Jesus in Disneyland
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Religion in Postmodern Times

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David Lyon
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Preface

This book is about the changing fortunes of religion in postmodern times. That first sentence may already have you worried or irritated. The “changing fortunes” sounds like a secular sociological account, unpalatable to those with sincere religious commitments. “Religion” smacks of conventional, organized religiosity, inappropriate to today’s world of spiritualities and seekers. And as for “postmodern” – it is a passing philosophical fad, so why waste time trying to force false connections between it and serious stuff like religion?

Not so fast. What follows is a sociological account, but it is not unsympathetic to faith. Indeed, it suggests that faith has been underplayed and underestimated in sociology. “Religion,” admittedly, is a shorthand, just to give some sense of what the book is all about. I use the term mainly in the context of institutional religiosity, which is indeed in pretty poor shape in contexts most directly touched by the postmodern. But I argue that the religious realm, including faith and spirituality, is far from dormant, let alone dead. Religiosity does find different modes of expression, however, and this relates to context. In premodern times, religiosity was often expressed in very traditional ways, which were upset by the coming of modernity. However, modernity itself is currently in the throes of remarkable and profound changes, but, because it is not clear that we shall ever be able adequately to encapsulate those changes in one concept, the more tentative “post-modernity” is used to sum up a movement, a debate, a set of tendencies: much more, in other words, than a philosophical fad (though I do not deny that its faddish features also exist).

All books have biographical as well as bibliographical genealogies, and it may help some readers to understand the family tree of this
one. Over a decade ago a book of mine appeared bearing the title *The Steeple’s Shadow: On the Myths and Realities of Secularization.*¹ Its central metaphor – the steeple’s shadow – raised questions about the reach and scope of institutional religion. If once the steeple’s shadow stretched over much social life in medieval and early modern Europe, what has happened in the modern era? A strong version of the secularization thesis suggests that, not only has the shadow contracted significantly, but, with that diminution of churchly influence, societies are simply less religious than they once were. There is something to this, of course. If one assumes that religion must take institutional forms, and that those institutions will exert social, political, cultural, economic impacts, then contracting institutions – seen in declining pew-populations and diminishing financial bases – will spell shrinking social shadows.

But there are other ways of considering the question. The idea of secularization, if taken to refer beyond institutional religiosity to the attenuation of all forms of faith, spirituality, and belief, is plainly mistaken. Even if one holds to the institutional definition, it is clear that on a global scale the fortunes of Christianity, not to mention other faiths such as Islam, are far from feeble. Much secularization theory is rooted in a more general theory about the modern world, that the latter has become progressively less hospitable, at least to certain kinds of religiosity. But this may be modified, in multiple ways. For a start, modernity is in part the product of religious activity and belief, so setting the one over against the other in a simplistic fashion is very misleading. For another thing, religious phenomena are never static; a constant process of renewal, relocation, restructuring, and resurgence appears to occur. Huge variations exist today between patterns of practice in Europe, North America, Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific Rim, and it becomes increasingly hard to see how one theory can fit all cases. At any rate, in *The Steeple’s Shadow* I showed how secularization theory was being questioned, and argued that alternatives to its most misleading variants were becoming available. Among other things, I argued that the chief cause of secularization – modernity – was itself in question.

In the mid-1990s I involved myself more directly in the debate over modernity, publishing a small book that introduced and analyzed the concept of postmodernity.² In particular, I stressed that postmodernity refers to changing social conditions and not only to the well-known playfulness, parody, and pastiche of postmodernism. The changing social conditions have to do especially with the expansion of new communication and information technologies (CITs), along with the spread of consumerism, in the later part of the twentieth century.
These two together have grown so fast and so far that they have altered the contours of what was conventionally thought of as modernity. The latter condition has not somehow gone away or been superseded; rather it has been reshaped, and seen in quite new ways. The indicators are varied, and include global tourism and travel, as well as television and the Internet. These have to be seen in the context of the restructuring of corporations and of cities, the increasing obsolescence of the nation state, and the fragmentation of labor and of lifestyles, as the single-occupation career declines and as cultural identities and alignments proliferate.

