] In the *Left Behind* series, characters have to learn to jettison the false neutrality of the secular world and its institutions' hostility to Christian belief. They do so by attending to alternative Bible experts—the DVDs, books, and sermons left behind by the right-believing Christians who were never under the sway of the fashionably secular world. As such, Christian Postmodernism is part of the larger epistemic crisis facing the United States today.

To be sure, this epistemic crisis is not solely the result of religious influences. There were other important milestones in American conservatives' hostility to mainstream journalistic, academic, and profes-

[7] As Chris Stroop notes, this worldview is called "presuppositionalism" and is like "postmodernism run amok" (@C_Stroop). See also Stroop, "Authoritarian Christianity."

sional expertise.[8] Under the not particularly religious Newt Gingrich, the Republican-led Congress abolished the nonpartisan Office of Technological Assessment in 1995, which had provided ideologically-neutral analysis to elected officials on questions of science and technology (Sadowski). (More than twenty years later, Gingrich is in favor of abolishing the Congressional Budget Office, which provides nonpartisan expert assessment of budgetary proposals.) The not particularly religious Karl Rove similarly derided journalists and others in "the reality-based community" who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." As Rove instructed Ron Suskind in 2002: "That's not the way the world really works anymore. […] We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors … and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do" (Rove qtd. in Suskind). Jean Baudrillard could not have put it better. One could look back on the late twentieth-century conservative charges against the 'liberal media'—in the wake of professional media establishments beginning to be less credulous toward official military accounts of success during the Vietnam War or beginning to be sympathetic to Civil Rights protestors in the 1950s and 1960s—to see a similar emergent, not necessarily religious, hostility toward professional expertise in the field of journalism during the same period.

Nonetheless, Christian Postmodernism is part of the larger asymmetric epistemic crisis afflicting U.S. conservativism, as outlined by David Roberts, in which group-based epistemology dominates the alternate-information ecosystem many U.S. conservatives inhabit. Christian fundamentalist Bible colleges and universities, publishers and bookstores, newspapers and magazines, radio and then television shows, museums and campus ministries, have together formed a set of institutions that resist elite, secular expert knowledge. Recognizing the power of expertise's infrastructure, Christian fundamentalists created this counter-infrastructure to cultivate and curate its alternative forms of knowledge,

[8] Indeed, an earlier convergence lay in the tobacco and petroleum industries producing 'research' to create doubt about the real dangers of their products.

Christian Postmodernism avant la lettre. As I have hypothesized elsewhere ("Religious Origins"), the longstanding fundamentalist Christian hostility to professional journalism and mainstream academic expertise is likely a contributing factor to the higher receptivity to fake news among conservatives during the 2016 U.S. election. Indeed, the relatively high population of conservative Christians in the U.S. may have been a contributing factor to the higher circulation of fake news in the 2016 election compared to the 2017 European elections. The conservative white evangelicals who inhabit this Christian Postmodernist alternative information ecosystem voted for Donald Trump by 81% in 2016, and remain his core group of support (Najle and Jones).

Christian Postmodernism's hostility to mainstream expertise and its openness to an alternate, especially religious, network of institutional counter-expertise likewise accounts in part for its dismissal of climate change. Conservative Christians are less likely to believe in scientific evidence for climate change caused by humans ("Religious Groups' Views"); they are also less likely to be in favor of policies that mitigate climate change, a fact that David C. Barker and David H. Bearce attribute to their high belief that the Second Coming of Christ will occur by 2050 (268). Christian Postmodernism also buttresses theologically conservative opposition to high school sex education. Conservative Christians often prefer abstinence-only sex education programs of the kind endorsed by the Bush administration, even though they are "positively correlated with teenage pregnancy and birth rates" (Stanger-Hall and Hall)—a fact that may have provided the occasion for David Foster Wallace's short story about a young evangelical couple facing an unwanted pregnancy, as I have suggested elsewhere ("David Foster Wallace's Evangelicals").[9]

The development of Christian Postmodernism over the last half century was perfect preparation for white evangelicals' political support for the consummate con man Donald J. Trump. Many among the Chris-

[9] A parallel set of issues has arisen with the new Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C. While not avowedly fundamentalist, the curators are at some odds with mainstream Bible scholarship. See Concannon for a fascinating analysis of the Museum's late request to respond to a session devoted to it at the Society for Biblical Literature conference in the name of "balance"—almost an "equal time" approach.