Seen this way, some connections with postmodernism become more evident, particularly insofar as CITs and consumerism encourage a relativism of belief systems. For postmodernism, as understood in this book, concerns the intellectual and aesthetic dimensions of life. TV helps to dissolve the boundaries between high and low culture, and to turn simulation into a major aspect of cultural production. Questions of ideology, belief, and culture are raised here, and, above all, ideas associated with classic modernity are challenged. Indeed, at one level, postmodernism is all about the demise of the grand narratives, the superstories of modern times, the decline of ideological commitment to big ideas like the nation state or progress. Within postmodernism, Reason loses its capital R, science softens its hard edges, and knowledge is seen – and felt – as (con)textual, local, and relative.

In Postmodernity, as in The Steeple’s Shadow, I accent the importance of the everyday, the mundane, the ordinary. Despite the popularity of some rationalistic accounts of religion, secularization cannot sensibly be viewed as the steadily rising superiority of science over traditional beliefs. This is one “metanarrative” that has fallen on hard times. Nor is the postmodern challenge to faith best understood cognitively. Postmodern relativism may eat corrosively into the belief-content of some theological formulae at an elite intellectual level – and this threat ought not to be underestimated – but the gauntlet is more deeply and definitively thrown down by the social currents of postmodernity. It is in the commodification of everyday life and the impact of mass consumer cultures, facilitated by the CITs, that the impacts on faith and practice are felt most deeply. That is, they are experienced here, even if they are not necessarily understood.

This is why I chose the metaphor of Jesus in Disneyland for this book, because it neatly links together social and cultural features of the postmodern, while at the same time retaining some thoroughly modern characteristics. The world of simulations, which disturb or destroy a (modern) sense of reality, is seen delightfully in Disneyland.
Yet those simulations are highly dependent upon the highest of high technology. They are products of modernist rationality that are celebrated in their shrine at Disneyland, the EPCOT (Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow) Center. Disneyland, Disney World, Disneyland Paris, Disneyland Tokyo, and so on are also global tourist magnets, but, once there, one can also indulge in virtual tourism in almost any country you care to name. Heritage becomes instant and the immediate purges the historical memory, even as it is simulated in film footage and hands-on interactive experiences. Farewell to Hugo’s hunchback; hello to safe suffering.

In this book, then, the themes examined in The Steeple’s Shadow and in Postmodernity are explored further. I draw on many kinds of evidence, and rely on many other writers and sources, in order to paint the picture that I present here. As far as history and sociology are concerned, it seems important to listen to two kinds of voices in particular – those that allow themselves to be expressed in major surveys and opinion polls, and those that speak in more intimate settings of the small-scale case study. I refer to several of the latter, and also to the results of some large-scale surveys, which offer some impressions of overall situations. In particular, I make occasional reference to a major survey carried out in 1996 entitled “God and Society in North America,” which garnered some data for a research project that I co-direct with Marguerite Van Die. Among other things, this showed very clearly how much religious activity – often relating to orthodox belief – goes on outside conventional settings of churches and, for that matter, mosques and synagogues. This is a tremendously important aspect of contemporary religiosity, central to religion in postmodern times.

The picture I paint is done with a broad brush. It is impressionistic, relying on image and intimation as much as on the kinds of evidence mentioned above. Despite the definitive sounding subtitle – religion in postmodern times – readers seeking a comprehensive or detailed account will have to look elsewhere. But for those curious about the hints, the reports, the rumours of religion in the emerging postmodern landscape, I hope that what is caught in my wide-angle ‘scope will help you see the world in a different way.

David Lyon
1 Meeting Jesus in Disneyland

It is Disneyland that is authentic here! The cinema and TV are America’s reality! The freeways, the Safeways, the skylines, speed, deserts – these are America, not the galleries, the churches, the culture. Jean Baudrillard

The scene is Anaheim, California, home of Disneyland. Not unusually, 10,000 people are streaming through the turnstiles. Only today they are heading for a Harvest Day Crusade. In place of the regular attractions and rides, Christian artists perform at several stages through the park, and an evangelist, Greg Laurie, preaches a gospel message. While some find the juxtaposition somewhat incongruous (has not the Disney Corporation expanded its family values to include gays and lesbians? is beer not sold here?) the organizers have no qualms about it: “We saw Disneyland as an opportunity to bring God’s kingdom to the Magic Kingdom. We felt that, as they opened the door to us to share Christ, we wouldn’t turn down the opportunity just because other things take place there. Jesus is the example for this.”

Jesus in Disneyland. A bizarre sounding collaboration. Or is it? Just why does it appear so odd? At first blush, the objection could be that an ancient, premodern religion is found side-by-side, or, more accurately, interacting with, the epitome of postmodern culture – the artificial, simulated, virtual, fantasy world of Disney. It is not as if this religious group is merely using the park as a stadium for its event. To a considerable extent they adopt the styles, the fashions, even the attitudes of Disneyland. And they are not alone. Other groups – such as at the annual evangelical Spring Harvest weeks at Butlin’s
Holiday Camps or at Christian events at Legoland in the UK, and at numerous Christian theme parks, such as Logosland in Ontario – use similar venues and methods.

It seems like an anachronism. Two vastly different historical eras are telescoped incongruously into one, within the gates of a theme park. Not only do the two seem historically out of place; culturally, too, they clash. The simply-dressed, sandal-clad, travelling rabbi who quietly admitted to close associates that he was God’s promised Messiah – Jesus – also has connections with the self-advertising, technologically complex, consumer culture of comfortable California? Anachronism or not, such things occur, especially in America.

But the problem is not just one of oddity. This collusion – or collision – of cultures also takes place in a context that was once supposed to have erased most traces of conventional religion from daily life. It is often said that when premodern religions met modernity, from the seventeenth century onwards, relations were less than cordial. The scientific-technological revolution, the burgeoning of industrial capitalism, and the rise of urbanism and democratic politics often had an abrasive and corrosive effect on organized religion. The mathematician LaPlace took the trouble to inform the French emperor that he “had no need of the hypothesis” of God.3 For many others, the process was implicit, whereby the “hypothesis” was for all practical purposes quietly dropped. Religious vestiges gradually succumbed to the evolutionary forces of modernity. Or so the story goes.

All this, and more, makes it hard to account for the Jesus in Disneyland event. Yet it occurred. And, apart from a few raised eyebrows, it was not treated by those involved as an anomaly or an isolated California quirk. Perhaps the difficulty is in the eye of the beholder? Those accustomed to the predominantly secular discourse of contemporary politics, mass media, or academe apparently have a harder time coping with Jesus in Disneyland than those who actually attended this event. This is not meant to imply that there is no anomaly, or that the view from below, which cheerfully harmonizes the surface contradictions, is in fact superior or correct. Nor do I mean to propose, however, that the secular discourse has it right either. Rather, I suggest that both perspectives should be problematized – held up for serious and careful examination – as a prelude to a better accounting for the event.

In what follows, I offer just such a problematizing account, as an introduction to the broad themes of this book. While the Jesus in Disneyland event is interesting in its own right, it also opens a fascinating window on contemporary religion and society. Conven-
tional religion – in this case Christianity, but similar analysis can be made of other religions – is caught at a curious cultural juncture. Disneyland captures several crucial features of this, as the theme parks epitomize the tensions of modernity. Both modern and postmodern elements may be discerned at Disneyland, and today religious life is drawn by the pull of both gravitational fields.

Disneyland is a social and cultural symbol of our times. In particular, Disneyland is a trope for the democratization of culture, including religion. An event like the one noted here raises questions about the deregulation of religion. Disneyland also points up the ambiguities and ironies of modernity and postmodernity, as well as their sources, the proliferation of new communications media, and the growth of consumerism. Disneyland as a cultural symbol also hints strongly at questions of authority and identity, and of time and space, each of which is crucial for a contemporary understanding of religion, spirituality, and faith.

**Disney’s social impact**

There can be little doubt that Disney’s influence is universal. Wherever it is possible to see a television or a cinema screen, Disney characters will not be strangers. And in more and more world tourist destinations, a Disney theme park is within reach. Plans for the latest are currently under way in Hong Kong. Disney’s impact extends far beyond films or parks made by the Disney corporation. By the end of the twentieth century Disney had become a byword for commercial culture, a symbol for animated cartoon lives, a model for tourist activities, and a mode of imagination. But it was also a way of communicating, a herald of technological futures, an architectural inspiration, and a guide to city planning. In Melbourne, Australia, a recent festival celebrated a Disneyfied Winnie-the-Pooh as a “United Nations ambassador for international friendship!” Under these conditions, it would be surprising if Disney did not have a religious relevance.