tian Right believe that the President has been chosen by God as a kind of modern-day type of Cyrus the Great, the pagan Persian emperor who saved God's people (back when God's people were the Jews) from captivity when he defeated the Babylonian empire and permitted the Jews to return to Judah to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. It is not clear what can pierce the epistemic closure of the alternate information bubble that many white evangelicals now live in. Modern evangelical apocalyptic thinking traces its roots to John Darby's premillennial dispensationalism in the 1830s (which was the theological inspiration for the Larkin chart in Figure 1); since then, the End Times have repeatedly kept not coming, over and over again, but this has not generally dissuaded the theological movement from expecting Jesus's imminent return "quickly." What happens instead is that a few individuals, usually of the younger generation, drift away from or break with the faith traditions of their families and communities, becoming mainline Protestants, agnostics, or unbelievers. In other words, Christian Postmodernism's epistemic bubble leaks. *Left Behind* plugs these holes as best it can; thus, Chloe is representative of the younger generation drifting away from her mother's strong faith, a drift into the orbit of university's academic expertise which is halted only by the amazing supernatural occurrence of the Rapture itself. Now imagine if the Rapture does not occur, and that it keeps on not occurring. Perhaps Chloe continues in her trajectory, caught up in the rising rates of young Americans leaving their childhood churches. While this rise of the religiously unaffiliated affects white mainline Protestants and white Catholics more than white evangelicals, it is occurring in the latter congregations as well (Cooper et al.). Maybe Chloe, like other young Christians, becomes disaffected by her church's regressive politics, or by the clergy's sex abuse scandal, or by its treatment of LGBTQ individuals. Perhaps she is gay herself, hastening her exit as an #Exvangelical. What will Chloe do? Everything depends on that.

Works Cited

@C_Stroop. "3. What is presuppositionalism? It's sort of postmodernism run amok, in defense of fundamentalist Christianity. You'll find it defined briefly in this analysis of the authoritarian 'Biblical worldview' illustrated with the rhetoric of Franklin Graham:" *Twitter*, 6 July 2018, 4:34 p.m., twitter.com/C_Stroop/status/1015242669780553729.

Andersen, Kurt. "How the U.S. Lost Its Mind." *The Atlantic*, 7 Aug. 2017, theatlantic.com.

Barker, David C., and David H. Bearce. "End-Times Theology, the Shadow of the Future, and Public Resistance to Addressing Global Climate Change." *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 66, June 2013, pp. 267-279.

Burley, Mikel. "Dislocating the Eschaton? Appraising Realized Eschatology." *Sophia*, vol. 56, no. 3, Sept. 2017, pp. 435-52. doi.org/10.1007/s11841-016-0534-0.

Concannon, Cavan. "Museum of the Bible and Biblical Studies: A Twitter Story." *Wakelet*, n.d., wakelet.com.

Coogan, Michael. *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*. 2nd ed., Oxford UP, 2011.

Coogan, Michael, et al., editors. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*. 5th ed. Oxford UP, 2018.

Cooper, Betsy, et al. "Exodus: Why Americans Are Leaving Religion—and Why They're Unlikely to Come Back." *PRRI*, 22 Sept. 2016, prri.org.

Douglas, Christopher. "David Foster Wallace's Evangelicals: The Other Postsecularism." *Christianity & Literature*, 2 June 2018, christianityandliteratureblog.com.

—. "How America Really Lost Its Mind: Hint, It Wasn't Entirely the Fault of Hippie New Agers and Postmodern Academics." *Religion Dispatches*, 9 Aug. 2017, religiondispatches.org.

—. *If God Meant to Interfere: American Literature and the Rise of the Christian Right*. Cornell UP, 2016.

—. "The Religious Origins of Fake News and 'Alternative Facts.'" *Religion Dispatches*, 23 Feb. 2017, religiondispatches.org.

Downing, Crystal L. *How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith: Questioning Truth in Language, Philosophy and Art*. InterVarsity, 2006.

Ehrman, Bart. *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)*. HarperOne, 2010.

—. *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*. 6th ed. Oxford UP, 2016.

Humes, Edward. *Monkey Girl: Evolution, Education, Religion, and the Battle for America's Soul*. Harper Perennial, 2007.

LaHaye, Tim. *The Faith of Our Founding Fathers*. Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1987.

LaHaye, Tim, and Jerry Jenkins. *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days*. Large Print edition, Thorndike Press, 2000.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, foreword by Fredric Jameson, U of Minnesota P, 1984.

Najle, Maxine, and Robert P. Jones. "American Democracy in Crisis: The Fate of Pluralism in a Divided Nation." *PRRI*, 19 Feb. 2019, prri.org.

"Religious Groups' Views on Global Warming." *Pew Research Center*, 16 Apr. 2009, pewforum.org.

Roberts, David. "America Is Facing an Epistemic Crisis." *Vox*, 2 Nov. 2017, vox.com.

Sadowski, Jathan. "The Much-Needed and Sane Congressional Office That Gingrich Killed Off and We Need Back." *The Atlantic*, 26 Oct. 2012, theatlantic.com.

Stanger-Hall, Kathrin F., and David W. Hall. "Abstinence-Only Education and Teen Pregnancy Rates: Why We Need Comprehensive Sex Education in the U.S." *PLoS ONE*, vol. 6, no. 10, Oct. 2011, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0024658.

Stroop, Chris. "Authoritarian Christianity, or, What Franklin Graham Really Means When He Equates Progressivism with Godlessness." *Not Your Mission Field*, 30 May 2018, cstroop.com.

Suskind, Ron. "Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush." *The New York Times*, 17 Oct. 2004, nytimes.com.

Williams, Daniel K. *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right.* Oxford UP, 2010.

Witherington, Ben. *Revelation.* Cambridge UP, 2003.

Biography

Christopher Douglas is the author of *If God Meant to Interfere: American Literature and the Rise of the Christian Right* and is a professor of English at the University of Victoria. As well as his public-facing scholarship on religion, politics and literature, his current book project is on Christian Right literature, theodicy, and the historical-critical method.