There are two main concepts used in exploring Disney’s social influence, Disneyfication and Disneyization. Each has something significant to offer, but it is worth distinguishing between them. Disneyfication tends to be used critically. Spy magazine, for instance, defines Disneyfication as “the act of assuming, through the process of assimilation, the traits and characteristics more familiarly associated with a theme park . . . than with real life.” The same magazine reported a telephone interview with Walt Disney World, in which it
asked about the possibility of laying on a “Fantasia wedding,” fea-
turing a transparent box of mice, with pinned-on ear enlargements. The Disney receptionist balked at this, explaining that Mickey him-
self would attend. “Why simulate it with a real mouse when you can
have the genuine article there?”, she asked. The author of this piece
also observed that “Genuine Disneyfication must be tawdry, con-
trived, useless, and dripping with class panic.”

More sociologically Chris Rojek focuses on the moral and politi-
cultural culture represented by the Disney leisure industry, coming to the
cautious conclusion that Disney parks “encourage the consumer to
relate to America as a spectacle rather than as an object of citizen-
ship.”7 Disneyfication makes social conflict temporary and abnormal,
emphasizes individual rather than collective action, and generally acts
as a mouthpiece for the American Way. The Disney world view fails
to make sense of the present or to provide a plausible vision of the
future, sacrificing “knowledge for staged spectacles organized around
soundbites of history and culture.”8 Thus for Rojek Disneyfication
subtly organizes our lives, even while letting us think that we are in a
realm of release and escape.

Umberto Eco takes a similarly critical line, applying it to the on-
going uncertainty generated by Disney in order to perpetuate consump-
tion. Deep questions of good and evil are rendered shallow through
this process. The cynical shows through all too readily. Eco thinks of
America as the prominent hyper-reality, whose ideology “wants to
establish reassurance through imitation. But profit defeats ideology,
because the consumers want to be thrilled not only by the guarantee
of the good but also by the shudder of the bad.” Thus there must be
metaphysical evil, “both with the same level of credibility, both with
the same level of fakery. Thus, on entering his cathedrals of iconic
reassurance, the visitor will remain uncertain whether his final destina-
tion is heaven or hell, and so will consume new promises.”9

Such critical approaches to Disney have much to commend them. Disneyfication may be viewed as a process that diminishes human life
through trivializing it, or making involvement within it appear less
than fully serious. No wonder Neil Postman wrote of “amusing our-
selves to death.”10 Yet the Disneyfication thesis also has limits. The
negative approach is not necessarily helpful in all contexts. With no
pretence at neutrality, the term Disneyization has been proposed as
an analytical alternative. Alan Bryman proposes that it should be
defined as “the process by which the principles of the Disney theme
parks are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American
society as well as the rest of the world.”11 He isolates four elements
of Disneyization, which are outlined below. As I shall show, each
principle also resonates in significant ways with some major themes of this book.

The first aspect is "theming," which can of course be found in many contexts not directly touched by Disney. Thus cafés and bars may be themed, along with hotels and shopping malls. Well-known examples include the Hard Rock Café and the Subway outlets. Theming lends coherence to a site, giving it a story line. Theming creates connections and thereby gives a particular ambience to a complete environment. Today, that environment may be physical, at a permanent theme park site. But it may also be virtual. All computer users have become aware of particular kinds of "environments" that are themed in idiosyncratic ways, the "Mac" environment, or the "Netscape" one, and so on. Theming may be seen as postmodern surrogates for narratives (even "metanarratives") which, however fragmentary or temporary, tell tales within which lives may be located.

Bryman's second aspect is the "dedifferentiation of consumption." This technical term refers to ways that "forms of consumption associated with different institutional spheres become interlocked with each other and increasingly difficult to distinguish." It is a breaking down of conventional cultural differences between kinds of consumption and between consuming and other activities. In the World Showcase of the EPCOT Center, visitors to Disneyland think they are sampling cultures from around the world, whereas in reality they are entering a thinly disguised shopping area. Conversely, sites where one expects to shop seem to spawn attractions. You can find rides and leisure zones within shopping malls. Airports and train stations provide evidence of the same phenomenon. Authentic crafts and current CDs can be bought, haircuts and massages obtained, tickets bought and checked. Increasingly, then, in more and more daily life contexts, one may expect to consume across a broad range of items. Such dedifferentiation accentuates the consumer culture, in which consumption becomes an order of life. The dedifferentiated environment privileges consumer outlooks and consumer skills.

Thirdly, Disneyization means merchandising. Images and logos are used to promote goods for sale, or are themselves for sale. The parks are both places where such merchandise is sold and the source of images and logos. Likewise the films are a source of images and logos that appear on merchandise, sometimes even before a film has been released. Many others, from sports teams to universities, have learned the Disneyesque techniques and advantages of merchandising. From our point of view, merchandising points up the power of an image, both in its own right and as something that can be bought. Merchandising also refers to itself and thus connects with a more general
trend towards self-referentiality, which is a prime component of the post-modern. A recent example of this is the picture of the classic Coke bottle that appears on Coke cans, to reassure imbibers that it is the “real thing.”

Fourthly, Disneyization involves emotional labour. Rather as McDonald’s restaurants attempt to control the ways their employees view themselves and how they feel, so the Disney Corporation encourages scripted interactions using its staff. Theme park employees are well known for their smiling friendliness and helpfulness. Disney employees are supposed to give the impression that they are having fun too and not really working. This focus on the self, and how the self is expressed, is again a feature of the postmodern. As we shall see, the modes of self-expression in postmodern times relate to the religious realm in interesting ways.

Bryman explores the possibility that while MacDonaldization exudes some very modern features associated with bureaucratic organization, Disneyization portends a shift into the postmodern. Disneyization spells consumerism and a concern with the sign value of goods, with style and identity projects. Disneyization breaks down differences, is depthless, and deals in cultivated nostalgia and in playfulness about reality. These are certainly themes that I think are deeply significant, both for the worlds of Disney and for the worlds of the postmodern. How far these features are affecting – and are affected by – contemporary religious spheres remains to be seen.

**Modern and postmodern**

The Jesus in Disneyland event may be used as an exemplar for understanding religion and society relationships at the turn of the twenty-first century. In several significant respects, religion is being both Disneyfied and Disneyized. This is what makes Disneyland such a good trope for contemporary culture, both modern and, increasingly, postmodern. Disneyland encapsulates in concentrated form some leading trends, especially the preoccupation with consuming – fashion, film, and music – and the experience of spectacles made possible by high technology. While Disney’s simulations by electronic media raise doubts about reality, and thus connect neatly with the postmodern, there are many other features of Disneyland that still seem thoroughly modern. High technology, to take the most obvious example, is also explicitly linked, through the high-tech EPCOT Center, with classic modern notions of progress and linear time.

How, after all, does one enter the Magic Kingdom? What sustains this world? Well, all major credit cards are accepted and these, along
with the whole massive theme park system, are entirely dependent on the highest of high technology. Night and day, electric power flows into Disneyland to support the operation of machinery and its finely tuned computer-controlled system. Moreover, McDonaldization, which epitomizes principles of modernity such as bureaucratic organization and scientific management, is also present in the theme parks.\(^4\) Whatever else postmodern means, at Disneyland or elsewhere, it emphatically does not mean that consumer capitalism has collapsed or that modern technology has been jettisoned. Just the reverse. The modern and the postmodern are equally characteristic of Disneyland.

It is crucial to dispose of the idea that modernity has somehow ground to a halt, to be replaced by postmodern conditions. Rather, the prefix “post” is attached to “modernity” in order to alert us to the fact that modernity itself is now in question. This does not mean that the sense of an ending – evinced in much postmodern literature – is insignificant, only that it can be over-extended. Sociologically speaking, although the rediscovery of deep cultural influences has helped to balance the analysis of social structure, the danger is to imagine that somehow social settings are irrelevant to the emergence of new cultural landscapes. Postmodernity is a kind of interim situation where some characteristics of modernity have been inflated to such an extent that modernity becomes scarcely recognizable as such, but exactly what the new situation is – or even whether any new situation can become “settled” – is unclear.

The inflated characteristics of modernity, which give rise to postmodern premonitions, relate above all to communication and information technologies (CITs) and to the tilt towards consumerism. Both are bound up with the restructuring of capitalism that has been under way since at least the last quarter of the twentieth century. Some such as Manuel Castells focus on the former, arguing that present trends are best summed up in the notion of an “information age.”\(^5\) Others such as Zygmunt Bauman center their analyses on the social consequences of the shift towards consumer capitalism.\(^6\) But as the social and cultural converge, not least under the influence of these trends, it makes more sociological sense to hold the two together.\(^7\) The growth of CITs and new media augments the power of the image, while encouraging such developments as positional pluralism. But the dynamic of the whole system may be traced increasingly to the demand that consumption levels be constantly raised.

So phrases like the end of modernity, though arresting, can be very misleading. When Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo used this phrase as a book title\(^8\) he was referring to the exhaustion of modern ideas, a modern ethos or a modern world-view. For him, modernity starts with Descartes, and is characterized above all by a belief in progress.